



If You Thought Vietnam Was Bad

[The Million Dollar Hole,](#)

by Michael Casey

Washington, D.C., Orchises Press, 2001

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[Helena Minton](#)

In 1972, Michael Casey's *Obscenities* was selected by Stanley Kunitz as the winner in the Yale Series of Younger Poets competition. A collection of short, often brutal lyrics and a searing indictment of the Vietnam War, it struck a chord with a whole generation. Over two decades later, Casey's second book, [Millrat](#) (1996), explored the world of textile-mill workers in northeastern Massachusetts.

Now, nearly thirty years after his first book, Casey revisits the Vietnam era. [The Million Dollar Hole](#), dedicated to Kunitz, is set in Fort Leonard Wood, a Missouri army base, where the narrator, a military policeman, is stationed prior to being sent to Vietnam. Beginning and ending on a bus, the collection reads like a series of short stories. The narrator is named Casey, though a note at the front of the book assures us that this is a work of fiction and that all names have been changed. Recounted in flat language, often in army jargon, with very little punctuation or capitalization, these poems have a surprising power. Many of them are funny, yet as readers we laugh at our own risk. The narrator's tone is weary, and he hasn't even been to Vietnam. It's as if Casey were saying, "If you thought Vietnam was bad—take a look at this."

This book is as much about work as it is about war. If you wonder what an MP does, you can find out here: he guards a gate through which no one passes ("south gate"), he goes into town to catch soldiers who aren't wearing fatigues because "day times we had nothing better to do" ("town patrol"), he drives around at night shining flashlights into parked cars looking for couples having sex—a task some MPs relish ("patrol supervisor"). He also has to apprehend soldiers going AWOL and break up prison riots. Sometimes an MP goes to the Outpatient Clinic

for lots of things animal bites
traffic accidents
wife beatings
the most common
but there were suicides too
and attempts at it ... ("Outpatient Clinic, General Wood
Hospital")

In the hospital, "with a force for a giraffe's throat/nurse Jones would push a tube/down a willie's throat." Such brutal events are particularly painful to read about because they seem so mundane, so much a part of the daily life of the base, punctuating "ordinary time" like the secular equivalent of the liturgical calendar.

Frequently an MP is ordered to look the other way, not to tell what he has seen: "at a time like that/I am supposed to keep quiet/I should say I don't know" ("bringing the witness"). In "AGO" an MP who has witnessed a traffic accident in which there are "four trainees dead in the rain" is told that he couldn't possibly have seen it because he was "two

three hundred yards down the road ... not only did you not see him drunk/ you did not see him period." Fortunately, the narrator has the chance here to tell the truth about the accident.

In the world of an army base, prisoners and guards are almost interchangeable. It's chance that makes one an MP and another a prisoner in the stockade. Sometimes cooks are given helmets and sticks to help break up prison fights. We cheer when a woman knocks out her abusive husband " ... with a heavy and metal/most huge smoothing iron" ("Wesley"). In this world, the narrator, with a college education and year or two on most of the other trainees, is considered wise. Soldiers ask him to interpret their girlfriends' letters. One soldier is relieved to learn that he has only given his girlfriend a venereal disease, not a baby ("SP/4 West").

The narrator is never condescending: he has affection for these characters—and they are characters in more than one sense. Perhaps because of the generic landscape of the army base and the poems' flat language, both proper names and nicknames stand out: Manwarring, Tenewicz, Diagati, Boddoms, Canney, Nurse Jones, Mastrantonio, Urbi, Gregarian, "Beeson the physicist," "Kerry the boxer," Johnstone, Devine, Emanuel Klawir. In the poem "AG Levy," Casey and Diagati are preparing to go to Vietnam:

Diagati says he has nothing to worry about
his name means God guards
he asks me what my name means.

The names continue to haunt us long after reading the book.

In one of the book's pivotal poems, "patch of green," three soldiers are shooting the breeze in the stockade yard, "talking the war up ... ": "Tenewicz says/you have to have a war/you have such a big army/you need to do something with it ...". Then Negroni gets up and goes back inside. Negroni is a prisoner but casually lets himself back into jail, while his guards stay out in the yard. A month later Negroni commits suicide: "his wife left him/and the war had nothing to do with it." War or no war, this army base epitomizes the human condition.

What do these men do when they're not working? Sometimes they go to the movies, where fights break out over the woman selling tickets, whose low-cut outfits raise expectations. The MPs are called to break up the fights ("permanent party"). Men scratch tattoos onto their own skin, "pairs of dice/drawn with no sense/of perspective whatever/Grandma Moses drunk with ink" even though "your epidermis is/government property in the army" ("military tattoo"). Often the soldiers play practical jokes, trying to catch each other breaking the rules, calling on the phone and pretending to be of higher rank ("south gate"). In a poem called "SNAKEGGS" someone concocts bizarre objects out of paper clips and rubber bands and seals them in an envelope, pretending they are rattlesnake eggs. Occasionally a leisure activity as simple as drinking can be a challenge. Someone offers Casey a glass of wine, "beaujolais in coke cans with the tops cut off/and the sharp edges pounded smooth ... ," but his friend has invited several other people and you can't get drunk "on one quarter of a half bottle of beaujolais" ("beaujolais").

Though there are light moments, the violent ones are swift and frightening and stay with the reader. During a riot, prisoners throw two sleeping guards out the window ("Manwarring's defenestration"). Manwarring, whom Casey remembers " ... in a bad way/stammering and his face all scarred" ("bus stop"), reappears at the end of the book, recovered, still an MP, " ... senior man white hat/ he was big time," and offering Casey a ride ("old times sake") though Casey has a bus to catch. Casey agrees to ride around with Manwarring and ends up missing his bus, while the MP answers a call for—what else?—a dog bite.

When Casey finally boards the bus departing Fort Leonard Wood, he finds himself sitting next to an Englishman and his girlfriend... "an American with

an Irish name."

... I cannot but think
should he not move out
go back where he comes
and take her with him
I would have ("Jody the Brit")

Casey, on his way to Vietnam, does not have that option; but we know through these poems that Casey, the poet, went and came back and not only lived to tell about it, but lived to make enduring art of his experience.

Michael Casey was drafted in 1968 upon graduating from Lowell Technology Institute. He trained in Georgia and served as a military policeman, not only at Fort Leonard Wood, but in Quang Ngai Province, Vietnam. He teaches at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell, and Northern Essex Community College.

ALSO OF INTEREST

Casey, Michael, *Millrat*. Adastra, Expanded Edition, 1999. Paperback, 60 pages, \$6.00.

_____, *Obscenities: Poems by Michael Casey*. Volume 67, The Yale Series of Younger Poets. Yale UP, 1972. Paperback, 68 pages. Out of print.

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