W.D. Ehrhart

The Last Time I Dreamed About the War

Ruth and I were sitting in the kitchen
ten years after Vietnam. She was six-feet-two
and carried every inch of it with style,
didn't care a fig that I was seven
inches shorter. "You've got seven inches
where it counts," she'd laugh, then lift her chin
and smile as if the sun had just come out.

But she didn't want to hear about the war.
I heard the sound of breaking glass
coming from my bedroom, went to look:
VC rats were jumping through the window.
They looked like rats, but they were Viet Cong.
Don't ask me how I knew. You don't forget
what tried to kill you.

I tried to tell her, but she wouldn't listen.
"Now look, Ruth!" I said so loud the woman
sleeping next to me woke up and did
what Ruthie in my dream refused to do:
she listened to me call the name
of someone she had never heard of,
anger in my voice, my body hard.

The woman I was sleeping with
would be my wife, but wasn't yet. I was
still a stranger with a stranger's secrets

and a tattoo on my arm. She'd never known a man
who'd fought in Vietnam, put naked women on
the wall, smoked marijuana, drank whiskey straight.
And here I was in bed with her,
calling someone else's name in anger.

She wanted to run, she told me later,
but she didn't. She married me instead.
Don't ask me why. I only know
you never know what's going to save you
and I've never dreamed again about the war.

A Vietnamese Bidding Farewell to the Remains of an American

Was your plane on fire, or did you die
of bullet wounds, or fall down exhausted?
Just so you died in the forest, alone.

Only the two of us, a woodcutter and his wife,
dug this grave for you, burned joss sticks,
prayed for you to rest in peace.

How could we know there'd be such a meeting,
you and I, once separated by an ocean,
by the color of our skin, by language?
But destiny bound our lives together.
And today, by destiny's grace,
you are finally going home.

I believe your American sky
is as blue as the sky above this country
where you've rested twenty years.

Is it too late to love each other?
Between us now, the ocean seems so small.
How close are our two continents.

I wish a tranquil heaven for your soul,
gemmed with twinkling stars and shining moon.
May you rest forever in the soil of your home.

[From the original Vietnamese poem by Tran Thi My Nhung, translated by Phan Thao Chi and adapted by W. D. Ehrhart.]

Beautiful Wreckage

What if I didn't shoot the old lady
running away from our patrol,
or the old man in the back of the head,
or the boy in the marketplace?

Or what if the boy but he didn't
have a grenade, and the woman in Hue
didn't lie in the rain in a mortar pit
with seven Marines just for food,

Gaffney didn't get hit in the knee,
Ames didn't die in the river, Ski
didn't die on a medevac chopper
between Con Thien and Da Nang.

In Vietnamese, Con Thien means
place of angels. What if it really was
instead of the place of rotting sandbags,
incoming heavy artillery, rats and mud.

What if the angels were Ames and Ski,
or the lady, the man, and the boy,
and they lifted Gaffney out of the mud
and healed his shattered knee?

What if none of it happened the way I said?
Would it all be a lie?
Would the wreckage be suddenly beautiful?
Would the dead rise up and walk?