

WILLIAM CHILDRESS

Summer Day with Rifles

A sudden crackling,
and Rebel soldiers fall
just yards from Yankees.
Soon they'll rise and bow
in the civil quadrille
they call reenactment.

At Pea Ridge, Arkansas,
the bookstore pushes politics
and sells images of blue and gray.
Outside, I stare into the bore
of the kind of cannon
that took great-grandpa's head off
from more than a mile away.

The battlefields of Arkansas
gave way to grander ones
at Chancellorsville and Gettysburg,
but in this Ozarks battle,
ten thousand soldiers died
on a morning meant for boys
with fishing poles and worms.

They say their general wept when,
having spent all his brave lads,
he saw in the glazed grass
the mirror of his defeat.
What can sweating tourists
see in such grim yesterdays?
That courage only lives
in those who march to die?

In a photograph from that battle,
A drummer boy looks left down a line
of soldiers, his face forever hidden
from my gaze. Donated by his parents
at twelve to beat the drum
for a lost cause, he marches as proudly
as all the rest, to finally lose his life
on that green hill just over yonder.

*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 that technology failed.
(I must correct two common errors:
they are never called *shroud lines*,
and paratroopers do not shout 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 rain falls with a precision
that can quench a hunter's fire.

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WILLIAM CHILDRESS'S first poems were in *POETRY* in 1962. In 48 years of freelancing, he has published thousands of articles, photos, poems, short stories and half a dozen books. He is a former paratrooper and Korean War veteran.