

Two Poems

Stan Hodson

What Returning Veterans Don't Talk About

Sacrifice

In the tumbling thousand snowy
Cloud banks, the only moving thing is the eye
Of the gunner. The plane itself has the grace
Of a garbage truck, and weighs as much before
We club the wings with bombs and top off
The tanks with fuel. A mobile, manned gun
On heavy-milled struts with extra-stiff

Knees to take the crash and drop-kick insult
Of shipboard recovery. An incinerator
Deep-freeze jackhammer looking for a place
To scream through stupid. But when we tow
A plane up to the launch-point, and the yoke
Takes it, it hunkers right down right then,
Docile, with a pneumatic sigh.

Because it weighs nothing to the catapult
Once it's got its head of steam up — box car
Semi-truck, hook it up, cinch it down, throw
It off the deck. That's all the catapult does,
The plane means nothing. The jet engine smear
Of fire streaming in place, melting the hair
Off the unwary, ruining the inner ear

All around that pitch — nothing. Up here
On Yankee Station outside of Hanoi,
The point is to interdict lines of supply,
And demoralize the local populace.
That's how the mission reads. What it means is
We're gonna blow some folks to paste,
Gonna do a little human sacrifice —

Maybe them, maybe us, when the juju
Voodoo's on, you never know. A hasty
Bomb, now, the catapult is bound to notice
That, bound to buckle and shift its track.
An anxious bomb opens the flight deck
Right down into the sleeping compartments.
Sad sacks smashed down through the toilets,

The shower drains, the bunks pushed through each
Other three deep. Not the weight but the reach
Of the bombs. Hidden so far in plain sight
It's hard to see it straight on, or from our homes
As we're out the door. One of those secrets
At the frame of things day and night —
The trade of the navy bomber is to live

Each one of fourteen hundred and forty
Minutes each day with bombs.

Anti-Personnel

The United States Naval War College
Is a faculty whose collective conscience
Is both guilty and astute. They know the rage
They would feel if an aircraft carrier
Turned their wives' china back to dust in the hutch,
And buried the children and grand children
With their own roofs. They know the savage

Hurt that beardless high school boys dispense
From the flight deck — napalm that eats the live
Body like an ice cream cone, melts your fingers
Back to stumps right through your wedding ring
While you wait, quite as fond of bone cheese
As it is of lung custard — *Would you please
Ask grandma Reagan to stop smiling?*

They know, in their Dress Whites, the damage
Anti-personnel bombs do. They designed
Them *to leave the major structures untouched
For allied use, while maiming the inhabitants*
Unto the verge of death so that they linger
In their amputation, gangrene, and madness
Long enough to clog the roads and swamp

The hospitals and spread contagion,
Certain to demoralize any populace —
Would you ask mothers Carter and Mondale
To, *Please, just stop smiling.* The War College
Knows if an enemy sicced this sonuvabitch
Ship on us, we would jump to smash it,
And no quarter given. So much for the bunting

In red, white, and something on the new hull,
And the wages poured throughout a local
Economy, and the drum majorette
On the virgin flight deck, and the champagne
Bottle in the hand of the latest wife
Of the latest Secretary of the Navy —
Would you please just ask cousin Jackie

*And aunt Lady Bird to goddamn stop the State
Smile.* Sad chicks in their paper-doll chain
Gang, their glad rags and ragged gladness
And their menfolk, the prisoners of war
War-college. In their resolute ignorance
Making their bodies an averted glance,
A face of euphemism. Settling in life

For only what gets into the newsreel, a show
In the flickering dark from behind their heads
By Lawrence Welk and the census bureau,
Made small and dead by being played out
On the cafeteria wall across three door
Knobs, the drinking fountain, and the motto
On the trophy case.

The Long Way from Danang

White Wing

The dream, as sleight as radar, hunts: Danang...
Missouri...hog farm. The river, a rope of mustard
Clay sucking itself. The cuts in my hand
Soaked grey. Chatter of radio garble
From the four or five jeeps quartering

The corn fields, driving me against the trouble
River. Drowned fawn, ticks still in his ear
The flood so sudden, more due. This plot more heard
Than seen, more known than heard — the citizens-band
Static just there at the frame, no pairing

Of far-soft / loud-near rules. Just murder.
The dream has stunned my face with the white wing
Ghosting down, and I'm bent listening
To the ache of maybe my left thumb's gone? Will it land
On this side, please? Or if it has to end

This way, will it hover for me? They're close
Now. Am I confederate, blue, marine, brown? —
The dream refuses to show me. They're curious,
These boys. They dream if they can knock just one
More body dead, ready for it and keen

On the instant, they'll see the secret gone.
But, smash a stone to see inside : smaller stones.
The river rises all the while, floats the deer
Against my back then swings him out and down,
Into an eddy feeding there. Their headphones

Trouble these boys deaf. They were born to more
Horsepower and bullets — loud-far soft-near —
Than they know how to ignore.

Coyotes

I know what time the dream was. From sleep
I heard my wife stir in the room and woke
Enough to feel her cross the doorway, the house
A shell of cool grey air just turning, my clean
Feet luxurious in their burrow, her naked

Body a gardenia floating down the dark
Rain barrel of the hall to the front door
To let the cat in clawing at the screen,
Coyotes belling from the mountain's deep
Silhouette just standing into massed face

And fall. Gardenias, her belly. A park
Of gardenia, her breast and thighs. My head
Crushes back into its ground, to dream — Danang,
Missouri. Hog farm. Deserted. The rain
Has dropped the flies, and the slain animals

Have the slaughterhouse to themselves. They hang
By slit ankles and drip quietly. The white plane
Went behind the hills behind this place.
Two jeeps are rutting in the farm's front yard,
The kitchen garden. When they get stuck they jerk

Back and forth and machine-gun the upstairs
Windows, the roof. Damage where repairs are hard
To make. It gives the lesson time to spread:

The footprints of the fugitive are poison.

One of the marks of professional vandals —

An officer corps with dental and pension
Benefits — to teach like this, to curry hatred
Like clockwork.

Passwords

My friend from Vietnam days flies the plane —
An engineer now in Portland, Oregon,
Who never flew a plane in his life — in khakis
As luminous as mother-of-pearl.
A uniform we never wore. We were dungarees,

And sailors in real-time. From the jeeps
Someone has seen me leave the slaughter shed
And run to the meadow, where the plane landed
Moments before — a top-secret jet that makes
No sound, of metal so softly white it keeps

Almost no shape — my friend standing on a blurred
Wing reflecting hill and cloud, grass and trees.
His face streams so much light he doesn't look
Like himself, but he welcomes me, not scared
Of the soldiers, their bullets leaving no marks

On the fuselage. Under cover of broad
Daylight he flies me back and forth across
The river to scenes I don't recognize.
Somehow this helps me, and then late that day
We part in a field of silver-green shocks

Of grain that beats in waves on our bodies.
He's off to fly the plane, and I to walk the road.
At the end I know it's him because I say
Give my love to Barbara, and he replies
And mine to Leigh — our wives' names the password

Between us. To say, yes we are partnered
Men and the marriages of life are good.
And to have such women on our way.

Stan Hodson has worked as a sheet metal mechanic and furnace installer, a technical writer and editor for an industrial safety consulting firm, and a labor-law attorney. He retired in 2019 and now pursues literature full-time.