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.