

## Four Poems

Richard Epstein

### Bamboo

He walks, head bowed,  
as he carries the weight of the world.

He's my mailman. I thank him  
for the bills he brings.

Without looking up,  
he says he gets them too.

He turns to the path he makes to the house  
next door. He told me his son is scheduled  
to appear in court for car theft. His son won't go.  
He says he'll cross that bridge when he gets there.

He fled North Vietnam in 1952;  
walked for days without food to the South.

He was forced to join the Viet Minh  
and later fought with the Viet Cong  
in the delta near Soc Trang.

He told me when he walks his route  
on a hot summer day,  
he often hears whispering.  
When he looks up,  
there is always  
bamboo.

**After Đắk Tô, Nov. '67**

like cordwood  
    we stack them  
end to end  
    alternating  
head to foot  
    the best use  
of available space

## I Remember

I Remember digging holes to plant tomatoes and corn  
on a 1-acre garden with my dad.

I Remember the first time I rode a bicycle. My father ran alongside  
holding me upright as I rode down a steep hill.

I Remember losing a shoe at the Mid-Valley drive-in.  
I had school the next day and only one shoe.

I Remember throwing pebbles at my girlfriend's window  
not knowing her mother switched rooms.

I Remember driving my mother cross country in my first car  
from Pennsylvania to Arizona without first gear.

I Remember the long, warm embrace with my girl outside the train station  
before I went off to the Army.

I Remember the first time I ran to take cover in a sand-bag bunker  
to wait out a late night rocket and mortar attack.

I Remember the little girl in rags who came through tangle wire.  
We'd give her food but she always saved it to take home.

I Remember the laughing girls in black sarongs bathing at a water well  
as mud-caked buffalo stood watch.

I Remember coming back to the States: like an out-of-body experience,  
or sitting in the last row of a picture show.

## Whacked: A Conversation at the VA

When I said the kid next door got hit in the head with a rock,  
I didn't say I threw the rock that hit him in the head.

And when I said I think the girl in the apartment downstairs likes me,  
I didn't say she came into my room and slept with me at night.

And when I said I was in Germany instead of Syria, it was a small white lie  
so my folks wouldn't worry about where I was or what I do.

I'm a sniper. I never told them that. I take lives but I save lives too.  
Would I shoot a civilian? You tell me who is a civilian and who is not.

A teenager burying an IED is a teenager burying an IED.  
I would deactivate him. Remove the threat. He would cease to be.

And when I came back to the States and said I sometimes drink a little to unwind  
before sleep, it means I can't sleep unless I drink myself to sleep. That's when  
they come.

And when I exhale, there, at the pause between the next in-breath, I think about it.  
Do I do it? Inhale I mean. What if I didn't inhale.

**Richard Epstein**, a long-time resident of the Washington, DC area, has been a featured reader at the U.S. Navy Memorial, The Vietnam Woman's Memorial, Dog Tag Bakery, and the Memorial Day Writers Project. He is the editor of two veteran anthologies and his poetry has appeared in *O-Dark-Thirty*, *DEROS*, *Incoming*, *A Common Bond*, and others. Richard hosts an open mic venue each Memorial Day and Veterans Day on the National Mall adjacent to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and more recently via Zoom.