

L A R E N M C C L U N G

Counting the Dead

Sometimes we breathe on windows
and name those faces
that wake us in the night
walking there in sleep. They live
where only the half-awake can see.
For those we can't remember
we draw a line. As a girl
I stood staring at the blank wall
left to think about whatever
I'd done wrong. With my finger,
I'd list names of boys
I'd marry, our children.
On a Sunday evening in July
the wall houses shadows.
We stand where the dead wander
nameless and I watch him
as he sees a face in the flare-light:
Timothy Dye, Christmas '48
to Easter '69. At sundown,
he unlearns to lock up
a story and shifts a shoulder
as if to shake a demon loose.
In the wall, I trace the year

where my father would be
and leave my own name there.

Thanksgiving

He stands at the sink, the turkey
in his hands. He turns it

under the water, removes the innards,
pulls back the loose skin from the hollow

of the neck and tenderly washes
the bird's open cavity.

He's laughing when he calls it *hero*—
and *Doesn't it sound better that way?*

Then, as he cuts the fat, ties the limbs,
he tells me: *Out there, there was no rest.*

*Some of those guys were farm boys, too.
We snuck through the highlands*

*where we heard they were camped.
In the freezone, we had orders to kill anyone,*

*NVA, SVA, you know. The Cong
were gone, but they left chickens there*

*and those farm boys in my platoon,
they knew what to do, to grab*

*a chicken by its head like this:
he slipped his hand over my fist to show*

how the palm would fit over a head,
the neck between two fingers.

*They'd slap the chicken into the air—his arm
shot up then down like a whip.*

He said, *the legs kicked and kicked.*
That night, they butchered the birds, plucked

feathers with their fingers, the guts from under
the ribs, the gizzard, the heart, the liver, the lungs.

He said, *We huddled in the grass to eat the legs
and wings slow enough to keep the night at bay.*

That was the first time I ever killed anything.

Carpentry

I've seen him work the backsaw into heartwood
for perfect dovetails, held slabs of wood in place,
my fingers turned white at the tips, worrying
I'd slip as he'd move the blade across a pencil mark.

When I ask where he learned, he tells me
his father drew blueprints for a living,
carried a compass and protractor
everywhere, it was part of his thinking.

He said he knew interiors, maneuvered
in tight spaces where the old man couldn't fit.
He'd inch through the crawlspace on his back
to the rats down there, they had red eyes. He was scared,

wasn't scared. He tells me it was like the first time
in a foxhole near *Phan Thiết*, that sometimes
he'd close his eyes and hold his breath
because mud in the jungle smells like sick
and you never know what you're sleeping with.

What you do there at night maybe isn't sleep.
I read sometimes the inner animal
is activated by a brief awakening. This is true
for the rat, the hedgehog, and the rhesus monkey.
On waking, they scan the environment for signs

of predators. Maybe in war this is how a soldier sleeps,
part in dream, partly conscious. I also know
in sleep the brain re-orders memory. When I ask
the name of his sergeant he forgets.

But he has this photograph where they're digging
foxholes. My father is laughing as he works.
He swings a pickaxe over his head, his arms at a right angle.
He's shirtless, and hanging just to his solar plexus
his mother's miraculous medal on a silver chain.

LAREN MCCLUNG received an MFA from the Creative Writing Program at New York University. She's been the recipient of a Goldwater Hospital Teaching Fellowship, a Teachers & Writers Collaborative Van Lier Fellowship, and a Veterans Writing Fellowship at NYU where she lead a year-long workshop in creative writing to veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. She currently teaches in New York City and is co-editing the anthology *Inheriting the War: Poetry and Prose by Children of the Vietnam War*.