

What Love Makes of Us

D. F. Brown

Troy is in the nursery...

—Delmore Schwartz

We come to words and find each other

Framed in Art Greenspon's 1968 black and white

As a G.I. stands center of a blasted jungle clearing

Arms raised like he could pull a helicopter

Into that narrow space and let it

Lift his wounded comrades to safety

I try pretending but war gets

In my way as twilight settles

into shadows along shoals

and through trees across the river

at any other campfire

they would be memories

called up and spit into

the flames to sizzle for a second

rise as smoke unto the stars

but in this dark they crawl

over old sandbags in my heart—

great slobbering ghosts from Vietnam—

and set up the blood altar
dog tags and cartridges,
belt buckles, their pistols,
heartache and *ashes*
all fall down

As suddenly so
my pen leaps fifty years

into mirror backwards
full of guns and statistics

strung out grin or grimace
the best thing to do

is sit quiet a long time and
watch the well-used trail curve

into the deep green foliage
and lock and load and listen

monkeys shrill in the treetops
and learn to squat among them

Because we have no home in the jungle
We keep memories there

Deep in the forest
Search for a certain tree

Deeper in the bug noise
Find and eat its fruit

Then its god might show
And ask about our nakedness

By the time I arrived
at the start of the final stage
you could feel failure oozing

half-hearted watch our army
war weary worn out
sag to its knees and

understand the only question
"who is the last dead dude
doing fucked up best he could?"

When you find yourself
toting an automatic rifle

down a muddy *Binh Dinh* footpath
with an understrength platoon

hoping camouflage works
and wonder if you get to

the part that makes sense
and think you want to know

what happens next and how
far you got to go to get there

You're one of those bullet boys
Nixon sent to die in Nam
Bait for his Xmas bombing rage
But didn't

Locked in love with come true
they made us learn the Pledge

hide under our desks and
fold fear into heartache

like it was protection
each word a piece of god

All night in the mouth of a myth
you hear clouds scrape through
and think you filled enough sandbags
talk *short* shit like wishes
you'd leave this jungle
go straight home and home
is the hole you wish you'd dug deeper

Each night a new password
Something to say when dark arrives and
Twilight trips down the body count aisle

Slides into your foxhole and
Knotted in your heart
You clutch the claymore clacker

Like life depends on blasting
800 eighth inch steel balls
Across the path below

War sounds like a poem remembered wrong
And listeners must imagine the blood
It takes to make that true then
Read the rifle fire and find the grunts
Puddled on the jungle floor—
What cadence meaning
Moaning in its meat?

You can pray it's wind
Clicking thick bamboo

Blowing chill deep damp
As if god had ears and listened

In *Binh Dinh* along the *Song Con*
Above *Vinh Thanh* village

And answered in English
So hope third person works

And it might be someone else
Sitting in this shiver wishing

Xmas to come right away and Santa
Shows with a sack of free shit

And gives some to him and his brothers

All we have for here is how
Live fire low crawl cruel

Smear across the page
Soldiers dress as shadows

As salads as treetops
As close as words get

Hand grenades and horseshoes
As if suffering made them

Bullets in everything
Smoke from burning shit

Some sort of truce with barbed wire
Lost in the happily ever after

Our war we were
The history mystery guys die for

As they say of *Ben Tre*
Destroyed in order to save it

So, who wants to walk slack?

War becomes a swirl of words
as quick as scribble

something loose inside us
good guys in white hats

we studied this in school
manhood makes love war

something to die for
then the flies

Who knows how years connect?
All we get are these minutes

Parts come back in pieces
Pushing our hearts along the past of least resistance

Four-wheel drive
Knobby fucking tires

Whatever happens merges
More stream than consciousness

Off road in the soul
The dead shove those helicopters

Over the *Kitty Hawk's* side
Into the South China Sea and

Because that's history we hold on

Useless Ulysses
late from Troy
lives down there in the wind
replacing broken with bent
works memory like a poem
words push through him and
numbers days like they matter
as if the past were true
and knew the way home

He spoke of nights in the jungle
as if words were shadows
the long version dreams take
candle flame to glow

there wasn't much story
back end of *Binh Dinh*

tossed like teens to combat
digging foxholes in the boonies
another no-net number in the dark
then packing up first light and
slither off through
the waxy facts of burning
eat peaches from the can
and learn to sleep again

I have a platoon in my head
Half are dead

They talk all the time
Offer suggestions for poems

Laugh at many as making
Too much moment of gunfire

They say it's over just like that
Just like that

We stood on bare hillsides in *monsoon*
look good in the snapshots

they gave us the guns
made war dance in our hearts

so we glow like in the garden myth
as if our blasted hearts had been defoliated

like god was hiding from us
when good boys died for nothing

grief enters each syllable like a dirge
like war was braille in places

light trapped above us
in the muddle of before

when we were children
and rubbed everything

If you believe something was ripped
Rough out and a space left aching

Feel your way along this edge
Reach in pinch off the spurting

Artery and try to clamp slippery
Start intravenous Dextran

Watch it all blood out red
Listen to this poem fade

To distant helicopter rotor noise

I rise from the ashes of sleep
and think I have a handle on the dark
know the place by heart
so mornings makeshift at the mirror
I remember how to who and
will tell strangers thanking me
for service they know nothing about
can handle only in clichés
that I leave stuff out
fragment what remains
nameless faded worn away
exaggerate small details of the killing
how blood becomes art and war
becomes a lapel pin
a baseball cap or coffee mug
ten per cent off lunch at *Luby's*

As if the past was everything we could be:
the unreliable innocence of memory
asleep in its scars

And everything happened
the only way it would
like bumper cars or quantum mechanics

And each hour a carnival train
we ride backwards
watching what we come from
blur bluer and disappear.

Born and raised in the Ozarks, **D.F. Brown** authored *Returning Fire*, *The Other Half of Everything*, *Assuming Blue*, and in 2018, *Ghost of a Person Passing in Front of the Flag*. Educated at the University of Missouri and San Francisco State University, Brown served as a medic with the 4th Infantry Division 1969-70 in Vietnam. A sequence of his poems was selected by Phil Klay as Second Place in the Iowa Review's 2016 Jeff Sharlet Memorial Award for Veteran Writing. For many years Brown was the Education Director at FotoFest and then taught high school English at Houston Independent School District's Challenge Early College and was chosen as the 2008 Secondary Teacher of the Year. He gardens in Houston.