

J . T . L E D B E T T E R

Fire Fight: 1970 (Xuan Loc Province)

—for Capt. Mike Doyle

The only tree left
after the tanks mowed them down
after the big fire to make a lager
the only place to hide with the man
in your arms
bleeding on your chest
calling out something about home...
one tree
long and dead and full of termites
but safe if you could reach it
fall behind it cradling the man bleeding
on you
his mouth at your ear saying home...
not hearing the voices
behind the guns
telling you it was your turn
to die
your XO calling, “Gunner, *TROOPS*”
but you knew it was coming

and pulled the dying man on top of you
feeling embarrassed un-heroic
so you turned him over and laid upon him
like a lover
covering your blood with his
and when it came the dead tree exploded
filling air and bodies with dead tree
then counting the seconds
before the command to reload
running across the fire of grease guns
and RPGs
the other skin and bone
burning through your shirt
something for doctors to separate
after it was over
after the shadows of the whirring blades
drifting over the jungle canopy
taking you to base camp and the other
to die one mile closer to home.

J.T. Ledbetter was born on a farm in Southern Illinois and grew the rest of the way up in Southern California. He holds a B.A. in English from California State University Long Beach, and an MA and PhD in English from the University of Nebraska. He is Professor Emeritus at California Lutheran University in Thousand Oaks where he teaches part time. Recent books include *Underlying Premises* (Lewis Clark Press, 2010), *Old and Lost Rivers* (Lost Horse Press 2012), and *Death by Violin*, Stephen F. Austin State University Press, 2012.