Blue Streak: A Journal of Military Poetry
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MEA is a non-profit, volunteer-run organization whose primary mission is to work with veterans and their families to publish creative prose, poetry, and artwork. We also work with scholars to publish articles related to veterans’ issues in the humanities and social sciences.

Our publications include
The Journal of Military Experience
Blue Streak: A Journal of Military Poetry
The Blue Falcon Review
The Veterans’ PTSD Project
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanda Fries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nightmare</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike Sukach</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dragon Fruit Cacti, Vietnam, 1970</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce Sydow</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tags</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymous</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passing Storm</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craig W. Steele</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Under a Minute</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doug Self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Afghanistan’s Fields</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris Heatherly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Name Is Ruthie, Your Nightly Nurse</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack Thomas Kirt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masks of PTSD</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judy Bell</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio Call</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Howerton</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunset over Baghdad</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Howerton</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

© Military Experience & the Arts, Inc.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valhalla</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virgil Huston</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramp Ceremony</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virgil Huston</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan's Flanders Fields</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virgil Huston</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft Spots</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mariecor Agravante</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Afghan Blood House</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriel Tolliver</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanging by a Thread</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin Hough</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unseen</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather Sapp</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combat Infantry Bro (CIB)</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Mooneyham</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeremy Cox</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blood Brothers</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winfield Goulden</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honor</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph Miller</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On Being the Only Veteran in English Comp II</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer Childress</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Welcome Tour: Camp Smedley Butler, Okinawa 42
  David S. Pointer

The High Score Scandal 43
  David S. Pointer

Training Riley 44
  David S. Pointer

2 Miles Down the Road 45
  Ryan Barry

The Poet As Survivor Assistance Officer 47
  Ed Coletti

Showtime 50
  Ryan Koch

He Never Shut Up 51
  Liz Dolan

Army Surplus 1948 52
  Liz Dolan

When the Darkness Calls 53
  James Heavy Hackbarth

Pull Out 54
  Monty Joynes

Viet Nam Village, Ft. Polk 56
  Monty Joynes

The Helicopters Came 58
  Michael Lythgoe
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wolfman Jack</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas Michael McDade</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Keep Moving</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer Pacanowski</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In The Heat of Battle</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerry Pardue</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quartz Mountain Modern Art Exhibit</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason Poudrier</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Smell of Blood</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suzanne S. Rancourt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why I Don’t Meditate</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suzanne S. Rancourt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LZ Some Hill Somewhere</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred Rosenblum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triggers</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia Lee Stotter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An AWOL God</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dick Hattan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homecoming</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dick Hattan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 Years Too Late</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dick Hattan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterans Day</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dick Hattan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Divergence 80
Dylan Reyes-Cairo

THE ARMY (with apologies to Kipling) 82
Geoff Sutton

Lethe 85
Farzana Marie

Damn Agent Orange 87
Randall Berg

A War Film Documentary 89
Stanley Noah

Paranoia 92
Travis L. Martin

Rifling About 94
Travis L. Martin

The Dead of Peleliu Speak 96
William Lincoln Simon
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 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

© Military Experience & the Arts, Inc.
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 fatique
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
Seminole, 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
epecially 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.
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 canaling 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

ey 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
dominoes
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.
The text is a poem titled "LZ Some Hill Somewhere" by Fred Rosenblum. It describes a chaotic and intense experience on a military flight, with vivid imagery and metaphors. The poem reflects the author's perspective on the challenges and surreal moments faced during service in a war zone. The text captures the raw emotions and physical sensations experienced by the author and his crew, emphasizing the contrasts between the apparent and the actual conditions. The poem uses metaphors such as "bird droppings" and "a reality of ripples" to convey the unnerving and surreal aspects of the experience. The poem evokes a sense of resilience and the human spirit's ability to endure and adapt in the face of extreme adversity.
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,
   screeched and re-screeched 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