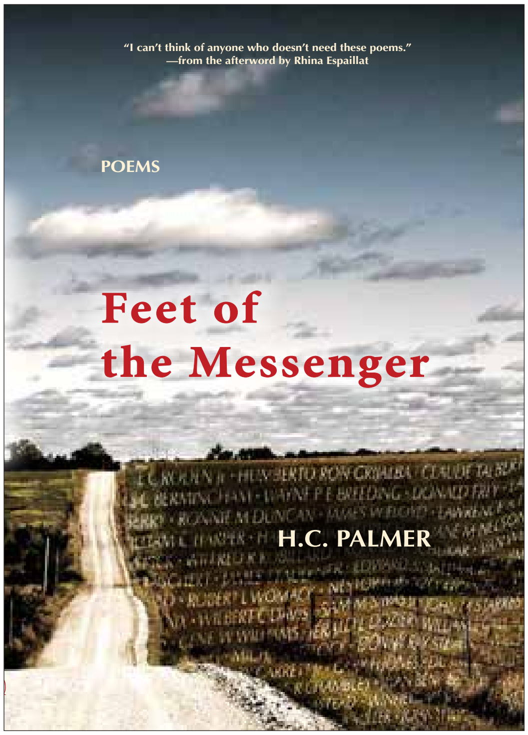


# An Interview with H.C. Palmer

author of

# Feet of the Messenger

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Interview by Karen I. Johnson

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*The collection of poems in* Feet of the Messenger *covers a variety of subjects. It is divided into three sections. In the first, you write about your Vietnam War experiences. The theme of the second section centers on death and dying. The third focuses on your ranching experience and on nature. Would you agree with these categorizations?*

In the first section I write much of my story, but also some stories I've been told related to war. I've revised, I'm certain, but the revision comes in part from having forgotten particular (probably unpleasant) experiences, which I recall the best I can while writing about the war. I'm certain also that much of what I remember from the American War in Vietnam has been altered by what I now know about it, and, perhaps more importantly, how I've coped with the worst of it. I'd already been exposed to trauma and those traumatized, physically, psychologically and spiritually. Becoming a doctor is good training for what I experienced, but I can't speak to the trauma that comes with being in the infantry, killing and being killed. I'm thankful for that.

The second section relates some personal memories, starting with my mother, and finally her death and then her father's death. Her family were immigrants from the Piedmont in northern Italy. They were not well-accepted in their adopted town in southeast Kansas. I often wondered if my Nonno and Nanna were sorry they left their "old country," as they called it.

The third section focuses, as you suggest, on my farming and ranching experience and the natural world, but I must tell you, the war comes back to me in the prairie. The first time I was ambushed by that kind of thing was when I was hunting out there and walking through tall grass up to my shoulders and more. I saw the elephant grass in that experience and I got a little queasy and for a long time couldn't get it out of my mind. Why now? After all these years?

*You are a medical doctor whose residency at the University of Kansas Medical Center was interrupted by the draft in 1964, which sent you to Vietnam. Where in* *the country were you, what was your role, and how long were you there?*

For the first half of my tour, I was a battalion surgeon with the First Infantry Division. We were the first full division to arrive in the country, bringing the total number of Americans fighting there to around 50,000. By the time I came home, eleven months later, I believe there were well over 200,000 of us there. We were about fifteen to forty miles north and east of Saigon. The battalion moved around a lot; much of the time we were in a nearby firebase, sometimes even within a Michelin rubber plantation, as there were plenty of them around. The last half of my tour was with the medical battalion at division headquarters. I was in the country a little over eleven months. That was because our battalion traveled from Oakland, CA, to Vũng Tàu in an old WWII troop ship. That took twenty-eight days—all the way across the Pacific—and by regulation, counted as part of our tour.

> "The war comes back to me in the prairie."
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> H. C. Palmer

*What are the challenges of returning to civilian life for a soldier who has fought in a war?*

The real challenge for the combat soldier is to put their training behind them, to find a way to leave the killing behind. As you may know, boot camp is a process of taking a seventeen- to eighteen-year-old kid and breaking him/her down emotionally and morally in order to teach them to become killers. They are trained to bond with a tribe of eleven to twelve other soldiers to become a part of a killing machine—one for all and all for one. A part of this training is learning to dehumanize the enemy. This sounds inhuman, but if we want to win wars we must teach our soldiers to be better killers than our enemies. When veterans return to civilian life, bad things can happen; there is no "de-boot camping." The tribe is sent their separate ways, and back home, even parents and close friends can't replace that kind of relationship.

*Much of the power of your poems about Vietnam comes from allowing the reader to experience the ugliness of war through your eyes without putting a name on the ugliness. Two examples are "Counting Boys in a Truck" and "Thơ Hòa Bình." Can you tell us about the meaning of these two poems?*

Both are examples of extreme American ugliness. The ugliness started in the White House and Capitol Building. "Counting Boys…" is about the institution of "body counts" by Johnson and McNamara. Americans were being killed, at that time, by the hundreds each week. So, we were ordered to keep body counts of Vietnamese dead, which were illuminated on TV screens every week to prove we were "winning the war."

In the case of "Thơ Hòa Bình," the "Poem of Peace," I'm writing about Agent Orange. I'm thinking our military leaders and those in the war department were pleased they'd found a way to kill and defoliate the triple canopy jungle that was hiding North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong soldiers from air strikes. However, none seemed to anticipate that we would lose as many lives or more to the poison many years later. The immediate effects of the spraying were toxic, and this desperate woman and her already dead boy were victims of the dioxin poison.

*The third section of this collection focuses on nature. You open it with the quote, "To see and know a place is a contemplative act," which perfectly describes these poems—contemplative. Did you come by your love of the land as a child? Can you tell us a little more about your strong connection to the Flint Hills?*

Yes. I grew up on a very small farm in southeast Kansas. Mom and Dad had five acres, a very large garden, a milk cow, always three or four pigs and a couple dozen chickens. My parents took turns milking, and Mom canned food as fast as she could. Dad had a friend who raised registered Herefords, and we went to his place to walk around once or twice a month. Later, when I was in practice, I had a herd of 70 mother cows, registered

Herefords, and my dad owned a half-dozen of them. In 1948, when I was twelve, he took me out to watch that big perigee supermoon rise. That evening was just spectacular, and of course I'll never forget it. There was one cow and her calf in the pasture at that time, but we did get a chance to reenact that scene later in our lives, with thirty or so cows in the pasture.

My parents wanted me to be a rancher, I think. They sent me, starting in the first grade, to Camp Wood near Elmdale, Kansas. I spent two weeks there every summer for four years off and on. Those weeks were magic and still haunt me in a very good way. The Flint Hills were and are spectacular. I drive out there often, sometimes just to get as far off the blacktop as I can. I like to find places where I can see nothing made by man.

*Have you always written poetry or is your writing more recent? Is the writing of poetry an integral part of your life now?*

I've been writing poems for ten years now. My first were a collaboration with a printmaker. I published two books about the Flint Hills. After this I came to believe that poetry was a way to say more in less space, so I tried that and have been surprisingly successful. I used to think that writing poems would be easier because they are smaller but soon discovered they take a very long time and need to be set aside and revisited.

Yes, writing is something I never stop thinking about. I keep a notepad handy, ask questions, look at stuff critically, research extensively, keep a file and revise a lot. I read every day, and keep some of my favorite poems with me—those would be poems by W. S. Merwin and B. H. Fairchild. Context is important for me. I don't want to write frivolous poems. I want them to have some meaning, something important to say—at least important to folks who think like me. I also read for a magazine. I'm a lowly assistant poetry editor, and I see a lot of stuff.

*Can you tell us a little about your recent work to help other war veteran writers?*

For a little over five years I've been working with veterans who choose to write about their experiences in war, or about anything else for that matter. We meet once a month at the Central Kansas City Library. There are eight or nine who attend regularly. We read pieces we've sent out a week or so earlier to the group for critique. We are patient and kind in our criticism, and all of us have grown in craft and storytelling. Once a year, in the spring, we have a meeting with guest speakers and writing workshops.

*One of your poems, "Selected Notes on Beauty," contains several diverse verses in which the words "beauty" or "beautiful" appear. Can you comment on the connectivity of the verses?*

Well, even in the worst context, one may be able to find something beautiful. Of course I've read Fairchild's "Beauty" many times. In this poem, the soldier with a head wound relates the simple, immediate beauty of being alive through what he thought was a beautiful moment with a beautiful fish not many months before he came to war. That moment and others in this poem are more beautiful to me in the context of Fairchild's "insight and backward vision." I believe the truest poems of war, and probably of anything else, come from this context.