

# 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.