

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Day Trip to Nirvana

So hot
my flushed skin
and the white sand beaches
near Hoi An
stewed together
and I diminished to
nothing, three worn shells
in my palm crusted
with sand mimicking sugar,
surf forced jade-green, frothy blue
overhead
South China Sea-sky casserole,
waves tugged, insistent,
at heavy black pants
of wiry young men turning cartwheels,
flinging drops of laughter
off-limits back then
to ones who were so
surely their soldiers at play:
so hot
when our driver took
us
captive, no resistance
even in the dusk too fast along
Highway 1,
we sent a dog back to Buddha
before we arrived at the restaurant
of his family
in the dark by the river
salted with strings of tiny lights —
I ate prawns
wiggled into deliciousness
over charcoal and steam;
a meal of heat and buzz
all day
visiting battlegrounds and paradise
hummed with the beer
until
it was perfection.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Do Not Disturb

Some of the soldiers
were lonely innkeepers
whose job during slow times
at night
was to count the
eyes,
matching the number
two to a guest-body
hoping against hope
to have nothing left over,
nothing extra to account for;
between check-ins
imagining
where the bags would
eventually
go
to the funeral parlors
in towns with
three churches,
one general store
and a civil war monument
bigger than
the gas station;
since eyeballs
take a long while
to lose
their glisten,
the evening's concierge
desperately tried to seal
all the lids
keeping guests
in the dark,
keeping them still
or they'd flutter,
and rustle their
plastic shrouds
insisting they were
in line first
every time a chopper
set down
another load.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Homestead, Pennsylvania

Ripe
blackberries
in Frick Park, a platoon
spit-shined purple
glistening full
in the Mon Valley
sun;
it was a marine recruiter's
dream
the valley where
war beats steel
any day of the week —
the steel-men daddies
got up
ready to buy it every day,
their drill instructor, liquid iron
lessons simple,
be always ready
for a hot-metal death
be always ready
to suck your last
sizzling breath;
so
the steel-men sons
lined up,
signed up
figuring Vietnam
would be just another walk
in the park
under old glory.

Semper fi.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

The Names

Nicknames slip out
slotted tongues
then nothing but
faint aftertaste
of seeping pennies:
Mooch, Jungle, Zap,
Moon Doggie,
Big, Little,
Hog, Doc,
Southie, Frenchy,
Sonny,
Hawk, Mac
remember
we were all together
in the mud
remember the clots of
mud around rice seedlings
when they ripped
us from the treeline —
the mud throttled
us and glued our eyelids,
stiffened just like cooling
drying blood
on nicknamed skin;
you're all right here
so close your breath tickles
hackle hairs whenever
a chopper chatters over
and I know I've seen you
in the Stop 'n Shop
buying aspirin and beer;
last week I think your
old pickup peeled past
me, I tried to wave
but my hand was mud
and you sped
out of my life before
I knew it, again.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Take a Number

Sorry.

Triage: must let some
 die
must let some
 live
with puzzle piece
parts missing
jigsaw arms, feet, balls
eyes and hands
oh, damn them all,
half-bodies that
didn't quit
so we had to
 pick
who to quit
first
but we stayed with them
every one,
we tried to stay with them
every one
but sometimes
the mashed
breathing creatures
clawed at us, insisted
on living
so the dying did their
business alone;
we crave forgiveness
for
letting die
and pardon for
making live.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Claymore

Snap...crackle...pop...
changed...deranged...estranged...
and they whisper, puckered mouths lipping
he's not the same since he got back —
sausage-casing
unmemories,
bloodless thin-skin
squeezing neck to toes,
in,
cold and tight;
sucking short little breaths,
in,
just enough to keep
his sorry heartwreck
going
no where
fast
like every night
on LP starting in the kitchen
working out to the
perimeter front hall
slightly dusty lavender
scented and saddlesoap,
snapping deadbolts home
pulling the doorknobs front
and basement
three times and the locks once more —
check —
shoving each window down
too many flat eyes inspecting
pushing the catches twice times two;
sniffing for them —
smelling nothing again
every night, again
like half-baked
half-cocked ambush
souvenirs,
the keening cry and his pointman's
ground up face,
tripwire, dogmeat:
front toward enemy
mother of god which way is that?

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Space-Time Continuum

Some wives
eventually run out
of room
I guess
the box at the back,
at the bottom of the closet
must have swollen
over the years
been subject to the general
theory of relativity as it applies
to the heaviest of dark matter:
last letters, photos of shirtless grinning
soon to be dead boys posed
against the sand bags
arms looped around each other
and their best friend
the rifle,
ribbons and medals too
if the top sergeant
hadn't run out
the day they finally
cut you loose;
must be bigger than it looks
bigger than that box
of god-awful Christmas tree
stuff from her dead aunt
that she shoves in your
hands every year:
Here, you always put these up before.

Anyway, the box is gone,
she sort of remembers a
cleaning frenzy one violet-peppered
spring morning
when it got in the way
for the last time,
like you feel
more and more,
dog-eared discharge papers
taking up more than
your share of space.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Dear Jane, Our Homecoming Sucked

Blond forbidden prick tease fruit
the stuff of celluloid wet dreams
got religion
or politics
or laid on the left
and went to Hanoi
where big guns
coughed
and American flyers
went down in twisted blood-smearred
burning pieces;
GI s licked sun-chapped
lips and scrawled *free*
on the upper right
and wrote
their own forbidden fruit
letters *I'm OK chow's bad it's hotter than
your backseat sweetness
stay faithful I'll kill Commies
for Christ*
and then
Jane came to straddle those big guns
and the boys took
it as a great big Dear John
'cause when they got home
pretty
hippy-dippy tie-dyed girls
spat out *baby killer*
and their moms looked
questions like *did you
did you, did you ever
kill or cry or bleed or rape
or whatever it is you do at war,
my son?*
And their girlfriends nagged
*you aren't the same, not very
nice, really, why can't you
be here for me?*

So, dear Jane, we'll put it all on you
instead of looking
in our teary hearts
and offer the ache
to loved ones
risking betrayal all over again.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Wannabe Mother

She could have been
I guess
Jan Scruggs' mother
with her fading dolly-pink
lipstick,
helmet
of doctored blond curls,
heavy black-framed glasses
bedazzled with rhinestones
but she was so
small;
not that size disqualified
her, but she seemed so
lost
a dry whisper rattling in the
shushing trees
that buffered the Veterans' Day
crowd snaking past the Wall;
he was her youngest she said
after all the others
and she always got to visit
him on Memorial Day,
of course on Veterans' Day
and Christmas;
I really wanted the lady
with the heart-shaped
Jesus pin to be Jan's
mother,
otherwise
she might be the mother
of one of them,
down past the three
patrolling soldiers,
down into the valley
where more
than enough dead
sons to go around
attend
eternity.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

The Other Soc Trang

Please, doc, god,
call me a drunk a lush
a loser drinker no good bum,
but don't say PTSD,
it can't be PTSD,
I was at Soc Trang
and nothing much happened
to me, not the real stuff
that makes you swallow
your puke so normal people
can't see how screwed up you are;
the booby traps,
you remember those
don't you,
and all the Charlies
every at night
moving around like
they owned the damn
country or something,
weren't you there
at Soc Trang
the night we were mortared
sure you were there
you screamed with your
mouth closed jammed
under the bunk
as they dropped and dropped
 incoming
 incoming
 incoming;
what's the matter
you only remember
daylight and driving supplies
around in the steam bath
delta;
thought you were there same
as me,
must have been
the other Soc Trang
where not much happened.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Coin Toss

Heads, you were out
of the kill zone –
on R&R in Manila with a taxi girl
while an ambush went south
and your fire team left 'Nam
feet first;
you won...
your tour ticked by
scrambling powdered eggs
for the short timers
and ticket punchers
in the rear;
another toss,
you were sandbagged
at battalion headquarters,
with hunt and peck
missions inside the wire;
or, helpless
in a splash of spreading red,
your pointman caught
Betty on the rebound;
and maybe, you were
taking a leak
as the one with your name
whistled a bloody refrain
of mistaken identity
through the other guy.
Tails.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Hey, Sister, Nice Tits

Hey, GI, you know that memorial
you always call the Nurses' Statue?
The one where those three
tower
over all of us,
you know that
Vietnam Women's Memorial
it's for all of them:
the donut dollie at An Khe
whose party trick one day
was dabbing pieces of bloody
flesh back on guys
from the First Cav
and the other women
who had to smile no
matter what, no matter
how fucked up some poor
soldier was
even if he had
maggots in his thigh wound
or no thigh at all;
it's for every single one of them
the Spec 5 in Saigon
and Intel gal at Long Binh,
the flying nurses
the ones out at sea,
and the RNs in triage
who came home with
rusty cuticles and weary eyes,
they showed up when
the rest of America
squirmed uneasily,
backed away
from you and your buddies,
it's the Women's Memorial
for all the women
who didn't have to be there
but went and served
and paid their dues;
hey, GI, try:
"Welcome home, sister.
Welcome home, vet."

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Shadow Lives

There are more
of them
than you can imagine
cast in deep shade
by lost
fathers and brothers,
sons, uncles and husbands,
sisters, daughters,
friends and neighbors;
small talk shushes
them, strangles them,
squeezes them into shadow
whenever the V-word comes up
because
the order of the day is
dead is dead, leave it alone,
let it go, give it up,
too sad, too deep, too much.

Too many.

And it is for the children —
we all of us are children —
that the lost leave their Wall
at first light
filing out
in no particular order
taking point
by turns
all day
speaking in tongues
from living mouths
filling voices with names
and dates,
of death,
and, at last light,
black granite warms
as the lifelorn rendezvous,
spirits slipping back
into their perimeter
taking watch by turns
to see that we never surrender
their memory.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

My Pain

They've been hit
through & through
but only the tiniest
blot of dried crust
shows under their hearts
and they show me
pointing to the hole
all out of size to the
hurt
drawing near, I reach
to turn them
where I know to find
the real story
oozing crimson ruptures
a quarter century
unstaunched, I reach to
touch
but fingers grasp only space
between us, they back away
earnest
*this is it, all there is,
look here and no further,
no touch....*
*please, please,
help me;*
eyes plead,
eyes of twin kaleidoscopes
chips of iridescent grief, black
guilt oblongs shift past
yellow flecks, shame
slides between
inevitable red slivers,
isolation glitters with every twist,
they draw away — out of my grasp
turning
their exit wounds blind
me like white phosphorus:
again, I wait for the phone
to ring out
another dead soldier.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Prisoners of the Code

Turned to mockingbirds
bound by oath
white band on wings
ropes
garble warble
forced
to co-opt bird anthems
of young pioneers
singsonging
Mao and Uncle Ho
to the hearts and minds
of peasants caught
by short-haired cadre
crooning
the truth as it was
spun by
guards
ever wrapping and unwrapping
in clammy moonlit air:
recant decry confess
imperialist monger of war
puppet trooper your crimes
against the people
who observe no conventions
just rope, and
we're bound to break
you into song
or shrivel you
into stickmen
fed only by your
code of honor.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Blue-Eyed Daddy

*...don't bury us
in glory ribbons
teddy bear flags
dog tag beer can
jump boots....*
We were just men
boys really on a lark
with no idea
that we would fail
again and again
looking for cease fire,
rolling and bunching
the bed-clothes, trying
to find a spot that didn't
ache and moan;
don't bury us
before our time, before
the roses and our sweet
plump-handed daughters
squeezing our fingers
for dear life as they
toddle for the first
time
past sun-sprayed
hedgerows,
laughing with their daddies
loving him
purely;
don't bury us
in silence and disdain,
we were men
boys really
on a glory lark
that peeled skin off
our hearts,
thinking it hell in the rice,
but learning real hell
at home
as we lived
buried
behind
a thousand yards
of blue eyes.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Welcome Home

And their moments flake off
in tiny specks
rusty dust glazing
red when wetted with tears
beers
or spit;
screened porches
wooden dark-frames
fan like parasol ribs
skeleton lines
against the western
light, every stuck gnat, fly-wing
beetle foot, making
sungold-leaf bug lace,
as America sits
on her small town porches;
America — that is her soldier sons
sit in the drawing-down light
with katydids seesawing
honeysuckle sweet air
waiting, maybe, for someone to
pull up and wave
and say,
"Hey, thanks and welcome home."
Or call, just once, on the Marine Corps birthday
maybe, or the anniversary of Ia Drang
and say, "Our thoughts and prayers are with you."

Otherwise it's merely minutes scaling off
in tiny scab seconds,
and what's left
is raw dirt waiting for indifferent sod,
Memorial Day blossom look-a-likes
between weather-proof flags;
otherwise it's one more dead man,
burned up
with that unlovely fever
they call post-traumatic stress,
another dead man whose eyes
were too full of gore
to cry or talk
just gone.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Outlaw Mission

We are the enemy camp.

They advance in columns
of Harleys –
magnificent bastard screaming eagle
doggie jar-head grunts
biggest baddest meanest
mothers ever rode.

Black-mirrored eyes
give nothing away,
as they wait by the Wall
for their men to come home.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Price Tag

They're out there
every night
doing nightly things
alone or
with babies and daughters
and sons, maybe even
grand-kids
kind of clicking off the
unforgiving hours
since the news
slammed in their lives:
bap, front door opens and the words
roar, *we regret.....*
too bad, so long, he's gone,
we'll see that you get most
of the pieces back and a flag:
Dad
where are you
and why,
why, oh why did you leave
after you said you'd be back?
I learned to tie my shoes like you said
and I've been the man of the house
since 1969
I never helped myself to childhood,
you said to be the man
and I was, even after mom
married that new guy.

They're out there
every night
and most of us are pretty
much tired hearing
about *Dad, if only Dad,*
so they mimic regular people,
spit the name of his war out
like a bad nut,
blah, Vietnam, blah,
echo — let's move on,
get over it,
it don't mean nuthin'.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Gifts Daddy Brought Home

Boot prints
on the verandah
some mess you brought
home from summer camp –
caked cammies,
what the hell is this
red flaked dirt blood,
mama-san wash & dry
forgot these
short timer duds
when you packed
hell bent for leather
back to the World;
wizened, lost
in an old C-rat can
five dried apricot ears
one guy was already
Van Gogh
before we pinned them
in the wire.

And it's freaking
Christopher Columbus
sailing off the edge
of beaten flat emotion
every time
summer camp comes back
at night sweating
oily fear
stinking your wife's
flowered sheets
with shame because
you weren't
man enough
to save all those
boys.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Vietnam Half-life

An officer and gentleman,
map-less in the no-man's-land
of normalcy:
sometimes,
a chopper slices
a corner out of the sky
and seizes his gut;
a voluptuous breeze
tilts just so, turning
a pedestrian curbside
around –
into a Da Nang street market
banked with seven kinds of rice
and eels;
banana golden mounds, prawns
and ducks, wilted feathers patient
before slaughter;
in his heart's eye,
one soft brush of fingers
through black raw-silk hair,
small palm cupping his hand
as he pays for some trivial purchase.

He is half-home.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Lewis B. Puller, Jr., Age 48, Dies By His Own Hand: A Casualty of the War

Faces of friends rise like tears,
as I read the headline:
should I phone them all, tonight?
see if any called in fire
on his own position, too?
Overrun....but not going down
easy.

Will we now
build monuments to the men
who lost their lives,
but did not die,
in Vietnam?

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Counting Backwards from 100 by 7's

For 20 years,
the nose of Vietnam
pushed against his memory pane,
dark eyes watching,
but no warm brown fingertips
or sneaky curls of incense
leaked into real life –
until he went back
in country:
then,
night became his enemy,
one hundred ways to ambush
peace of mind and
no one relieved him
on hole watch.

The VA doctor asked him to count
backwards from 100 by 7's:
honest, Doc, math is no problem,
even under fire he could
do long division –
but, there's blood on the wire
and he knows
he's next.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Warrior's Love

I know how you long for
those small kindnesses
like peaches and pound cake
or a light touch
to keep you awake on hole watch;
you miss those grunt mothers,
walking point
in heart and soul matters.

Weren't you complete
in that blooded circle,
with death's wolf eyes
gleaming in your light?

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Homeless

Shipshape
tucked and belted
even when scuttling for butts,
eager cupping each new one
to his heart deft
between the fatty, fat whiteboy
and bus stop post,
quick hand drop
rescues a flicked half-smoke
from the menage a trois
of smitten flapping sparrow
love, wings and tussles
chattering, scattering
barbecue chips
and filter tips under the chain-link
fence just out of touch;
one pair of socks
has one bold red stripe,
pants secured
in the second pair
almost bloused
I wonder if
he had been airborne
all the way.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Lies That Soldiers Tell

No, honest,
I like ham and beans,
you take the peaches;
back home, after, we'll do Baja
and Yosemite,
or the French Quarter,
hunt boar in Tennessee and
I'll be your best man;
no matter what, we'll
talk once a month,
here take the cigarettes, too,
I'm trying to quit.

We killed men, a couple,
they squared off,
we were quicker;
and that woman, but, hey man,
she had a grenade;
enemy dead, payback –
it's the ticket price
to the war;
we're tight, right?
In the World I'll be there,
no matter what.

Twenty-five years later
the fine print reads:
*looking for "Smitty"
think he's a Southie
lost track in the Da Krong Valley,
Dewey Canyon,
I made it out,
give me a call, best man.*

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Upon the 20th Anniversary of Ho Chi Minh City

Oh, yes,
at this party
they line up with
counterfeit invitations
and ask to be served
newly chic war cake
along with the boys –
our boys corn fed on
John Wayne in black & white,
abashed later to find,
when it was too late
for re-innocence,
that blood work is always
in living color.

Donut dollies and nurses,
bless them all,
civilians pimped by Uncle Sam,
guys in Norfolk
with purple heart paper cuts,
thanks, you all did your part:
but war cake
can't be bronzed
as a party favor;
it belongs to the boys,
they sleep with its sharp,
dried, angry crumbs
of sweet regret
tossed in the bed sheets,
souvenirs clinging
to just waked skin,
flaking off
inconveniently often.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Flashback IOU

Lost in slurping
footfall
sidewalk concentration
I am harshly wrenched
by a blurt
of high-pitched giggles
and glancing back
I return to where
I've never been,
past Pleiku and the tea plantation
to the orphans' nuns:
clad in dark habits
topped by death-white and black
wimples, they look like accidental
paper dolls stuck
on your slides
of hankie-sized gardens,
bamboo, barbed wire and
rippled-tin roofs
sticking out of the pushy jungle,
flat-eyed caretakers
of the round-cheeked children
who somehow always found smiles
behind their mouth-dwelling,
grubby fingers:
The walk light changes
and I am alarmed back to here
and now, seeing
three preened women in chic black,
their laughter trickling out
from under dripping
umbrellas.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Delta to DMZ Dance

I am alone with the music
and the dead
are improbably hunkered
about us
field stripping
Lucky Strike butts over and over,
considering dancers
from narrowed
starlight eyes;
occasionally they straighten,
nostalgic perhaps for fluids,
draw fingers across
living brows, and
hunker again,
thoughtfully nursing
sweat-salty fingers between
uninvited lips,
recalling the brine of being
gun-metal blood,
tears and close juices,
intimate tonguesful:
I am alone with the music
and the dead
fill me ashes.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

My Enemy, My Dear Wife

Would you love me
more
if I had died
and the only messy part,
which you would not see,
was pushed pieces at a time –
some naked and soft with new
blood, like a baby's back
fresh from birth –
into the body bag.
But you would not see that.

Do you,
do you,
do you love me enough?
If you did, enough, that is,
you'd see them
watching us
semi-circled around the bed foot
curious eyes, longing,
every time I take you
to take it all away –
the total stroke;
I slide into hiding
from their faces
and the hungry, skinning
blades that turned them
naked and soft
with new blood.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Chill of Old Memories, Tet 1969

An ugly glance
 off to one side
& the pearly shell of
winter sky clouds
behind a tangle of tree twigs
becomes talcum powder pale
quicklime
on the naked backs
of leftover sappers
sagged in concertina wire
at dawn
after the heat
of mortars rockets grenades
and our base camp boys
on automatic
thinking that the boils of satan
had popped
gagging up
black froth and sallow flames
while bunkers,
one after another
concussed into coffins,
the bullets spit little puffs
of red dust in a dervish
of death;
somebody said,
there was advance Intel
but we lay there,
anyway,
wide open like witless virgins
watching
grinning rapists
approach with outstretched
hands.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Conjuring

Quick from the road
I see
ankle-deep
 in a young green
 winter rye pool —
razed corn stalks
riding shotgun
along the revetment —
a singular green crane
wings high
in pre-flight
check
foot posed
in frozen tip-toe
above the déjà vu rice;
and quick
a burst of
vicarious sights
scents, cries and light
in the raw air,
then merely
solo lamb's-quarter
stalk, crepey leaves
frost darkened into
hanging almost feathers
along an Indiana
backroad.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

The Many Loves of Soldiers

Talk and talk and smoke,
liquor boasts of war
unmask us
letting slip
blood-stained tears,
quick recovery with
harsh laughs and winks
and more talk
around the deeper silence
around that place and time
we wouldn't trade
even for one night of unbroken sleep:
we really loved our
fear, that ice pick
slid deep in the throat,
loosing slow
drops of cold bile
congealing until the blush
of taking fire
made us rosy warm
again, at least Charlie
never sent any Dear John
letters;
Saturday afternoons
smoke and Wild Turkey
swaddle war stories —
tongued so many times
they slide out
skin-oil sweaty slick
a long secret string
of worry-beads
until wifey calls
time to go home —
step out, blink fast
in the light
haloing spring fans of soft,
unfolding green leaves
and blossom petals fluttering
into the street
like some kind of Tet
firecracker pieces shooing
away the lesser demons;
damn, someone's lit a fire
cheating us
out of here and now
with that lush, woody scent
smoky like the villes
at dusk winking into light, one
hut after another
how we loved that
time of sooty thrills
obliged only
to walk away intact.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Last Letter

His name
was
not written on
the picture backs
bruising brownish-red
with age
a young man caught in
joy before he left
and she lost
the letters lost
the name
so that every dead
soldier
could have been him —
safe at home
she mourned them all
equally
because who could tell
the right one
from the others
covered with the flag?

Sometimes
she let him live,
the last letter a
sweet token
of those few summer-lit days
salty by the sea,
letting her down easy
because all along he'd
had a lover,
then the dead soldiers
went back to being strangers.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Yellow-Eyed Cat

Hear
no evil, speak no
evil —
can't tell what's been
spilled
on this floor
in love or haste
or heat, in sickness
or in war
puddles of what makes
us human,
so much juice to mislay
over trifles,
Hail Mary full of grace,
let the bonzes burn
and limp babies flop
in the arms of begging
mothers
do we always see no evil....
the almond-eyed cat
dreams of rice rats
by the threshold
in Hanoi.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Lai Khe

Ash-drab rank and file trees
thick green crowns
trapping the leaden
stillness,
pell-mell shattered
by an accidental
ambush,
a VC patrol caught in
wide aisles
rakes us and darts
back deep
into the plantation
for safety;
it's over fast,
but he's hit,
hit and down,
a man turned into blood
pudding, food for the devil
as the sunlight gauze shroud
drifts carelessly
over his face,
now he's dead
and the tappers return
to the trees —
their cuts dribbling white,
belying the rubber's black heart —
all clear,
too late
we smoke and wait
for the dustoff.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Thien An, 1994

We wound with the road
on foot
nudging
rusty pine needles and purple flowers
toward the
hilled monastery,
clenched in heat's teeth
we were pinned
by the stopless skirl
of blue-dappled,
long-horned cicadas
to the memories
of '68 Tet
when pits of bodies outside Hue
steamed;
the old Vietnamese priest
crooked a finger —
hissed us aside
in French-spiked English:
"Your driver is VC."
Ah.
Done and undone
by the whispers of priests.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Looking for Dien Bien Phu

It was hot
 and more
than that, we jinked around
sidewalk partials giant
broken dentures
grimacing,
don't look too closely
in the maw, under the street
you'll dream Jonah
in the belly of Saigon;
torpid tourists inventing
purpose between iced coffees,
we let hours slither off under
the tamarinds and bougainvillea
with just a hiss, an exhalation
a hint of snakes almost encountered,
losing minutes like
shimmery raw silk metered
through a hawker's hand
we asked everywhere to buy
the round, red pins proclaiming
40th Dien Bien Phu —
our Vietnamese in equal measure
to their English,
they shrugged and offered
flags to mark
the liberation date of Ho Chi Minh City,
twenty minus one
coming upon us soon:
busy year for victory, forty years since
the Viet Minh spooned
our strange bed-fellow
snail-eaters
out of a little green
hell
way north:
bamboozled by rice balls
and bicycles
we brought the lot,
the guns the planes the bullets
little boats, swift boats
and slow boats to the South China Sea;
all the while,
under Lilliputian tables
by noodle soup stalls
mongrel dogs scratching poxy hides
in blissful, squinting concentration,
and their mongrel mamas and great-grandmamas
too, ceding hot pink flesh
to fleas and mange unceasingly —
they could have told us
just what to expect.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Under the Black Virgin

Between the cool ghost trees
silence caught
like a garrote —
plantations
another one of those goddamn places
off limits
on the way to Tay Ninh,
at least a Vietnamese name
you can actually say —
hard scrabble, hard times
always watched
by our own cherry martyr
Nui Ba Den,
a hard-case mama — the high ground —
and we wanted her in the worst way;
we knew that zone like
a tongue sweeping
'round and 'round teeth
sometimes,
we'd take Route 22 out to the gate
and lob hard rice over the sign:
you are now leaving
the Republic of South Vietnam
don't let the barbed wire
hit your ass on the way out,
other times,
like new-moon Saturday nights
me and the boys
would hop the fence, maybe
dragging home later
our guts wriggling out
of both hands;
and that Cao Dai gingerbread temple,
sure was something else
its Giant Eye Ball
checking in with
Commie Command & Control
under Cu Chi I bet....
well, I might go back some time,
some hard-up holiday
if I thought
I could get up
that mountain
to see
what the hell we were doing.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Out of the Valley

There is no direct flight
into the eyes of this general:
you must rub past all
who stood
when it was necessary
under the massif
after things got worse,
much worse, and
the elephant grass regulars
closed their saw teeth
at X-Ray
and Albany;
you must walk past
each of his precious blooded boys
as he tells you
that they came out of
the valley
with their heads held high,
and all of their dead;
that is what you must
know
before you can know him.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

On Being Rejected by PBS

Thanks; no, really, thank you:
I watched the 70's last night
rock ' n roll ' n punk
rock ' n plastic angst
guitar picks three-chord special,
foundry subtle bass, and Patti Smith
coyly ungendered clouded
in ciggie, puff, puff,
smoke, wiry hair
faux distress
can't have the car keys
phony baloney sex and
fortune cookie flirtation with death
images
safety pin leather spiked
hair, black-mouthed children mewling
whining wheedling clawing
for some edge
any edge of
the envelope;
it's hardly new, the Greeks had
zits and China
pulled Confucius out of the hat
to quell quaking, waking, doubting,
wanting kids —
they warned me of adult
content, that must have been
the Sex Pistols
lounging in union jack
jockey shorts saying
God Save the Queen, shit;
guess that story
about army nurses
carrying boys' fingers,
eyes and faces
in wallet dividers or
tucked in something
old, something new, something
borrowed
something blue garter belts,
sealed in glass cages
neat beads of blood
caulking out
sensation storms,
guess a story like that
has too many chords and
content warnings
would last
forever.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Refurbishing Uncle Ho

I have tried to imagine
Hanoi —
with lotus lapping
water around the
newly ancient
One Pillar Pagoda re-created
after the French took
their Indochina torch
and lit town on the way out —
wondering, is it like Saigon
only less so? The ancient guild
warren of streets
named paper votive objects,
parasol, hoop net, bamboo, lacquer
rice and worms
haven't kept up with the times
so
cellular phone, pirated video
or plump white tourist street
more properly would be
in Saigon
which is more properly
Ho Chi Minh City
where they aren't tied
to the old ways
any longer than they have to be.

Uncle Ho
asked for the burn
but fellow travelers
get more mileage
out of his perennial state
lying in Hanoi
making hiatus every so often
to Moscow
where they specialize in fancy death balls.
Ho is in good hands
for re-waxing
and re-wording,
re-created
so even we
can't remember
why we bombed that saint
in the first place.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Balance of Grief

Feet soothe wide
dirt paths
queued with
ghost-silver rubber trees
as far and beyond
as
the seeing eye;
feet lilt along
with baskets on poles
just right the
speed to keep body and
load moving
on
rice salt prawns
cilantro eggs greens
up down up down up down
a tuneless bobble
stopping only
when market
is reached
or it all jars
loose —
the grunts carry
grief
in blood-veined baskets
each lost soldier
cradled, a stillborn newborn —
jolting out of tune
lurching
until the end
or it all jars
loose.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Starlight Fugue

Callow green,
flattened, shadow-light,
lovers paired
never as close as sniper and night target
scoped in a pulse beat;
intimate in that breathless,
slow,
trigger squeeze.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Firebase Gangsta

The homeboys
jumble
heads over hot shoes
in my mind
with their boomer daddies
and the geckos
fuck-you lizards
doing manic push ups
and swelling
red, scaly neck flaps
out and out and out
staking a testy green claim to
tent flaps and sand bags
in In-do-chi-na
lookat me
lookat me
big and bigger, biggest
don't cross me, man
in your face,
I'll take you out
take you down,
drive by, bye-bye.

Their daddies played
the Cong
in the wire,
now
the boys
play each other
on the street...
mouthing and strutting
and puffing and rapping
and cool as skin over ice.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Choices Not Made

We tread delicately
On ancient rims of porcelain cups,
A slow dance of discovery
And futility.

Sometimes everything is not
Enough.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Night Patrol

In this dragon's land,
rice has risen
its tiny green swords
from plowshares
since before the ancestors;
I cannot imagine this land at war.

Long evening light splays across the treeline,
my traveling companions sigh,
the scent of cook fires
trickles through dusk air –
first one oil lamp glows in a thatched window,
then another –
 *how easy it would be
 to slip through the twilight
 into that sweet clutch of fear and anticipation....
 and never come back.*

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

"My Lai"

I wonder if birds nattered too that day
in the will-o-wisp graceful pines –
when soldiers came
and dropped the babies
one by one by one
with their mothers and the elders.

It was mines, they say,
plucking limbs and lives
one by one by one
that drove them in
to gut the village...as if killing
erases death.

The soldiers' mothers, what of them?
Did they think hell roared
as their babies
turned butcher?

Please tell the mothers
that butterflies dance above the graves
at Son My.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

In Memory's Lair

Even a photograph
palm-sized
with a road curving
between green-graced
hills
and tiny figures in
white-winged ao dai
sears
through my chest,
cauterizing the exit wounds
in my heart.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

One and Many

Passersby hold up hands
outstretched
next to her larger than life
bronze fingers, burnished
silver by touches;
she looks out – off –
for the slick, again to come and claim
another bloody boy, to whisk him away
where hands
push and pinch and stitch the pieces
back together;
she watches, by wishing
tries to draw the whooshing blades
faster
to the hands
who shove living, flopping limbs
and trailing tubes
on board, onto the
giant throbbing heart —
hoping to beat the body handlers
slip-slapping arms and torsos
onto ponchos, always the race
she tries to win
by staying at attention
even in her sleep,
so they can't sneak in and
whisk
the caterpillar boys
away to waiting hands
of mothers unable to grasp their
butterfly sons stitched into
stars and stripes:
she's the one looking toward Lincoln
past the Wall full of no-timers,
stoic to passersby
who washed their hands
of the war in the first place
but now
want to match
outreached fingers against hers.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Beggars and No Flush Toilets

For so little,
you would spurn
four thousand years of history—
Vietnam brocade
with silver dikes stitched
around surprising green rice-silk
paddy quilts,
surely to please the god
and goddess, looking fondly
down
on their offspring —
fiercely gentle folk
who will serve gracious tea
under carved dragon roofs
and give you their hearts
for a song or poem
as long as you play
by their inscrutable rules —
for so little
as the rumors of beggars
at every tourist stronghold,
dry husks hands
floating in a sea of need,
for so little as
squatting behind
a tiny banner of scrap plastic,
high enough to shield
your round eyes only
you will never see
Hoan Kiem Lake,
with the turtle patrolling
still, I'm sure,
and Le Loi's
lightening sword at the ready,
waiting
until history
bites its own scaly tale
again
and the gate-crashers
must be turned-out
again.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Politics

I look in their intelligent eyes...
people of decency
weaving children and good works
through the weft of community,
now;
I look and wonder
as Hue was pried back
house by bloody house during Tet of '68 -
what did they chant at the barricades
under the enemy flag?

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Futility Defined

Do you wonder
if transparent fingers
slowly
grow
with green shoots in the paddies?
Rice enlivened by young men's bones
and juices so long ago lost,
chewed up by fire from the treeline;
a handful of hometown boys
pressed deep into field muck
leaving a fluid wake
that nourished rice
and fed the enemy.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Looking Glass

It is hard to imagine,
this mild October evening,
a place farther from
My Lai than my front porch –
but in the last dilute
squeezings of daylight,
the sweet smell of burning logs
startles me...
I am back in the feathery pine twilight
at the graveyard
with village cookfires filling
the dusk.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Hometown Boys

Thirty years back:
you left that place
and never made it
all the way home,
still traveling
to the beat of a blood tattoo
and never passing a word
of what it was about:
taped against glint and noise,
at night with the bamboo
squeaking
and fear
vivid as tracer rounds
on point still,
inching toes itching
for the tripwire
just do it be done with it
screaming with hand signals,
and no one gets it
yet.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

The My Lai Peace Park

To some, it may simply
look like
we're back with our do-gooding
done-bad
stuff
intentions paving the
road to fixed-up clinics, and
shrimp farms in exchange
for husbands and babies
or papas,
loan funds that
revolve
like the wheel of life
no prayer flags
however just
fluttering contrition
and shame to pluck at freely
growing
like the kapok tree
dispensing its white gauze balls,
sopping soul blood
from the green wound
memorial
curled along the fringed-pine fence
row;
but until we all look
over the fragile
crumbling edges of bloody ditches
into the fleshy truth
of hot, chopped
bodies
we cannot buy our way out;
we must own the horror,
all of us
who turned away our faces
when we heard —
and didn't even cry.

There is no far away
from My Lai.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Stayed Too Long at the Fair

Tick
Tour
Tick
Tour
Tick

You went over the fence
where the rice was always
greener
and meaner
and those feisty little bastards
scampered off for safety
so often
you weren't really
there at all
just a bloating,
hulking, spattered
shell of mission;
 tick
 mission
 splat
 mission
another couple guys
bought it
where did they come from
anyway,
they new guys
or fucking old guys
too dead to know
when to go home?

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Yes Means No With a Smile

Saigon
near brush
with dusk, the over-wrought
beaten-copper pearl
full moon gong
floated
over the wedding party,
fire crackers
staccato
good luck demon riddance
perhaps too near
gun fire for my former
soldier companion
blew the vocabulary
lesson
away —
he didn't want meat
and pointed to *vegetables*
in my
Vietnamese-English
phrase-book
at the soup stall
where we ate,
in another language
I guess
because they too pointed
and smiled and nodded
then honored him with beef.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

To Forgive

You from the hollows and hills,
motor cities, steel cities,
pork barrel cotton king broadloom oil boom
ocean port holy coal towns,
yoked the turncoat dragon
and it came
only at your call
over and over,
licking our moon-cheeked babies with
orange tongues of black fire —
jet-haired girls,
old-enough-to-kill-you boys,
mama-sans and papa-sans
stopped breathing
as the war hoarsely clattered
over and over and out —
just went about their days
waiting
to burn.

Still, you from the hollows
and hills, sea to shining sea,
and we
have floated
in the same golden plasma moments
when time stops
and green leaf cheeks
puff up with dusk air,
almost to sigh
with the sun
on its final tilt up
for a last, long cast of light
to net us, twilight fishes
pulled into the deep shadow
for another night
of dreaming
the same cracked tea cup dreams
under left-over French,
white-gaitered shade trees
in Saigon
and out along the canals
with palm-trees flocking
as birds on stilt legs, full-fanned
plume tails and no heads
around elephant-colored tombs
set about with new rice.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Survive & Evade

Under a milky-blue,
hot April sky
slipped over the bridge
at Cam Lo
I looked for some sign
of the Walking Dead
returning from Con Thien
and saw a only boy with his bicycle
watching fishermen undo their nets.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Offerings

The ghosts did not unfurl from headstones
or blue, orange, white-crested tombs.
Why now, past the paddies
in these baby hills before Da Nang
do they lightly rise to greet me with flowers?

A flutter across my heart, in one moment
I leave time,
and see souls of soldiers
standing uneasy at watch.
In one moment, I want to call out,
reach out, show them
winnows rise and fall, melons fat
and satisfied hung from their stick-woven
perches, soft trails so gently cupping
children in,
gathering them home.

All those men stolen from promise
left stirring on this ground,
offering restless petals of welcome.

I take them
and cannot respond.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Let Bygones Be Bygones?

The universal cat
arched, curved,
then stretched – scratching –
folded four paws
precisely,
flicks a look at me,
past me,
in a sweet courtyard
faintly reeking of the empire.

A chill on my neck,
tripped by ghost fingertips
who brush invisible along walls
pockmarked by bullet holes...
someone speaks, off to the side,
"Let bygones be bygones,"
and perhaps means it.

Cream and yellow-faced egret
treads long, deliberate toes
around fragrant
cream and yellow-faced plumeria
blossoms,
waxy cast-offs from
a courtyard tree.

East is my morning window,
gonged and chanted into dawn,
another day along the Perfume River.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

M-16

Hung behind the door
at the ready, always
wide leather belt
copper buckle
size of your small, sweaty fist
finally
drove you
off to war, seabag,
salt-crusted eyes
and man-meat hands;
and, when choppers thrummed
overhead,
coming for your first best
friend,
you touched the shredded cheek
unbelieving with one shy finger,
he grinned and said,
Hey, it's OK, I'll make it...
seeing the boots flop, double-time
on the slick
as it lifts
away
your eyes jam
hope to god
morphine takes the edge off
before his last lung of air
rags empty among strangers.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

A Very Bad Day In September

...red sky in the morning,
sailors take warning,
soldiers, too,
before the day runs out,
first molten then
clotting the moment
forever behind your eyes;
in a climate of havoc
no footprints
left behind
from a day toothed
like elephant grass
blades skirting
gray stone
four-poster graves
half sunk beds of eternal rest
for Buddhist bones.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

At the Moving Wall

You said you came
to the Moving Wall
to see your father
with no gift,
just yourself, and
that wasn't enough,
just his flesh and blood
having never been held
by his eyes, or his hands
even,
he wanted you named
after his best friend
second-hand, second-guessed;
yet
you carry
him under your skin,
his bones slide with yours,
maybe your laugh is his
laugh, or your teeth,
or your love of the open sky
over granite outcroppings;
you came to him, today,
with no offering,
so
reached up and pulled off
a tulip tree flower —
pale-green banded orange
blossoms full of ripe pollen
promise,
floating like surprising
water lilies in the shallows
of light yearning leaves,
and you stood before his name
and thought yourself —
alone —
not enough
for this dead soldier,
this dead father.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Metaphysics

Vietnam does not exist
except when it rises
like some Brigadoon phoenix
from misty ashes of longing
met head on with unrequited passion.
Even as Vietnam stirs up
sweet and thick
from the bottom
of your bitter black dream cup,
only you exist.

In those pauses
quivering
with breeze and light taunting
white ao dai gliding –
you feel
nothing will ever be like this
or as good
as the tiny forbidden flicker
of tender skin
just above the waist.

And as you stir
white into black
to pour crackling over ice,
soon you will not exist –
swallowed by Vietnam.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Reunification Express, 1994

Somewhere miles out
of Saigon
north even of Phan Rang
and Nha Trang
eating sticky white rice
spooned from red plastic
laundry tubs
you'd swear the riders
of the purple sage
were hiding in a box canyon
a kind of hot tumbleweed
dryness with prickly pears
pretending to be
overlapping green roof tiles,
sheltering some
deeper resemblance to the
cowboy warrior's home range,
a dun-blue sky as big as the
ceiling
over the Badlands
on a persistent wind afternoon
broken by furrowed trees old
before their time,
stands of slender
silver-mottled rubber trees
slip by
warning even those
lost in train time
bound for the Hai Van Pass
that the time of heroes
is past
is past
is past.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Loss

The sweet wind fills my hair
and turns the trees
to jewels,
plying each leaf
with a facet of movement
and late spring sunlight.

There was wind off the lake
in Da Nang ...
did we each wonder
if wind
would ever be the same again?

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Some Who Stayed

Misshapen wool steamed
softly
on the stove, pulled-down nylon rope
throat high where we gathered
the one place warm and
I made biscuits that
baked hard as the memories
years later
of talk in the West Virginia winter
crusty, biting layer of
glaze over a foot or more,
late snow, one said he starved himself
ate bananas and water for months
until
they rejected his skinny, draftee butt
— not enough meat for
cannon
or even typewriter
fodder;
I kneaded and pummeled
a lump of flour and water
until dry dough flaked
all over while I heard
the ways they didn't go —
red and gray socks funky damp
around us
so far from triple canopy jungle
hung about with leeches
soft lips ready to slip kisses
too quiet, waiting
for the first red line to
spring up, blood bracelet
discarded carelessly like a diva
might throw a twisting string
of faux rubies
from an unwanted admirer —
so far from the truth
of having stayed, laughing
half-rueful, half-relieved at not
knowing of this,
eating harsh biscuits
free to go on
with unmarked flesh.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Answer to a Grandfather

It's over, let it go,
no more words
no more writing, the time when none
of us were heroes
on the hill
and you say, again,
what can be gained
by getting the story right
getting the words fully
when there can be no
rightness in metal
and bone
changing places
turning young soldiers
into corpses
our memories curtailed by
a fine spray of red or mud
what does it matter now —
bringing the war home
from the front
like a second naughty head,
bobbling sideways — talking back
you were less, less
than enough or worse, maybe chicken
and no one ever knew
but it fusses
in your real ears
of things done badly
or fearfully,
you were the only one so wrong,
it gibbers
so you say let it go, no more words
what can we gain
from going back over that ground,
running our fingers around
that hole trailing dirt crumbs
and burning:
well, grandfather,
the war always leaks out,
all over your daughters
and your sons
and their babies you cradle
with a book in your lap, finding
words for only that
as your babbling silence
crusts the family with
yellow secrets
tinged so lightly blood-pink,
shame spots uncleanable
except by true words:
you must have guessed:
it won't ever let go.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

White Flag

Baby-blue thin almost
see-through blue ao dai
and long hair, heavy
and black,
wind wouldn't it feel like
across your cheeks
if you could move that
close, tresses sliding
across the silk
backs of two young ladies
claiming our passports and
granting room keys
in a ritual of hostage
exchange well-known at the hotel
with its glass wall into the restaurant
full of green and red-starred
Da Nang cops,
measuring
the fuss and mess
of pink-hot former soldiers
drinking obligatory cups
of tiny tea,
hunched at too low tables
spread-legged around knapsacks
all caught in listening
to the slip-suck of
laundry — sheets, shirts, rough
towels — against wet concrete floors
right off the lobby
hunkered splay-toed women never looked
it was the girls
for looking
and those girls, faces smooth
as rubbed church pews
watched and ran for bottled water,
remedies for tender stomachs,
ginger candy
out the door, swinging
sighing hair so different
from the black-shoed
sullen girls with full lips
painted dark
forming words of arch disgust
over remembered tomato soup
at this Cincinnati restaurant --
it was so sweet,
so, too sweet, spicy
like you know what I mean: barbecue sauce,
sneering around their matching
cigarettes,
exhaling smug words
until I
just had to retreat.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

And So It Goes

Vietnam comes knocking
and it's always
the wrong time
or the wrong door
and
I reel out those emotions
again
for all of them
with the sticky fingerprints
all over their wives
and children,
all over their lives
and whatever pieces
of heart and soul
made it home,
and I feel
grief
for them
and ugly relief for me
that I don't have to know
what I feel
because they throb so
loudly, I can't hear
myself cry.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Another One Returns

My heart
has a bamboo-lined graveyard
full of all those boys
who sneaked past death
once or twice
but
no one can forever —
and when another one
goes, I seek comfort away
from the sprouting upside-down
tree of acid tears — throat trunk-filled,
fast diverging branches pushing
stinging grief
deep into my chest,
I walk
among the white confetti
petals flung down by spring rain
in a final homecoming parade —
and see them all, soft-eyed
and smiling,
finally at rest,
back among their ghost warrior
brothers,
seeing for themselves that
crusty, rust-blushed bandages
are indeed shed
and wounds replaced
by purple lilac clusters,
seeing for themselves death's truth:
the universe welcomes her
children back
entire.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Widow

What is
not
is larger than life
dark alone silent
even in the swollen heat
you sit cold
thinking what happened
was a bad
dream
until you realize
you never slept
waking to the wait
of some other outcome.

POEMS CHanneled FROM THE WAR

Happy Valley

It is
on the map
which I have marked
with a purple Post-It Note
because someone always
calls to make sure it
really existed - out there
near Rattle-Snake and Charlie
Ridge -
if they call, I never see
their eyes, but I know
his eyes, behind the dark
glasses
and theirs
all hold a glassy stillness
in which lovely veins
branch and branch into
fractal infinity where
blood and river channels
be all the same -
and around the frozen
ice will be green
so breathtakingly
alive the leaves push
hearts to the
limit against bamboo ribs -
in the gull wind off
Lake Michigan, we met
because he wore the bulldog
on his shoulder
and I always ask;
when we parted, he took
off his bicycle gloves
to shake hands
the wordless truth of skin
against living skin.