

Knots

D.F. Brown

After our war, how will love speak?

John Balaban

Christ, you know it ain't easy. . .

John Lennon

Once upon a time in the fucked-up part
(I don't remember which day on the short-count)

soldier-boys pose *johnwayne*
history twisted into faces

caught in facts we can't forget
as if past tense were true

grinning grainy in faded photos
memory mutters *could have been*

we stumble through the traces
somewhere jungle noises

night poking through the dark
more shadows than we could shoot

called it *bustin'caps* like we were kids
locked in love with come-true

you hear clouds scrape through
think you filled enough sandbags

talk *short-shit* like wishes
words scars shadows fit

you'd leave this jungle
go straight home and

home is a hole
you wish you'd dug deeper

each night a new password
something to say when bedtime arrives

twilight slides down the body count aisle
slips into your foxhole

green turns black
you clutch the claymore clacker

like life depends on blasting
800 eighth inch steel balls

across the path below
killing gooks for god

when you find yourself
toting an automatic rifle

up a muddy *Binh Dinh* trail
with an understrength platoon

hoping camouflage works
and wonder if you get

to the part that makes sense
and think you need to know

what happens next
how far you have to go to get there

you're one of Nixon's bullet boys
bait for his Xmas bombing

we stood on bare hillsides in monsoon
and look good in the snapshots

they gave us those guns
so we glow like in the garden

made war dance in our heads
as if our hearts had been defoliated

like god was hiding from us
in the muddle of before

another no-place to die
like combat was braille in places

and we were children
and rubbed everything

wary worn-out wasted
it was all too late when I arrived

first real helicopter war
start of the final phase

I could feel failure's slimy ooze
my half-hearted platoon's

only question
who will be the last dead dude?

when the body was a buddy
each night wood for the cross

first blood then flies
swells to smelling bad

everyday a lion's den
we say what we can bear

we were killer kids
our mommas sent to battle

fought for stale candy
in boxes of bad food

history with a past
no one cares to talk about
like the 60s might mean more
than they want to know

we went at it in the jungle
like *hearts & minds* was a lie

spent our gifts on napalm
like we might make friends

we fought that war like
we had soldiers to burn

splintered splattered
the trope of boyhood

skewered on flawed policy
bikes and baseball

lost in meaning so bloody
we spoke in clots

right in front of you
and red for real

* * *

whatever was is
comes down dark each day
as old as told you so

the splash and ripple of recall
war in short scoreless innings
whatever was is

hex or hoax
our history haunts us
as old as told you so

enough pieces to puzzle
the past as body count
whatever was is

meaning at its meanest
the red stripes are blood
as old as told you so

another pacification program
turns bombing campaign
whatever was is

the maggots won
moaning in its meat
whatever was is
as old as told you so

clotted in these emblems
they are what we have

and clutch us in their doing
we struggle to decode

we were not news
we were straight leg

oh we were there there
and get to keep

what we can carry
sleep with guns

because I think
I know death like a friend

and can explain
I say so much

some comes true
history riddles dream

the lost war full of words
off-road in the soul

I gather shards
and search for glue

some nights I need help
back to my body

the one I lay down
where dreams are

I take less each time
in smaller packages

plenty of ammo
quick-release-pouches

camouflaged in the gravel
up close to your heart

I stand there
caught in my shoes

pulling at the sky
flash as long as I can

rain all night like dark was liquid
and each word fits its splash

history lingers in its stink
hasps and hinges and hooks

strung along the gristle
to hold us warp and woof

granny, slip or open hitch
we knot ourselves real

float through camouflaged
treetops, tossed salad or serpents

crawling out to stumble back and lament
maybe the gods make up after this

you pray it's the wind clicking
thick bamboo ticking

as if god had ears and listened
in *Binh Dinh* along the *Song Con*

above *Vinh Thanh* village
and answered in English

you hope third person works
and it could be someone else

sitting in this shiver wishing
Xmas comes right away and Santa

shows with a sack of free stuff
and gives some to him and his brothers

caught in the dawn
each day we count down

another no-net number in the night
survive another sunrise

as seen on television
as if the jungle made us

mornings makeshift at the mirror
I rise from the ashes of sleep

and remember how to who
think I have a grip on the past

know the place by heart
and will tell strangers thanking me

for service they know so little about
can handle only in cliché

how blood becomes art
and war a baseball cap

a lapel pin or coffee mug
so who wants to walk slack

we had no home in the tropics
and spent our wishes there

deep in the forest
search for a certain tree

deeper in the bug noise
find and eat its fruit

and then some god appears
and asks about our nakedness

sent to sop blood
splint and bandage

I crawled through staying alive
and then came home

surprised they let me
forgave myself surviving

eat peaches from the can
and learned to sleep again

I did not die in Vietnam
I get to hold the lost war close

and love the four-deuce mortar
my sixteen and my pistol

my pals in holes around me
the jungle that holds us

ammo-barbed-wire-claymores
all night knotted in my heart

* * *

words carry what we cannot keep
as if that mattered

made any difference
and shifts through the syllables

in slow circles above
as if words were buzzards

scrawled across the page
and caught us in your dying

somewhere late 60s
just back from the war

and lost in clues I remembered
mom tells me she knew

I would not die there
and in her kitchen

needed to use a bowl
to eat canned peaches

you know how hot the heart gets
sentimental circle-jerks

the combat brotherhood of beers
memory embers us a smoky past

crutched up the lost war limps in
screaming for an autopsy

lip-syncs a 60s tune
and digs a hole in Texas

that fits the shadows
you spend waiting

the long version night takes
the faces involved

five soldiers lined up firing blanks
mom clutches a folded flag

and some girl in a sparkly blue dress
blows *Taps* like it's her heartbeat

over and again civilians try
to make home important

offer parades and banners
Welcome Home Heroes

on billboards and more banners
the place is sick with flags

useless Ulysses
late from Troy

lives down here on the breeze
numbers days like it matters

works memory like a poem
words push through him

the way *was* is a question
replacing broken with bent

form tangled into content
one long sentence about the wind

so many words ago
he slobbers in his beer

some one-ring deal in a T V war
as if marching meant anything

bought those words in blood
hand-to-hand in the syllables

something he could feel
flush with the lyrics

when I saw the planes
fly one by one

into those towers
I thought first our war

had found its way home
had finally soaked through

seeped into the backyard
and killed our children

once upon an Ozarks childhood
they made us learn the Pledge

doo wop duck and cover
hide under our desks

the past is everything we could be
words life gobbles to get said

the unreliable innocence of memory
asleep in its scars

and everything happens
the only way it could

like bumper cars or quantum physics
each hour a carnival train

we ride backwards
watching what we came from blur

blue and disappear.

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Houston

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.