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Childress' poetry has appeared in such journals as *College English*, *Georgia Review*, *Harper's*, *Kenyon Review*, *Mademoiselle*, *Southern Review* and *Poetry*, and has been anthologized in *Modern Poets British and American* and *From the Belly of the Shark*, among others. His fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *Conde Nast's Traveler*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Modern Maturity*, *Sports Afield*, and elsewhere. He has received the Stephen Vincent Benet Award, a Devins Award, and an Illinois State Arts Commission prize for his poetry, and a Gold Quill Award for Journalistic Excellence. His books include:

Burning the Years, New York: The Smith, 1971.

Lobo, New York: Barlenmir House, 1972.

Burning the Years and Lobo: Poems 1962-1975,

East St. Louis: Essai Seay Publications, 1986.

Out of the Ozarks, Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987.

Soldier's Leave

Beside the river where he walks
boulders like green and moldy loaves
resist the downward pull of water
and hold their own in ordered grooves.

It is October, and the leaves,
once so flexible and green,
grate on each other in the wind
like a surgeon's knife on bone.

Soon ice will form among the trees
in lean cinereous splinters,
but he will be gone before it does
on a cold campaign of winter's.

Korea Bound, 1952

Braced against the rise and fall of the ocean,
holding the rail, we listen to the shrill
complaining of the waves against the hull,
and see the Golden Gate rise with our motion.
Some hours previous, bearing duffels
as heavy as our thoughts, we wound inward
like slaves in some gigantic pyramid,
selected by our Pharaoh for burial
against our wills. Now we watch Alcatraz
sink into the water, and visualize
the pale, amorphous masks of prisoners,
whose lack of freedom guarantees their lives.

Letter Home

Mother, they line the roads
like broken stalks,
children with bellies swollen,
and O, the flowers
of their faces, petals all torn,
and the flags
of their threadbare garments.
Mother, we give
them everything in our packs
and still they moan
so sadly. More with eyes
like stone.
These kids will never sing
again.
O, mother, wish me home!
With just one field of Kansas grain,
what I can do for them.

The Soldiers

In Korea, decomposing shit
chokes the perfume of the stray flower
still seen occasionally on hills,
and the paddies heavily seeded
with napalm mines, can grow red flowers
at a touch, with a blossom that kills.

From the dark immobilization
of earth bunkers, our probing patrol
infiltrates forests. Distant searchlights
paint ridges with something like moonlight,
and a grey rain chills us. Winter's cold
is not far away. It too will come.

Our ghosts meet other ghosts in the trees:
They appear pallid and luminous
in the eyepiece of a sniperscope,
a tool too complex for the Chinese.
But their simple burpguns never stop,
and their simple power murders us.

In December we start pulling out,
having done little but christen hills
with proper names: Million Dollar,
Triangle, Heartbreak; names that matter
to no one but us. We taste defeat
and like it. Victory is what kills.

No soldier can ignore tomorrow,
though finally it does not matter
as much as it should. We have today,
and by the grace of Generals a stay
of execution. Our lives narrow
around living's uncertain center.

It is not likely a solution
to human problems will come of this,
but soldiers can't be soldiers and be
human. The cold rain descends softly
on scorched graves, where, beyond human praise,
men lie in stiffened resolution.

Shellshock

I am MacFatridge as he was then,
torn by the mine he was defusing;
at the aid-tent door his arm fell off,
and a Medic stooped to retrieve it
and stood as though lugging a melon
that had burst in the sun.

There are those of us who are not tough
despite all they told us. If I cry
now, no one seems to care, but before,
I would have been punished with a laugh.
I wish that underneath the green sky
of this room, images of terror
would come again: that the emerald door
I can't pass would let me out to sleep.

Combat Iambic

Once in a distant war which was no war,
mired in the unclean paddies, bleeding clean
my buddies died while tracer bullets tore
through earth and armored vests like acetylene.
Our General, in rearmost echelon,
with fancy unfired pistol near his thigh,
barked militant commands and acted out
his manly role untouched by fire. O, sir,
I pray Beelzebub, Lord of the Flies,
to rear his maggot children in your eyes,
where curled like living lashes they can give
the atmosphere that suits a General's mind.

Death of a General

At the autopsy, the knife
inflicted the first real wound
his body had ever known.
The incision, deep and clean,
revealed a petrified heart,
and lungs unpowderstained.

He was survived by a wife,
who informed the reporters,
crisply, of his lifelong goal.
He had missed it by one war.
We probed for, but never found,
any evidence of a soul.

He was famed for discipline,
and we saw why. In a corner
of his stomach, well-hidden,
we found a thick volume
of military law.
No one was chief mourner

at his funeral. The guns
for the salute were pointed
at him. He was anointed
by a cloudburst, but his sins
remained. The medals on his chest
caught the light like cartridge-brass.

The Long March

North from Pusan,
trailing nooses of dust,
we dumbly followed
leaders whose careers
hung on victory.

The road might
have been the Appian Way
except for the
starved children lining it.
We gave what we could

to hold back the grave,
but in Pusan the dead-truck
snuffled through frozen dawns
retrieving bones in thin sacks,
kids who would never beg again.

When we bivouacked
near Pyongtaek, a soldier
fished a bent brown stick
from a puddle. It was
the arm of someone's child.

Not far away, the General
camps with his press corps.
Any victory will be his.
For us, there is only
the long march to Viet Nam.

The War Lesson

After they taught us guns, they showed us how
to throw grenades. We watched the meadows grow
momentarily large, then settle down
in bits of pummeled earth, and every man
saw it as the disrupted flesh of those
we were hired to kill. It was a game
we wished might end, but no, we had to fight
as they would fight, our goals beyond our sights.

At Khe Sanh, when the mortar rounds had hushed
and we moved out, I saw upon a bush
the burned and dangling genitals of a Cong.
Or did I see? We moved as in a dream,
a dream that paced our lives to marching songs,
and bundled flaming children in their screams.

For My First Son

Shadows of trenchcoats darken
his crib, tiny fingers grope
towards a future of steel
cables on a ship's deck,
weighted duffel, and arms
that drag him downward.

His small skull is bound
in iron confinement, the
doll's face pressed
to his mother's breast
darkens like crisped leather

in a flamethrower's blast.
I see trenchfoot and worms,
wounds spilling gangrene,
his delicate skin torn
by shrapnel. And then,

with eyes empty as spent
cartridges, he is packaged
for home. For these are the
gifts of male birthdays,
wrapped in patriot slogans,
and sent by lying leaders.

Happy birthday to you,
Happy birthday to you,
Happy birthday my son,
Happy birthday to you.

Trying to Remember People I Never Really Knew

There was that guy
on that hill in Korea.
Exploding gasoline made him
a thousand candles bright.
We guided the Samaritan copter
in by flashlight
to a rookery of rocks,
a huge, fluttering nightbird
aiming at darting fireflies,
and one great firefly
rolling in charred black screams.

There was the R.O.K. soldier
lying in the paddy,
his lifted arms curved
as he stiffly embraced death,
a tiny dark tunnel over his heart.
Such a small door
for something as large as life
to escape through.

Later, between pages and chapters
of wars not yet written up
in Field Manuals or Orders of the Day,
there came shrieking down
from a blue Kentucky sky
a young paratrooper whom technology failed.
(I must correct two common errors:
they are never called *shroud lines*,
and paratroopers do not cry *Geronimo*.)

I wish I could say
that all three men fathered sons,
that some part of them still lived.
But maybe I don't, for the children's ages
would now be such as to make them
ready for training as hunters of men,
to stalk dark forests
where leaden rains fall with a precision
that can quench a hunter's fire.

Burning the Years

Solemn as a priest, he gives
himself to fire. His shining face
wrinkles and turns brown,
a Kodak soldier
writhing in paper pain.

Goodbye to the slim youth
in paratrooper garb,
with boots like mirrors
and ribbons straight as his spine.
He knew all there was to know
about honor and duty.
But duty changes with each job,
and honor turns ashes soon enough.

Deeper in the cave of years
he's joined by man of War
who's still a boy.
Fists full of detonators and TNT,
he smiles murderously
for the folks back home.
At night he scrawls
on sweetheart letters
inscrutable Oriental signs.

Smoke rises like morning fog:
shadowy pictures, enlarged by time,
dance and preen. Girls of months or moments
feel again the fires
that once swept them and him.
But now the act is over. The fires
go out. All that's left
are the ashes in his mind.