

# BLUE STREAK



# Blue Streak

*A Journal of Military Poetry*

## Volume I

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*The Journal of Military Experience*  
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*The Blue Falcon Review*  
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# Introduction

—Wanda Fries

*On Peleliu we fought and died. We're restless lying side by side,  
Who gave our all. And now we wait,  
too worn to rest, too tired to hate.  
We are the earth's repatriate...*

—William Lincoln Simon

Written by a veteran present at the fall of nearly 10,000 of his fellow Marines and infantrymen in 1944, in a battle predicted to last four days, but one that went on instead for two months, these lines from the last poem in *Blue Streak* reveal that the war experiences of the writers in this journal of military poetry cover almost seventy years, a human life span in terms of the battles—some interior—the writers in this volume have fought.

As seems to be continuously and depressingly the case, William's battle itself is controversial. The strategists who made the decisions had yet to learn the lessons of recent prior battles, and the small island and its tiny airstrip proved to be nearly useless in the eventual defeat of the Japanese and the final resolution of the war. A captain who wants to know the reason for the clash of troops he witnesses says to Hamlet:

Truly to speak, and with no addition,  
We go to gain a little patch of ground  
That hath in it no profit but the name. (*Hamlet* 4.4.16-18)

I am not a pacifist. I am certain that there are rights—particularly the rights of those who cannot defend themselves—that sometimes must be protected, even at the cost of war. I am, however, a believer that my job as a civilian is to hold politicians accountable so that war is the *last*, not the *first*, resort. We must also avoid glorifying the dead and the wounded in a way that allows the politicians to hide behind these warriors’ honor, and we must *always* care for those who, as William points out, “gave their all,” a phrase that, to me, covers not only dying, but the death of innocence. Too often we send children to war. We should take care of the men and women who return.

One way to do that is to listen to them, because they do not speak in one voice, any more than the rest of us speak in one voice. I always cringe when I hear someone claiming to speak “for veterans,” because I know so many of them, and while it’s true that veterans share many common experiences, I can no more predict the opinion of a veteran on a particular political issue, a religious bent, or a musical preference than I can predict anyone else’s. That does not mean, of course, that we cannot speak in unison for veterans’ rights. As for veterans, this volume suggests that they can speak for themselves, in all their variety and diversity.

This volume will be my last term as poetry editor for what was, at its inception, a section of *The Journal of Military Experience*. I have wept with Sergeant Jack Kirt—as did every participant—during a Military Experience and the Arts poetry workshop as his wife read his poem about the night nurse who is the last witness as Private Johnson dies. His poem is included in this volume. Some poems here are raw; others hedge their bets behind an ironic surface that is barbed and cutting. Not all are bleak, and some of

the poems recount the excitement of jumping out of an airplane or the beauty of a Baghdad sunset.

Every poet was a pleasure to work with, and what I got most from them was gratitude; they were grateful that their voices will be heard, grateful for a few editing suggestions, as if I were not the one who should be grateful for the opportunity to read so many lovely lines of beauty and honesty. I hope they would all say that I honored their style, their metaphors, their cadences—their *voices*. I know I tried to. It has been an honor to be a part of this journal, one of the experiences that I will remember all my life.

As I leave, Suzanne Rancourt, herself a veteran, and perhaps for that reason above all other good ones, is more suited to edit *Blue Streak*, will step in as editor. Her own poems have been included in the last two volumes, including this one, the first free-standing journal. They are beautiful.

Read the poems and savor them. Listen. Though some believe our penchant for war is hard-wired, I cannot bring myself to apologize for continuing to hope that the voices of warriors from Homer on will finally be heard until, at last, we beat our swords into ploughshares and need study war no more.

# Nightmare

—Mike Sukach

All the stars scattered like kids in a fire drill  
space ripped open, these aurochs and satellites  
rained like cats and dogs, flak and spent casings,

“fucks” and “oh shits” squelched through forests  
and cities, car crashes were on that frequency  
and I think my ear was bleeding from the chaos

and no one could avoid the aurochs tumbling  
like cinder blocks tossed off the edge of the sky  
and smashing into the forests and cities, a scream

stretched out across the jagged horizon vanishing  
into TV static as fizzling satellites whistled overhead,  
and the aurochs weren't dying the way you think

they thudded into earth, tables, chairs, and ammo  
crates, righted their mangled raging auroch bodies  
and began feasting on satellites and the kersplats

the kind you see on cartoons but it's not Wile E. Coyote  
just some poor red splatted schmuck like we all are  
being overrun by aurochs at least three stories tall

and then, Doc, the nightmare began like it was all over  
and then I realize I'm staring down the sight of my rifle  
at everything the size a of marble and the earth was drifting.

## Dragon Fruit Cacti, Vietnam, 1970

—Bruce Sydow

A lizard bellied in blue  
measures me in sidelong glances  
as a cactus blossom beckons me  
to the allure of its sweet fragrance.  
The prickly buds envelop me  
with puncturing notes  
as the succulents pierce my hands  
and inject spiny nectar.

As their nodes heighten my senses  
in a painful bargain,  
the rows of fruit skirts  
the precipice of a magenta bloom.

A sunset applauds in dying splendor  
of splashed orange over China Beach  
painting a palette unmatched  
by any Master save for God.

# Tags

—Anonymous

dog tags and body bags  
collar, water, food  
series maps and compass  
a somber, solemn mood

I question why it hurts to love  
What point the pain and ache  
I wish I had an alternate  
A peace, a place, a break

My heart and head are haunted  
My soul is dark and mean  
My memories are many  
If only I could dream

But nightmares fill the space  
And time where otherwise I'd sleep  
I hope and pray and wish for help  
With things I've buried deep

## Passing Storm

—Craig W. Steele

*Only the dead have seen the last  
of war. — Plato*

Hail has snipped young leaves from trees  
and blooms lie lost beneath white waves,  
while sunlight dies in twilight's freeze.  
Hail has snipped young leaves from trees  
and as I wander where I please,  
I wonder what has wreathed the graves —  
the hail has. Snipped young leaves from trees  
and blooms lie lost beneath white waves.

# In Under a Minute

—Doug Self

The percussion  
of detonation resulted  
in concussion  
name forgotten  
the where  
when  
why  
blown from  
my brain  
too hazy to  
be scared  
looked to my left  
at my friend driving  
grabbed my balls and  
yelled, "They're still there!"  
we laughed the laugh of fear  
only combatants know  
picked up the radio to  
report the incident as required  
call button depressed  
blank stare in my eyes  
"Are you okay, man?"  
slowly I swiveled my head  
"I can't remember."  
he and I  
still alive

which is more than I can say  
for the guy driving his vehicle  
on the other side of the road  
I wonder if he still remembers  
the percussion  
from the detonation that  
only left me  
with a mild concussion

## In Afghanistan's Fields

—Chris Heatherly

In Afghanistan's fields the poppies blow  
The seeds of war flowering, row on row.  
We know the places where they grow  
Following orders, soldiers pass on by  
Leaving the demons where they lie.

Rules of engagement tied our hands  
Prevented us from entering enemy lands  
Lines on a map more important than a line in the sand  
Lying awake in bed, we ask the night,  
“Why were we there, if not to fight?”  
In Afghanistan's fields.

Across America, a slowly falling snow  
Thousands of white crosses stand row on row  
Our government sleeps; the poppies grow  
Perhaps we lost our way,  
Avenging a fateful September day  
In Afghanistan's fields.

# My Name Is Ruthie, Your Nightly Nurse

—Jack Thomas Kirt

I see that you have been in a coma  
for two days and I hope you can hear me—  
Johnson, I am going to check  
your vitals every two hours just to see if  
there are any changes. Johnson, my name is Ruthie,  
your nightly nurse, and while I'm here with you,  
I will see to it you are given the best care—  
Johnson, I will clean your wounds and change  
your bandages too and when I'm finished  
I will comfort you. Johnson, my name is Ruthie,  
your nightly nurse, I am going to check your vitals  
every two hours just to see if there are any changes. Tears  
in her eyes, these are her words. I am going to sit right  
beside you. I am going to write to your wife how much  
you going to miss her and how she going to miss you. Johnson,  
I am going to tell your kids that you love them, that you  
wish if it is God's will you can be there to watch them grow up.  
I am going to hold your hand while you are here. Johnson, I am  
Ruthie,  
your nightly nurse. I will be the person you will have talking with  
you.  
I will be the last person to hold your hand. I'll kiss you for  
your wife and kids. I'll tell them how good a soldier  
you were, Johnson. I'm going to tell your parents  
you are a brave soldier and that you love them very much.

I will write to tell your comrades to keep you in their hearts. And  
Johnson,  
when it's my time to go, who will sit beside my bed and  
hold my hand? Who is going to write my husband and kids  
and tell them I'm going to miss them, and who is going to kiss me  
one last time? Johnson. I am Ruthie, your nightly nurse.  
It's time to unplug you from the machine. I can't check your vitals  
anymore. I am going to clean you and dress you  
with your dress blues on and pin your awards  
on your chest and call for someone to bring  
your body out. Pvt. Johnson, you will be missed.  
Time of death 1400 hours. Stayed  
in a coma for five days.

## Masks of PTSD

—Judy Bell

I looked at my reflection  
staring back at me—  
friendly, kind and sweet  
Makeup done just right  
Hair sweeping gently  
back

Eliminate space  
My reflection a vision of confidence and success—  
a stranger to me.

Behind the perfected mask,  
anxiety, rage, depression, and shame—  
Invisible to the world, my torments rage.

Behind the perfected veil  
no one sees  
this controlled reaction  
to a sudden sound, sight, touch or smell.  
Responses quick and well-rehearsed—  
years of hypervigilance—

Behind the beautiful façade,  
Concealed rage, rage ignited  
from missed opportunities  
when depression or anxiety robs me  
of my chance.

Shame lurks behind that veil too.  
Falsely saying, it was my fault.

The day- and nightmares continue—  
Deep inside where no one sees.

Instead all view  
The familiar reflection.

## Radio Call

—William Howerton

Sierra 16 this is Echo 23, SALUTE reports follows:

S: Two males, one vehicle

A: Conducting Route Recon along MSR Tampa

L: Sunni Triangle

U: Unknown - Sunni Imam

T: 1537Z

E: AK-47, RPG in vehicle

Echo 23, Sierra 16 Roger over

A rush of adrenaline comes through your stomach to your fingertips as a voice acknowledges the imminent danger your soldiers currently face. Focused on voices over the radio for signs to release your combat power, your QRF is useless to the four-man Traffic Control Team, because an orange traffic cone between Baghdad and Balad looking for Imams and 57mm rocket blasters was a random task you approved of within the last 12 hours. You listen, learn, assess, report, direct, advise because the TCP Team depends on your mentorship, coaching and calming presence from sender to receiver, as you pray for peace while cussing for a violent end to hostile situation (Shoot the Son of a ..... ) because enemy and friendly are scared equally and you want the soldiers safe, ASAP.

A 24 minute encounter—  
you close your eyes  
hope this engagement will go away  
no harm to your soldiers  
and another report comes in:

Sierra 16, Echo 23, ACE Report follows:  
100% Ammo,  
no Casualties,  
all Equipment accounted for,  
prisoners detained, weapons confiscated, mission continues, this  
is Sierra 16, good job, roger out, until the next radio call.

## Sunset over Baghdad

—William Howerton

No napalm today, just small arms fire and fear in Sadr City, Baghdad and Balad. Troops are hated and loved, villains and heroes, vigilantes and professionals. Saddam palaces everywhere, green zone mortars flying all over, Apaches in the air, HMMWVs and MRAPs on the ground traveling at the speed of light to avoid IEDs and chase SUVs carrying terrorists. We operate in donkey cart environments, create firefights in bombed cluttered alleys, locate our enemy hiding in adobe huts which create the Baghdad “skyline” with the Tigris River creating a different Garden of Eden through our zones of responsibility, somewhat mindful of the ROE.

No seasons feature Baghdad, only the color brown. Brown buildings, brown uniforms, brown vehicles, brown trees, brown Mosques, even care packages from home come wrapped with love and brown. Our chow comes from you guessed it, Kellogg BROWN and Root. Only flashes of orange and red come in forms of explosions, rifle flashes, and blood.

Nightly patrols, traffic control cones, and cache discoveries drive us to catch the bad guys. Listening to our instincts, trusting only those in the same uniform, we do it all over again while developing feeling and visions which may never go away. This is not about oil or WMDs, sectarian violence between Shia and Sunni; it's about freeing the oppressed, our battle buddy, and leaving the desert. No iron men in Baghdad, just iron weapons, men of steel will waiting for the sunset over Baghdad for 364 days.

# Valhalla

—Virgil Huston

In modern times  
why do warriors fight  
pointless and  
counterproductive wars?

Do they really believe  
that Afghanistan is a  
noble cause? Iraq?  
That make us hated more  
by those we try to rule.

Is it just a job?  
Do they even care?  
Or would they fight anyone  
the politicians send them to?  
While the politicians stay at home.

Are they brainwashed  
or is there more?  
They say only warriors  
honorably killed in battle  
receive the best reward.

Do they wish to be received  
by Odin in the Valhalla halls?  
Or Freyja's Folkvangr fields?  
Or to Elysium where

the Greek heroes dwell?

Yet in today's world  
only Muslims believe  
in a hero's reward.  
Heaven awaits the brave  
with forty virgins each.

Even the promises to warriors of  
the Crusades are long forgotten.  
The West has no traditions left  
or the great rewards there are.  
If we only remembered and believed.

So, why do we fight these wars?  
Brainwashed warriors have no place.  
Pawns and puppets do no good  
but fatten the pockets of  
the Masters of War.

And the warriors die for nothing.

## Ramp Ceremony

—Virgil Huston

Three soldiers died this morning,  
I saw the medevacs come in  
Much later, we heard  
what happened—  
A firefight and IEDs,  
There were wounded, too  
Sergeant Major came to see me  
Another ramp ceremony,  
on the LZ tonight—

We started gathering early,  
while the day was still alive  
A crescent moon in the dimming afternoon  
Soldiers setting up the stage  
on that same landing zone,  
where the medevacs had landed—  
just a podium and some chemlights,  
it will be dark tonight—

We started forming up,  
crescent moon rising still  
US Army, Polish soldiers,  
civilians in the line—  
As darkness fell completely,  
we waited in the gloom  
The sound of Blackhawk engines,

across the sky coming in to land—

Chopper noise—

all we could hear—

Suddenly, searchlights took us

by surprise—

Finally, we could see

amid the noise and dust—

Together they lowered down

And waited for their riders,

brave soldiers three—

With rotors turning still,

the ceremony began—

We could barely hear the sermon,

or that last roll call—

And when they did not answer,

they were stricken from the roll—

Headlights approaching

from behind eerily,

we are called to attention.

Two ambulances head down,

the glowing chemlight trail

The formation salutes

as the vehicles pass us by and

pull up to the Blackhawks,

door gunners saluting, too—

Waiting on the ground

Flag-draped cases slowly loaded on—

Now empty, ambulances back away  
Just the Blackhawks left on  
dusty, graveled ground—  
The crew does its checks,  
climbs in and closes the door—

Engines revving, they rise up,  
perfectly synchronized  
move on out, searchlights beaming  
As they clear this tiny base—

Plunged back into darkness,  
we hear them as they go—  
The sound fades—  
Quiet on the line  
Not a dry eye that night—

Those soldiers saw the rising dawn,  
but not the setting sun—  
Their last patrol—  
Those of us still standing  
knew it could just  
as easily have been us.

## Afghanistan's Flanders Fields

—Virgil Huston

the great Alexander  
came through  
the Hindu Kush  
before us all  
no match  
to his success  
short lived though it was  
many followed  
none endured  
in modern times  
death  
tens of thousands  
British  
Soviet  
American  
Afghan  
who will be next?  
one who reads no history  
as our pompous politicians  
Iraq comes to mind  
Vietnam  
there will be others  
to attempt this folly  
America can't fight wars  
America won't fight wars  
just send young men to die

for nothing  
what of that ground  
that is forever England?  
I have seen it  
no one cares  
sheep shit on it  
men do not respect  
but touch a Muslim grave  
and US generals grovel  
and prostrate themselves  
while Presidents condemn  
their own soldiers  
for such transgressions  
while we should be  
denouncing those  
who desecrate  
Afghanistan's  
Flanders Fields

## Soft Spots

—Mariecor Agravante

I lean forward to breathe in  
The scent of his soft muzzle—  
His warm bronco breath condenses  
Visible hints of whispered nickers  
In the crisp morning air.

His coroneted hoof paws the ground—  
I soothe him at the withers  
Near his prophet's thumb,  
And in so doing calm myself, too,

I hear the beat of his heart—  
Rhythmic like the ra-ta-tum  
Of the military drum  
The metronomic tempo is  
akin to gait cadences:  
foxtrot, lateral rack, revaal,  
Tolt, and Tennessee running walk.

Nomadic steppe cultures  
(Like the Huns, Mongols, and Timurids)  
Have long held reverent affinity  
For eohippus's descendants;  
Every mustang wows with the might  
Of horse sense and pioneering power;  
Pedigreed thoroughbreds are held in awe

For their discipline and agility;  
Even the statue of Marcus Aurelius  
Astride his steed conveys grandeur  
Long past the halcyon days of  
Pax Romana antiquity.

Indefatigable and valiant Bucephalus comes to mind,  
As does Napoleon's inherently majestic Marengo;  
Wellington's Copenhagen and Lee's Traveller  
Were such treasured confidantes—  
Their forged bonds transcend  
The constraints of chronology,  
And down through the ages  
Their spirits touch mine.

I look at my horse,  
Think on Chief (the last US cavalry horse);  
I ponder as well on George Washington's  
Caparisoned horse, and his successors—  
Old Whitey, Old Bob, Black Jack,  
Raven, and Sergeant York,  
reminded of Native American  
Blackhawk and his faithful equus, too—

I pray that Providence grants  
Long healthy lives to both  
My Horse and me,  
That we may adventure together—  
Conquering doldrums and

Attaining worldly actualization.

Then, in time, we'll cross the threshold together

(From walk to trot to Canterbury gallop)

In a joint voyage to the Elysian Fields

Where our predecessors and forefathers

Have prepared the trail path for us.

## The Afghan Blood House

—Gabriel Tolliver

Halloween. We had just arrived  
replacements at FOB Gambit.  
Flying over Zabul province in a Blackhawk—  
the movie set of *Conan The Barbarian*—  
sci-fi Afghan. Ethereal. The house  
used to belong to some warlord who was  
killed by the Taliban a few months back.  
The Talibs shot up the warlord  
and his minions in a couple of the rooms  
leaving bullet holes, witnesses to execution.  
Now the house was a place to treat  
the wounded from the outlying combat outposts,  
for the dead to be picked up  
and taken to Kandahar Airfield.

Inside, a wall of handprints drawn  
by the previous Canadian units stationed there.  
Hands big, small, and medium-sized outlined in a variety of S  
outlined in Sharpie and paint colors  
alongside various messages, some  
handprints became memorials for those  
Death claimed for her quota.  
I had some time to kill and found a spot  
near one of the makeshift operating rooms  
to catch a nod. THOOM!...THOOM!...  
A Stryker's 105mm gun sending up

orange illumination flares toward the hills.

*Trick o' Treat, Talib*—I mused, imagining bullet candy, hearing Michael Jackson's "Thriller" in the MWR hut, Taliban zombies coming down from the hills and assaulting the FOB.

I woke to sounds of the aid station coming to life. An IED strike hit a Stryker. The driver and the gunner were CAT-A and rushed in. The driver was in his 20s. His ACUs were burnt, bloodied, and ripped open. Dude had a dazed, quizzical look on his face as if to say, "Really???" as he was being wheeled in by the medics toward one of the bullet-pockmarked ORs. As the kid's gurney was passing the handprint wall he raised his bloodied right hand touched a row of hands, giving each a bloodied signature.

"Let's go, Bix"— my squad leader called. I gathered up my M4 and Mich and followed him out into the full moon of the October night. We were relieving the listening post team outside the wire. Hours later we came back in and I headed back to the aid station. The bloodied streak across the handprint wall was wiped clean but still left a faint smear. I didn't see the kid. I asked one of the medics about him. The medic shook his head and kept on walking.

## Hanging by a Thread

—Kevin Hough

Your ups and downs,  
Your ins and outs,  
Oops you've caught a tear.

Don't worry Sam,  
It's on the lamb,  
That's where I'd like to go.

But, alas,  
It's come to pass,  
That I must take my leave.

And stich'er back up...  
Ehh, who gives a fuck,  
The thread that holds together me.

# Unseen

—Heather Sapp

I wear no medals on my chest  
Yet I am a Warrior  
You cannot see my scars  
They run too deep  
Their path is scored  
Through the recesses of my being

Would I rather have donated a leg to the battlefield?  
Some days I would trade  
My wounds are all unseen

Would I rather have left behind my arm?  
Some days I would trade  
My scars are all unseen

My wounds wake me in terror  
They are unseen  
My wounds attack when you stand too near  
They are unseen  
My wounds keep me bound in my head  
They are unseen

Would I trade?  
Some days I think I might

My battle still rages  
My war has not ended

I fight still  
My enemy is unseen

Yet, here I am  
And I may have wounds  
But I am a Warrior still

I AM a Warrior still.

## Combat Infantry Bro (CIB)

—Robert Mooneyham

Freakin New Guy, without a name  
Keep it that way, it's all the same.  
Scared to move, nowhere to run  
In the jungle, can't see the sun.

Hunter of men, eager for a thrill  
Deep in the bush, looking to kill.  
Searchin for Charlie, dressed in black  
Armed for combat, trained to attack.

Lost your buddy, no longer here  
Hatred grows, stabs like a spear.  
Seeing their eyes, all the same faces  
Crazy for blood, destroying all traces.

Professional soldier must be your goal  
Rejecting emotions to save your soul.  
No worry about the weeks ahead  
Cause you know you're a walking dead.

From the bush, you got the stare  
Don't mean nothing, not even a care.  
Back on the streets, nobody knows  
Dreams still echo to crinkle your toes.

Warriors reception, thanks never had  
Don't mean nothing, not even mad.  
It was our duty, we did our best  
Survived in Nam, let's put it to rest.

## Working

—Jeremy Cox

An island of palms in a sea of reddish tan  
Containing the essence of life in its lush, cool depth  
Or concealing a threat that may destroy me  
Day by day, week by week  
I pass by that grove  
So full of promise  
Like a beacon of life  
In this hard, parched land

For life draws life  
And if I have heard the call  
Surely I will not find myself alone  
Upon entering the sanctuary's spell

Either friend or foe  
What manner of beast lies therein

After a time I forget to wonder  
Forget to ask or dare to hope  
My island disappears  
Concealed by the desert  
The blindness of my eyes  
Reflects the darkness of my heart

I forget to feel  
I learn only to act  
Situations, scenarios, games, and contest

And so it is when I return home  
Every promise conceals danger  
Each acquaintance a potential culprit  
So the light in my eyes never passes the doors of my heart

Wait, what is this  
At the door stands one knocking

These things you say  
How can they be  
What is love truly  
Why would anyone offer

Such sweet redemption  
Is not for my ilk  
Only the darkness  
Can cover my sorrow

Softly he beckons  
Never demanding  
Only offering  
Peace

As I turn toward him  
He runs to me  
Whispering that he always knew me

## Blood Brothers

—Winfield Goulden (101st Airborne)

Christmas Day, 1944, Bastogne, Belgium  
Deep in the Ardennes Forest

The snow was heavy, wet and knee deep  
It clung to me like glue  
My eyebrows frosted  
I stumbled across the village square  
Tommy-gun on full automatic,  
Approached the ruined church

It was an icy hell  
We were devoid of hope  
The only reality *fatigue*  
Bone-aching, endless fatigue  
Always, the fatigue

I slogged across the village square  
Tommy-gun on full automatic  
Approached the ruined church  
I kicked open the door  
Peering into the gloom  
The place was a shambles  
The roof collapsed—

And then, I saw them  
sprawled before the ruined altar  
Two soldiers  
One dead American  
One dead German

They must have surprised each other  
At the same time  
They must have fired  
At the same time

Their torsos were torn asunder  
But their faces calm and peaceful  
Like saints fallen, sprawled  
Each, in some crazy, last moment  
Had fallen into the other's arms  
Individual pools of blood intermingled  
The American could not have been  
more than eighteen  
Red-orange hair  
Freckles, a turned-up nose  
The German was about the same age  
Handsome, with blue eyes, light complexion  
Long flaxen hair under his helmet

I looked down at them  
And I remember thinking then  
Even as I am thinking now  
over a half-century later

What a strange place  
For young boys  
To be killing each other

# Honor

—Joseph Miller

It's all you keep  
As an infantryman  
I disdain stylistic verse  
Shows of emotion  
And pretension in all forms

But an image reemerges  
The silhouette, the sound  
A flash, explosion  
A projectile grows larger  
As if it were an 1980s arcade game

But no points float in the air  
Only a man falls to the ground lifeless  
A terrorist certainly  
But by no mistake a man  
He comes back every night

His family asks me why  
I have no answer...

Though I've done no wrong  
I feel such sorrow  
Why should he hate me  
Why should I kill him  
I don't know

But the men in my truck  
Are still here  
Finding their way home  
Updating the world about Cowboys  
Seminoles, Giants, and Lions  
Of friends lost, lovers gained

I was there when they needed me  
I will always have that  
It helps me sleep

## On Being the Only Veteran in English Comp II

—Jennifer Childress

Put mind to hand  
and hand to pen  
try to go  
where others have been

Walk the talk  
talk the walk  
lines on paper  
blackboard chalk

Little lessons  
learned in school  
basic training  
(I ain't no fool)

Always sitting  
back row bound  
hands fly up  
salute the sound

If I was back there  
on the flightline waiting  
I could still my heart  
from palpitating

But not now.

Oh! Words

please be quick and with a snap

curl 'round on the notebook

and out of your nap

And the blank writing tablet looks up at me and grins:

"Hurry up and wait" :)

## The Welcome Tour: Camp Smedley Butler, Okinawa

—David S. Pointer

The dead Marine's mother  
was being escorted around  
Okinawa. She arrived at  
the Provost Marshal's  
office with the officer  
of the day fairly early  
in the morning, and an  
incarcerated prisoner  
elected to bombard her  
with his fresh feces—  
The desk sergeant had  
me trade my blackgear  
and .45 for a mop and  
bucket high blocking  
prisoner haymakers  
while helping him to  
hold his new mop as  
*conduct unbecoming*  
became a clean black  
tile floor as well as  
a stain odor stuck on  
familial funeral history

# The High Score Scandal

—David S. Pointer

The General looked at  
the criminal investigators  
never having seen such  
a group of non-dominant  
hand job NCOs holding  
each other's sticky stories  
together—earlier after being  
out shot by Lance Corporal  
Darus Stephens at the MP  
pistol range the criminal  
investigators called Darus  
in for intense interrogation  
sessions craving his confession  
in Splake's rat bastard time  
for crafty cheating never  
knowing that his grandfather  
a retired aviation colonel and  
old friend of the General's  
had trucked in live ammo  
into his grandson's live  
fire scenarios throughout  
the boy's childhood as  
the General went off  
like a random buzzer  
or air raid siren signaling  
incoming assault above

## Training Riley

—David S. Pointer

All shift long,  
I hide the eight  
plastic dope bags  
dashing into base  
housing, as Riley  
the drug dog sniffs  
& sneezes finding  
everything. Finally,  
Riley has only found  
7 bags of boogie weed—  
the dog handler says  
the property is over  
saturated with drug  
scent, and he calls  
a staff sergeant in  
charge of check out  
at the evidence bin:  
*“Bring me my dope  
or you stash box  
bandits are gonna fry!”*  
We rest Riley until he  
tugs and takes us back  
through the lingering  
fumes of misadventure  
until he alerts on the  
last bag of lost dope  
saving our careers,  
but not our ears—

## 2 Miles Down the Road

—Ryan Barry

Home sweet home again  
Home at last  
Time to make up  
For the time that has passed

First things first a bar  
a nice tall glass. But he's gonna  
get stuck here when his mind  
flashes back

One more beer  
One more shot  
Should do the trick

Week after week his second home  
drowning on his stool alone

Wondering if his family even knows  
he's back, hoping they think he is still in Iraq  
Fighting the good fight overseas  
Engaged in a war he does not believe

in anymore and how little  
how little they know  
two miles down the road  
the grungy bearded vet  
at the end of the bar

the one no one talks to  
the one who lives in his car

with all four tires flat  
He will never leave  
because his mind flashes back

## The Poet As *Survivor Assistance Officer*

—Ed Coletti

### I.

Earlier, young Lieutenant Poet-To-Be  
flies away from Vietnam to finally face it  
long before recovery teams return there  
to Trach Than seeking all its bones.

Bearing meager offerings, he seeks out  
the wives and parents:

“Would you like, could you want,  
G.I. insurance paid in blood,  
Military funeral with flag and bugle?”

“Why, yes, of course,  
Stevie would have wanted it that way.”

What they do not, cannot fathom:  
what the nailed-shut coffin bears:

“Arriving 2300 hours Dover Air Force Base:  
those remains of Private Stephen Doe  
comprised of left upper extremity  
extending from the elbow downward.”

How about a shoebox and a sand shovel?

The poetry flies right into him,  
the too-young Survivor Assistance Officer,

as each loved one (literally) takes wing  
howling upon the very first screech of “Taps,”  
tortured souls wrapped forever  
in the ever-so-carefully-gift-wrapping  
flag of the country that took  
their boy away and left instead  
a box of unseen bones.

## *II.*

Years pass back and forth like seconds used to:  
Now the keyboard keys click open  
the month of April 2004...  
another linking back to Vietnam  
a panoply of vibrant color  
shrouding boxed lifeless bodies  
“the flower of our youth”  
blossoming red, white, and blue  
stars and stripes and endless  
row on row of more and more  
flown again to Dover, Delaware  
an endless procession with  
no beginning or end of days  
...at least, this time  
the bones are boxed not bagged  
are colored not blackened  
are draped not slung.  
I want to see I want you to see  
I want my country to see

I want these colors of war seen  
I want to see the bodies in the boxes  
with the flags of freedom's colors  
I want to see, I want the president to see  
I want everybody every BODY to see  
every body— what his caprice has caused to cease  
to be even the memory of what we once were and were to be.

*III.*

Presidents must never and always will fire employees  
for offering to share the truth.  
These whistleblowers, these dignified little children  
pleading with their elders to notice  
not that the emperor has no clothes  
but that his clothes are soaked in blood  
that even comforters of red white and blue  
will not conceal what lies beneath the lies.  
A photograph of rows of coffins  
draped with rows of flags  
is not the rows of coffins draped with rows of flags  
and certainly is not a row of bodies turned to bones  
and a far cry from a row of boys and girls  
marching off on a children's crusade  
in row on row of little soldiers  
dress-right-dressing neat abstractions  
without the barest clue of how  
an AK47 or a mortar shell  
will tear apart their flesh and pulverize their bone.

# Showtime

—Ryan Koch

The stage is set  
Put on your costume  
Pick up your props  
Position yourself, the show  
will premiere soon.  
Months of rehearsals  
You're ready  
It opens  
The piercing light  
and searing heat stop you.  
Catch your breath  
Frozen, sudden stage fright  
Beads of sweat form quickly  
from every pore  
Hands shaking  
Forget your lines  
Deep breath, deep breath,  
deep breath  
Now, silence  
It's show time.  
"Welcome to the 'Stan,  
now get off my plane."

## He Never Shut Up

—Liz Dolan

But we all loved Tommy's uncombed locks  
his gut-busting laughter. Everything  
grist for his mill. In the beach house  
in the Hamptons he taped  
the older guys' riff on the summer stock  
of butts and breasts. He regaled us  
with tales of riding the rails in Ozone Park  
with Jimmy the Lip and Frankie Fingers.

The air went out of our summer  
after Tommy left for Nam. We broiled  
on Hot Dog Beach and languished  
on a tube in Peconic Bay. After his tour  
we expected the true skinny on the war:  
just another tropical cruise.

But he never spoke  
of the orange-scorched jungle,  
body parts dangling from branches.

## Army Surplus 1948

—Liz Dolan

From the window Mama yelled,  
*Come up now, come up now*  
after Tommy Breen, rolled up  
in an itchy, pea green blanket  
careened down the stairs  
in his father's arms who cried,  
*My boy can't move his legs,*  
legs that a day earlier  
had spidered up a chain link fence  
to retrieve a stuck spaldeen.

I never saw Tommy again  
nor did I swim in the city's pools. Paralyzed  
by fear of iron lungs  
Mama exiled me to Putnam Lake  
but even there polio spread  
as if it were revenge for the blanket  
of dust we spread over Hiroshima  
where sleek-haired Sadako,  
her flesh seared, creeped  
over Motyagushu Bridge  
screaming for her *okaasan*, and later  
failed to fold  
a thousand  
paper  
cranes  
before she died.

## When the Darkness Calls

—James Heavy Hackbarth

I went to war a young man with young man's dreams

I went to war with a young man's heart

I returned older than my years, a hole in my heart

not from a bullet, not from shrapnel metal that pierced my chest

War tore a hole in my heart and let the darkness in.

## Pull Out

—Monty Joynes

His worst combat experience  
Came when a smoke grenade  
Went off in his cockpit.  
His co-pilot was masked  
At the time and was able  
To put the helicopter  
Into autorotation,  
Which banked the ship  
In a spiral to the ground.

The incident occurred  
At about fifteen hundred feet,  
And accounting for a fall rate  
Of about one-hundred feet  
Per second, the pilot  
Started counting down  
Amid the smoke blindness  
And the twisting free-fall.

A second after pulling up  
On the stick, he struck  
A sandbar in the river  
With considerable force  
But with no serious damage.  
The obvious question became  
At what number in the count

Did he pull back on the stick?  
He admitted to a count of twelve.  
At fifteen, he would have buried  
The chopper under the sandbar.  
The lesson herein is  
That combat is no place  
To be playing chicken.

## Viet Nam Village, Ft. Polk

—Monty Joynes

This is training.

A village with no Vietnamese.

Just sergeants and aggressors

Dressed in black pajamas.

Rubber stakes.

Squad tactics.

Search and seizure.

I get letters of appeal

From pacifistic societies,

And I ask my C.O.

How the hell they

Got my name,

Military address and all.

How can I ever

Live in complacency

Again?

War is hell, laugh,

But who really

Knows it?

All the ones who saw it

Have used all

Their defenses

To construct lies

In the stories they tell.  
They can't remember  
The forced trance state.  
In recall, it is a dream  
Like viewing actors  
On a screen.  
And Glory dies  
In the remembering.

## The Helicopters Came

—Michael Lythgoe

Back in the Mekong Delta, '65:

I am airborne in a helicopter

looking down on Vietnamese Rangers;  
battalion attacks Viet Cong, rice paddy.

I fly safe—above the ground-fire; my squadron  
skip-bombs napalm tanks, sticky jelly flames,  
blue and yellow burns. Flashback: Jungle bleeds.

Commander speaks French words, Vietnamese.

I hear the Forward Air Controller clear

Super Sabres, “huns,” in flights of four;

my squadron’s call signs reply. Soldiers die.

I feel no pain, land safe in swamp and bamboo.

Today, another helicopter: painting is a blur,  
an Iraqi’s art on a book cover.

A veteran’s poems on pages, inside, hover:

PTSD. VA Hospital. Wounded Warrior.

Our world is shaky. Agamemnon dies

over and over—Trojan Wars. Black clouds.

Plumes over bomb sites, corpses, battlefields;

helicopter flies over volcano erupting lava;

over glacier seen smoking from outer space.

Kandahar: IEDs are now the enemy,

not punji stakes, new booby traps. Poppy.

Different terrain. Same noise. Stryker explodes.

I feel the blades beat sand and palm trees.

I watch Predator crews in California  
control camera's eye as missile kills.  
In safety, I remember. Same shudders.

\*A *Stryker* is an armored vehicle for troops.

## Wolfman Jack

—Thomas Michael McDade

Might have been  
the seventy-five Med Cruise  
or the one the year after that  
Wolfman Jack courtesy  
of Armed Forces Radio  
boomed through the Miller  
FF1091 and seemed as much  
a part of the crew as Linda  
Ronstadt who sang  
plenty of “Desperado”  
and Glen Campbell  
whose “Rhinestone Cowboy”  
aired a lot more than many  
thought necessary  
especially some black sailors  
I served with in Supply  
who longed for soul.  
That was a long time ago  
but when I hear those  
tunes today on oldies radio  
I do momentarily think  
of cowpokes  
before recalling  
my fast frigate days  
and shipmates  
still in my life and ones

I'll never see again.  
And in some kind casket  
locker of my mind, long dead  
Wolfman Jack deejays on  
and sometimes I obey  
my direct order to crank  
up the volume  
to provide some  
daydream peace  
and quiet.

# I Keep Moving

—Jennifer Pacanowski

Seriously, nowhere is safe.  
The grate's warmth  
enough comfort to capture a few winks  
All my belongings lie under  
my head, my functional ruck sack pillow.  
No one can steal it without waking me.  
My sleeping bag wraps around me  
a cocoon without the luxury of transformation.  
I awake to the same day replaying  
time passes without any contribution from me.  
I lowered my guard just long enough  
to get kicked by a cop for sleeping  
on the street near Macy's.  
NO REST.  
I keep moving, my ribs bruised.  
I am surrounded by emptiness.  
I long for the days when my buddies  
had my back, sleep coming quick after days  
convoying on the roads of Iraq.  
I would lie on top of my sleeping bag  
Surrounded by guns and the soldiers  
who knew how to use them  
Life was simple, dare I say, easy.  
Or at least predictable  
You followed orders.  
You did your job.

You were in danger  
You were protected.  
You lived or died.  
NO GRAY.  
We kept moving.  
Like I do now

So, I still keep moving.  
No one needs to see me,  
It only hurts them,  
Blaming themselves for my actions that  
Their good intentions have no control over.  
I don't care.  
I don't deserve it.  
I hate the daylight.  
People stare and scoff. Get a job. Lazy. Bum.  
Avoiding eye contact because  
I'm a reminder of fear.  
Of loss. I keep moving through the tourist spots  
watch for the school buses from out of state.  
Hoping I am the first nomadic traveler  
they have ever seen and their offerings flow into my hat.  
Those careless eaters with nice coats and fancy sneakers  
Always leave warm french fries and half eaten burgers in their  
Mickey D bags.  
Sometimes the conscientious, bleeding hearts want to bargain:  
Don't buy alcohol or drugs with my money.  
As the 40 ounces of liquid flow down my throat,  
Reality drifts away into the soft fuzzy glow of the street lamp.

No one sees me. The sun dwindles on the horizon.  
There is enough sobriety in that thought for anyone.

I don't want to be saved.

# In The Heat of Battle

—Kerry Pardue

Forty-four years—  
a long time  
To remember your face  
but you are still here  
to remind me about  
the price of war  
away from the power of the poem.  
The day you died  
Bullets and blood  
Explosions. Metal ripping into skin  
I am treating a wounded soldier.  
My fingers and mind, busy,  
Rush to stop the flow of blood.  
You pop up out of your hole.  
Three feet from me  
Our eyes meet. We are both surprised.  
By instinct alone  
I fire once.  
You stop mid-moment  
stare deep into my eyes  
A look of total surprise  
As if to say I can't believe  
you shot me

In slow motion  
You fall to your knees

No sound from your lips  
Just a flow of blood

You are the age of my own brothers  
Who have no knowledge of what war is  
They are still playing baseball, attending school  
Chasing after girls

I just wish  
That you too  
Didn't have to learn  
What happens in the heat of battle

I just wish neither of us knew about the realities of war  
I would have rather of taught you about baseball  
Watch you chase after girls  
See you grow into a man

## Quartz Mountain Modern Art Exhibit

—Jason Poudrier

As you admired  
a picture of a seed-pod  
on a pillow-case, evident only  
by the work's title,  
I wondered about you,  
commenting on its aesthetics:  
color, shade, motif, motion,  
how it looks like a viper  
about to strike,

But who could fail to see,  
in the next snapped shot,  
deep in the grains of the wood  
the swirling creases  
of a whale's arching brow  
over and under the knot  
creating a whale's eye,  
peering into some ancient  
Ocean.

How could I not stand there  
and keep watching  
as the driftwood whale  
swam through the oceanic grains,  
devouring through turned-banister, baleen plates:  
krill, plankton, and smaller wooden fish,

from my grandpa's first fishing kit,  
made for pastures and dry summers?

And who could fail to relate to  
the barnacles' confusion,  
who think they are attached  
to a ship, then realize it's a whale  
then both, but it's too late,  
attached for life like me to this picture,  
this black-and-white still  
of a piece of driftwood.

## The Smell of Blood

—Suzanne S. Rancourt

there is old plum blood clumped like grapes becoming raisins  
dry and cracked on the edges with crystallization occurring like  
nano birdshot.

there is fresh blood vibrant as lips wearing lipstick for the first  
time red with life and air  
and knowing nothing but that moment in the gasping for more.

there is the in between blood that grows sticky with flies like fruit  
juice spilt  
on clean linoleum that no one wants to talk about as it has already  
been spilt  
and cleaning up the mess implies our guilt

so we sip quietly with downcast eyes onto table tops in outdoor  
cafes  
or our mother's favorite butcher block and we pray that dogs enter  
soon  
to lick up taboos now sticky with truth.

there is the pink frothy blood that effervesces into mist alive with  
the last kiai  
last words, last breath, last action, beyond form and recognition.

there is the blood we suck from a paper cut, bright as words we  
sliced with time. never

is blood alone but mingled with bitter gall, and bile, or the rank of gut and brains.

there is the blood of unborn fetuses in glass vacuums and plastic measuring cups  
in deep sinks power washing the rot of vaginal infections

and there is the blood of life tainted with umbilical matter –  
amniotic fluids, saline, and protein enhanced with sweat canalizing through  
mergences, cavernous, cold, Sally Port pelvises.

there is the blood of death spattered with the last shit you'll ever take  
and no one cares what your last meal was but you and whoever made it.

Tabasco pizza, chocolate chip cookies melted into blobs from heat while being shipped from runway to runway,  
or sitting in back postal rooms in mail bags.

there is the blood of transfusions, transformations, transportation into Warferin, Heparin, and morphine drips.

there is the blood of lies,  
the blood of truth  
the blood of consequences, conflicts, confusion that titrate into the soil and dust of everyday living – the absence felt when mowing the lawn  
getting the mail  
feeding the dog.

there is the blood of abstraction, nightmares, invaders  
of songs, stories, horror metered by heart palpitations  
tightening of chest and the constant neurotic obsessive locking  
re-locking of doors, windows – load, re-load, fire.

there is the blood of love  
that dries too quickly into a cacophony of smells that embrace  
something someone somewhere describes as life.

Blood, I smell you on flesh, in bathroom stalls, laundry baskets,  
garbage cans, drain traps,  
Band-Aids in locker rooms, knee patches stiff with iron.

I smell you on the streets in the lives outside of reasoning.

## Why I Don't Meditate

—Suzanne S. Rancourt

they said, “close your eyes” “relax” “let your mind see”  
roads, I see roads, keep my head down, don't look left don't look  
right.

narrow, dirt roads, summer mountain meadow roads where there  
are goat paths, where the faeries live, or so the locals say,  
I see roads lined with tamarack, yellow stone pine, fine sand dusty  
roads

that ruin camera lenses and jam automatic weapons.

I see white sand beaches that are not alpine and they take me to  
New Mexico, White Sands, Alamogordo, Three Rivers, St. John,  
North West Scotland, there is warmth and I travel through  
Guantanamo, Si Bonne (Castro's favorite),  
and there in Santiago on the steps at the plaza, the men play  
dominos

when the women aren't around  
or revolutions aren't being waged  
or eyes gouged  
no retina scrapes clean.

Montgomery, Alabama – I'm pumpin' gas 'round midnight  
with the ghosts still blowin' down Rosa Parks Boulevard.

## LZ Some Hill Somewhere

—Fred Rosenblum

it became no shock  
to discover the floor of the earth  
deeper than it appeared  
on the ass end of a shit hook

its crew chief barking at us  
as we fell  
like a green excretion  
from the **whup-whup** hover —

bird droppings  
if you will  
our ballsy salted squad leader  
stood there  
still in a rainy red smoke mist

calmly looking down upon us  
... a welcome back  
to the cryptic contact message  
in his borrowed from lee marvin eyes

below  
our sane hearts pumped  
a reality of ripples  
into the ruby infusion  
of rainwater and blood —

down there  
in that bombed-out  
bowl of butchered meat in the mud...  
the scattered deaf mute carnage —  
some of our brothers and some of them  
cartilage and tendon ribbons  
end over ended  
with splintered bone

lying there  
listening to the chattering swill —  
a cook-off of brass belts feeding  
the white hot  
sludge-muffled maws

snorting hogs ...there in the torpor  
and the tumble of Kalishnikovs  
and B-40s performing  
a perfectly deadly medley  
of hair-raising melodies

and again  
I called on those  
almighty powers that be  
while the senior squid  
worked on this kid  
whose red marimba...of a ribcage opened  
for all the gods to see

## Triggers

—Patricia Lee Stotter

so solid in my hand this weapon  
not mightier than the sword  
but dangerously sending  
images that land in the soft hearts  
of women who  
who  
who live  
like mine fields, quiet and blossoming  
until the wrong word lands.

## An AWOL God

—Dick Hattan

Where were You at the lottery of unsought soldiers  
When celebrations and despair spared no youthful face?  
Where were You as the typewritten commands  
Sent jungle-clad children on missions of murder?

*But the Lord was not in the wind.*

Where were You when sappers and punji sticks  
Destroyed limbs of all-American hope?  
Where were You as protesting playmates decried the horror,  
During the year-long sentence of death?

*But the Lord was not in the earthquake.*

Where were You as the spray of orange poison  
Rained from heaven with cancerous consequences?  
Where were You as the newly armed warrior  
Spent a magazine of fire at unseen enemies?

*But the Lord was not in the fire.*

Where were You during the rape of black silk daughters,  
Begging for life during the respite from combat?  
Where were You when the warbirds' noise  
Muffled Your small, still voice?

*Were You there? Did you hear me?*

# Homecoming

—Dick Hattan

Arriving on the sterile tarmac  
Eleven months absent from life,  
Citizen soldiers enter the empty concourse  
Emerging aliens in an unfamiliar country.

An ungrateful country, ashamed, guilt-ridden,  
Avoids its sons' scarred faces,  
Warriors who heard the hail of fire  
Parade quietly through the empty tomb.

Absent our fathers' banners and bands,  
The cavernous void shouts words of freedom,  
58,000 ghosts haunt the memory of  
Battlefield comrades never to return.

Emptiness overwhelms anxious hearts,  
Struck by wounded nothingness,  
Marching in tune one final time,  
Disgusted, disappointed, alone.

## 40 Years Too Late

—Dick Hattan

Inside the hootch, Western warriors rape a foreign culture,  
Desecrating the daughters during respite from battle,  
Foreign intrusion triggers moans of hatred  
While elders seethe at the violent disrespect.  
Silence screams out from the loveless penetration,  
Eyes closed to the faceless horror,  
Innocence lost by repeated violation  
Gives birth to a lifetime of rage.

Combat boots trample a proud people,  
Igniting thatched roofs, stomping ancient graves,  
A rich culture set aflame,  
Poisoned by indifference and disgust.

Fed by the cadence of time,  
Memories haunt my aging soul,  
I revisit the timeless conflict,  
Tainted with the stench of godless actions.  
A powerless, proud people outraged at the bloody siege,  
Staring with hatred at the blue-eyed intruders,  
Helpless to protect its uncertain future,  
Powerless in the wake of war's madness.

The back-drop of war reopens forgotten wounds  
Recreated in search of meaning and purpose,  
Guilt and shame devour the long peace  
Stalking forgiveness 40 years too late.

## Veterans Day

—Dick Hattan

Old warriors in crumpled suits  
wearing tarnished medals from a distant war,  
Color guard with weathered guns  
firing volleys into rapt attention.

Retelling stories with foreign names  
changing with the march of time,  
Attentive to the bugler's call,  
remembering names of ageless youth.

Agent Orange with malaria pills  
eating the bodies of bygone heroes,  
Shouldered weapons with the smell of fire,  
recalling images of sweltering jungle heat.

Belated thanks from faceless crowds  
rising with latte-filled goblets,  
Toasting the lives stolen from death,  
hailing the feast day of citizen soldiers.

## Divergence

—Dylan Reyes-Cairo

i see the bending  
branch and curling smoke  
twining,  
not so different from each other,  
as spirits that bind shadow and earth  
rising  
from burning sticks toward murmuring lips

my guitar's steel strings chime quiet  
like whispering rivers  
silky  
as a sated lover here,  
where shadows flicker and hover  
near gnarling limbs diverged from root  
or sky  
inviting me to follow

but i dare not tread outside  
this smoldering sanctuary on a hill  
of our own creating  
where your memory lies  
waiting  
in every patch of moonlit music  
and stillness

tiny lights remind me of the distance,  
where reason chides the soul's resistance,  
and i pray that you  
come home

## THE ARMY

(with apologies to Kipling)

—Geoff Sutton

I've eaten my chow where I found it,  
I've swilled some bad beer in my time,  
I've smoked some rotten old stogies,  
And mostly I've stayed in the line.  
Served my time down at company level,  
Then to staff and Battalion XO.  
Taking command, wearing green tabs,  
Always wishing I was on my way home.

Platoon leader—fuck, what should I do?  
I sweated and growled in the dust.  
My grizzled platoon sergeant grabbed me  
And he taught me to do what I must.  
Sunburned and chewing tobacco,  
He smacked me upside of my head:  
“Check with me before you do dumb shit.”  
And I learned 'bout the Army from him.

Staff time was next for my training,  
Penance before my reward.  
Serving in each planning section  
To sharpen and straighten my sword.

S1? What the fuck? Who'd I piss off?

UMRs are not my forte.

I only ever knew one happy adjutant,

And I swear he must have been gay.

Intelligence? It's all mumbo jumbo,

IPB and MCOO overlays.

My balls shrink and now I can't swagger,

My Y chromosome's run away.

Logistics? What the hell's this S4 shit,

And all these weird classes of stuff?

I thought food just fuckin' appeared.

Do I need to be more than just tough?

Operations! At last, something real!

Pulling OPORDS out of my ass.

Why would I ever need more than one COA?

How come the Four can't support that?

At last! I've got a battalion!

I can finally do what makes sense.

But I've spent all these years just agreeing,

My jumbled thoughts all refuse to condense.

The CSM drags me out of the briefing,

Says, "Goddamit, your logic is thin!

You're the Colonel, don't act like a dumbshit!"

And I learned 'bout the Army from him.

I've eaten my chow where I found it,  
In garrison, combat and home.  
Time after time, when I stepped on my crank,  
I've been saved by an old NCO.

So now my career is behind me,  
With single malt at the end of the day,  
And PTSD, I can't leave the basement,  
At least there's calm in a Henry Clay.

## Lethe

—Farzana Marie

Dear Polished Quiet,

cleaned and re-cleaned like a rifle  
after a sandstorm,

Guard, won't you, the white carpet of stillness,  
from mud of oblivious leaf-blower during morning tea,  
sanitation engineer whose vehicle still sounds like a garbage truck,  
child toy with oh, 10,000 buttons, each louder and more  
tantalizing than the last.

Remember me,

where I was, how I was,  
when we last met.

Dear Chaos of Broken Microphones,

screached and re-screached despite  
five pre-showtime one-two-threes,

Mind, won't you, your mouth, since you know I know  
how you like to grind on the dance floor of bones, sheep ankles  
used for child's play in Middle Asia but divination elsewhere, even  
though

I also know you don't believe that stuff, especially the forecast of a  
solstice of silence.

Forget me,

I was never there,  
I don't even remember that dance.

Dear Litany of Lost and Found Events,  
    screened and re-screened on the flat  
    of a fat-fingered dry-clean receipt,  
Sing, won't you, the SEW-WHAT song just before  
the music of pass-and-review, salute the former soldier  
who has moved on; sound off eyes right! to that officer-starched  
image, the before  
in a before-and-after montage—before, that is, the C-130 flew over  
the Hindu Kush.  
Try to forget some things,  
    try, do try to remember  
    the rest.

# Damn Agent Orange

—Randall Berg

I did not die in Vietnam  
I'm alive as I can get  
Damn Agent Orange  
Ain't killed me yet

I've seen friends die  
Too many to forget  
Won't let it get to me  
I'll stay positive, you bet

The upper echelon said it's ok  
It's as safe as it can be  
I've seen it kill all vegetation  
What the hell did it do to me

Land mines, bullets, and rockets  
Left not a scar to see  
That damn stuff from Monsanto  
Left a lasting legacy in me

Planes, helicopters, and by hand  
That stuff was sprayed all asunder  
Depriving Charlie with cover  
now its putting me six feet under

Agent Orange not only affected me  
It's the second and third generation  
What a terrible legacy  
Throughout this great nation

## A War Film Documentary

—Stanley Noah

Stars are  
falling while  
people are  
leaping from  
shore cliffs of  
Okinawa, April  
1, 1945—  
Americans  
now on the  
beach  
with gathering hours. Civilians

were told the  
invaders are  
red-horned  
demons. The  
horror. The  
floating corpus  
delicti of lies in  
motion, up and  
down with  
every tide, tides  
coming

in going out,  
balanced by  
the timing  
of the moon's  
forever  
indifference,  
whimsical  
clock. Bodies  
beating on  
sharp rocks like  
dead fishes. I  
have seen

this event  
many times in  
my studies.

The one  
woman  
standing a  
breath a  
moment, the  
letting go.

And then I  
close my eyes.  
Don't want to

see the divine  
wind and waves  
again. Don't  
want to see the  
inevitable  
pungent  
demise.  
See mother with  
child, dangling  
all the long way  
down.

# Paranoia

—Travis L. Martin

They taught us to see  
Everything—  
Cars driven by dead men,  
Trash resurrected,  
Carrion stuffed with wires,  
Decapitating bridges that rain death.  
Little boys and girls get their pick,  
The mind or the soul,  
Haunt or be haunted;  
Death is never yours to choose.

They taught us to sense  
Hearts and gas pedals out of sync,  
Cardboard's invisible dance with the wind,  
The crow's palate,  
Alterity at the underpass.  
Camouflage and stealth can't hide hate—  
A deadly mind's stench is the soul.  
It became so clear in time:  
Death was mine to give,  
To accept into my heart.

I saw death then  
As I see it now.  
I sensed death then  
As I sense it now.

It stinks through my soul  
Like ghosts,  
Or Hate.  
Mine.

## Rifling About

—Travis L. Martin

The night never ends  
For children of the  
Cumberland Valley,  
Whose souls, wrapped  
In the Holy Ghost,  
Forever rifle about within  
For blame: once saved  
Always saved, unless—  
The paradox begins again.

What happens when  
The blue morning dew  
Evaporates  
Like crabgrass raptured  
By a sweet grandmother  
Planting spring tomatoes,  
Revealing the disgusting earth  
And the dark limestone caverns  
Underneath?

What happens when  
Blessed assurance  
In the soulless gaze  
Of the Black Angus

Is held accountable,  
Locking eyes  
With a broken old farmer,  
Begging forgiveness  
At the stockyard.

What happens when  
The water moccasin's  
Warning—  
That sickly-sweet watermelon scent—  
Oozes from your pores  
Like the sweat of ecstasy  
Or eternal damnation?

The sun rises,  
As it always does,  
And the valley  
Forgets the night,  
Cleansing the souls  
Of those left behind  
In murky-green waters,  
Calling its children  
Back to the altar  
To hear a sermon  
About the night  
Steadily approaching.

## The Dead of Peleliu Speak

—William Lincoln Simon

On Peleliu no poppies grow, between the  
crosses row on row,  
But only coral, rock, and sand. Each  
cross a muted sentry, stands  
A guardian of those hallowed sands  
That drank our blood.

On Peleliu we fought and died. We're restless lying side by side,  
Who gave our all. And now we wait,  
too worn to rest, too tired to hate.  
We are the earth's repatriate,  
Who crave long peace.

On Peleliu in coral sand, we lie and  
wait our sleep disturbed.  
Have we, like others, died in vain,  
and shall we have to rise again  
And hear once more the wild refrain  
Of bursting shell?

Oh the dread to hear us rise again, to fight  
on earth, in skies again,  
Nor listen full of fear and dread,  
to footsteps of the marching dead.  
Remember promises you said!  
We restless lie.

Make well the peace, oh men of state,  
for we the dead were taught to hate.  
We learned to hate and do it well,  
and make of life a living hell  
For those who break our sleeping spell.  
So falter not.

But bring the peace of God to man!  
Here us who lie beneath the sand,  
White sand, and damp with morning dew.  
We cannot but remember you,  
We men who died on Peleliu.  
Oh let us sleep.

\*Written at Peleliu in WWII, 1944