

## 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.

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### 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 liping  
*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 curtained 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.