

WILLIAM CHILDRESS

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## Once in the Land of the Morning Calm

My body came home from Korea  
With everything intact. But demo  
man Disharoon gathered a flower  
that petaled him with awesome power,  
and paratrooper Jimmy Kite  
came screaming from the Asian night  
to hit and bounce, a Texas boy  
whose parachute did not deploy.

In Basic Training, artillery plowed  
South Carolina like the fists of God.  
I was too ignorant to be afraid  
when Long Tom shells flew overhead,  
but I was afraid one moonlit night,  
when a colored boy was dragged outside  
to have the hell beat out of him  
by five big Dixie pieces of shit.

In Fort Huachuca, scorpions  
escaped the Arizona sun  
by hiding under rocks and sticks,  
while our feet baked on ten mile hikes  
to reach the trucks. One near the end

held little Jobe, my dearest friend.  
Above a cliff it lost the road,  
and six men died with little Jobe.

Who does not ponder his demise  
when life closes like an old valise?  
My years were already spiraling down  
In Sasebo, when I heard the sounds  
of a butt-can's scrape, a bunk spring's squeak.  
A sergeant lay smoking on bloody sheets,  
his razored juices filling a can,  
a Dear John letter in his hand.

But Sarge was seen, and in a breath  
Medics rushed in. He fought for death  
with all his might, a furious dance  
on a blood-slick floor without his pants,  
just medals on a shirt of tan.  
*"Hold him! I can't get the tourniquet on!"*  
They held him—he died anyway,  
the victim of a fiancée.

When we were ordered to Korea,  
one goldbricker's gonorrhoea  
made him miss the manifest.  
More moral boys made battle lists  
for Graves Registration to check off.  
Meanwhile, stateside, fat fuck-offs  
screwed the bleating nanny goats  
who wrote their sweethearts suicide notes.

Most of my 50s army buds  
have long since sunk beneath the mud,  
but I'm still facing the mystery  
solved for them by the military.  
They died for you, politicians say,  
whether you're colored, straight or gay.

Will you say thanks? Do you give a damn?  
Will you have butter with your jam?

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**WILLIAM CHILDRESS** is a widely published poet. He served as a Demolitions Specialist in the Engineers, Korea, 1952-53.