

H C PALMER

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## Break Room at the Ammo Plant

She works the swing shift  
packing 5,56s, believing  
one of her bullets will save  
his life. Break times,  
watching TV news & drinking  
stale coffee, she reads down  
*The Names of the Dead*—  
a squeeze of her cup handle  
returning fire as each is read.  
*He's killing those crazy people*

*with my bullets.*

His letters come 2 or 3 at a time.  
She tips sand from the envelopes—  
a little pile in her lead crystal ashtray  
reserved for special guests.  
Saturdays, at the Cherry  
Street bar, wearing perfume of

WD-40 & black powder—  
she caresses glasses of *Boodles*  
with oil stained fingers, until

the bartender's call for a cab.  
Today, at coffee break, news  
of a house raid.

A 12 year old girl.

In the photograph—  
white blouse, pleated skirt,  
school books & blue hijab.

A single round. She lets  
go the cup handle & turns  
her face from the others.

## A Season for War

*They had overcome him in the end, tenaciously...  
taking him down. Their heavy shots splashed  
into him...with that courageous passion peculiar  
to hunters.*

—James Salter

Billy and I pot-shot what we mistook for a duck  
back in 7<sup>th</sup> grade at Lake Kahola, Chase County.  
The bird dove, surfaced for air, dove and surfaced again,  
forced down by salvos of # 6 bird shot until it floated

and washed to shore. I presented the bird to my father  
like a sinner's offering to his Priest and remember saying,  
*If it had flown, it might have lived. A loon*, father said  
without taking it. *They don't often range in Kansas*

*and they're never in season.* Last time I saw Billy was Da Nang.  
A forward air controller flying O-1E Bird Dogs, he marked  
VC positions with the bright smoke of white phosphorus  
rockets.

I flew one mission. Rode the tandem seat. We packed M-16's.

He controlled the aircraft by working the stick with his  
knees—  
hands free to fire through pop-open windows. 2 Sampans,  
ferrying Vietnamese dressed in black, motored across  
the Han River. *Shoot 'em*, he said through my headset.

*Ducks on a pond.* I aimed far to the side. That night,  
between chugs of Tiger Beer, Billy lamented,  
*You're still a lousy shot, Doctor.* Billy stayed another tour,  
rigged an M-60 machinegun in place of the tandem seat—

converted his observation plane into an attack aircraft,  
so by diving and tilting or turning, he fired effectively  
until he dove within range of an AK-47 and took a round  
in his chest. He radioed for escort. Alongside, Huey

gunship pilots called through their mikes, *You're okay  
Captain, you're gonna make it.* The official report reads  
Billy was singing about Kansas when his O-1E nosed-over,  
skidding across the soft, white sand of China Beach.

*Note: China Beach is a recreational area near the Da Nang Air  
Base used for R & R by American troops during the Vietnam  
War.*

## A History Lesson at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial

Hồ Chí Minh studied to be a pastry chef  
under the French master, Escoffier

In the hours  
before dawn,  
the snowflakes  
were small,  
but with first,  
cold light, when  
they fell large  
& heavy on  
my hands, when  
the land was white  
& the Wall a shard  
of dark grief,  
I understood—  
it would snow  
forever.  
A bitter *glacé*  
sifted through iron  
fingers, the old  
pastry chef's *finalé*  
to the main course  
once gorged at blood-  
soaked tables  
as we trashed  
his French *cafés*—  
that gluttonous  
feast scavenged  
from spoils

of an army's retreat.  
I shivered.  
My breath, a mist,  
softened the Wall's  
inscriptions,  
the *carte du jour*  
from our storehouse  
of bootless offerings.

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**H C PALMER** is a retired physician who was a battalion surgeon with the 1st Infantry Division during the Vietnam War. His poem in the Fall issue of *New Letters*, "Selected Notes on Beauty" was nominated for a Pushcart Prize and for Best New Poets 2012.