

NEWT RONAN

The Forgotten Soldiers

Swearing to remember

Their names

Their faces

When they died

Where they died

How they died.

I forgot their names and faces

Forgot who was first, who was last

Forgot their death time and place.

But their wounds—I remember their wounds

Remembered at night, in dreams

Remembered at odd moments—

Walking, waking, working

Hearing, seeing, smelling—

Remembered at the sound of helicopter blades

Remembered in the smell of damp soil

Remembered in the taste of salt sweat

Remembered at the sight of an old black & white snap.

I remember their wounds

Brain-split skulls oozing

Faces noseless

Chests gaping open, gurgling black blood
Muscles ripped off bone and soaking tourniquets
Belly open-intestines falling

Track star with missing leg
Near - dead eyes the last to load. Triage.
Rain and blood puddling on black body bags.

I forgot their names and faces
Forgot who was first, who was last
Forgot their death time and place.

But I remember their wounds
And I dream of dreamless dead young men.

Agent Orange Trilogy

Agent Orange is the name most commonly associated with the poison Dioxin. There are six such poisons—Agents Blue, Green, Orange, Pink, Purple and Yellow, each named for the color coded barrels used to store the poison. The colors indicate the relative strength of the poison, measured in parts per million. Agent Orange is the variant used in greatest quantity during the Vietnam War.

Prelude—

Paradise: created free of poison but one,
That of the snake
Lethal only to mankind.

Earth: having tasted the snake's poison and lived,
Men craved more and dug, burned, built, printed, dumped
Until they'd created Dioxin: black poison lethal to every living thing.

Nature could not abide such a dark poison;
So men hid it in color coded barrels
Waiting for time, place and target.

1. Rainbow Herbicides

Originally, it is said, Dioxin was a by product of
Industry—engines driving,
Smelters firing, paper printing, combustion belching

Leaking into soil. Smoking up air. Fouling streams.
Where Dioxin spread, trees died,
Birds fell from skies, crops failed, children were stillborn

Once loosed into air, stream and soil
Dioxin searched for dark places to hide
Silently traveling through mouth, eyes, nose, skin

Hiding in liver, kidneys, pancreas and heart
Finding organs to infest, rest and grow. Waiting
Hidden, brewing acne, cancer, blockage, blindness.

Scientists observed this horror at work and, frightened,
Invented a scale to reduce the horror to jargon
Calling it the index of Observed Adverse Effect Levels.

Euphemisms supported by momentary observations
Of a hundred year half-life poison.
Words and numbers. Perversions and deceit.

So they continued brewing their batches
Storing it in barrels of blue, green, pink, orange, purple and white.
The rainbow herbicides.

2. Agent Orange at War

In time, scientists shared samples of their poison with
Farmers, engineers, contractors to use Dioxin
Spraying hills, valleys, rivers, fields

War makers watching the spraying
Saw the grass dying, trees falling, vines dropping.
Ignoring the flightless birds, stillborn infants, shriveled crops
War makers had found a weapon.

A weapon to neutralize a jungle-hidden enemy
Stripping cover from trails and bunkers
Burning clean meadows of grass
Leaving trees leafless skeletons.

So the war makers and chemical makers

Collaborated to invent delivery methods
Settling on using it as a weapon to be sprayed
From helicopters and airplanes.

Dropping from the sky, a cool mist settling
On jungle and trails and roads and lakes and streams
On bunkers and villages and babies and fish in pools
And crops in fields and livestock in paddies.

Cool as morning fog, misting, settling silently
On mama san and papa san and baby san
Settling on the exposed faces and arms of grunts
Where they'd wipe hands and rub the poison deeper.

Having perfected manufacture and delivery
War makers and chemical makers had one task left—
To find a harmless sounding label for their enterprise—
They needed something agrarian, simple, wholesome.

And so, Operation Ranch Hand was christened:
A cowboy name to disarm concerns of
Airmen who dropped it and grunts who walked in it
And locals who lived in it. *Yippee ki yay!*

3. Widowmaker—Solar Eclipse

He'd been bathed by a sprinkle of Tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin
Forty years prior. The Agent Orange, spreading slowly,
Has invaded his left anterior descending artery, reducing flow to trickle.

Now, a flat digital screen is projecting his heart, a glowing orange disc
Dimming beneath a dark moon, covering it in shades of
Blackness—the bloodless areas of his heart.

Eclipsing that bright orange sun, the black moon,
Blocking light, pauses at the meridian
Cloaking his world in dusk.

Choking off blood flow, suffocating,
Throttling his heart—the orange circle that is
Fading, gasping, airless, dying.

Technicians snaring him with with coils, leads and sensors—
—Jungle vines, branches, elephant grass—
Tying him to some thallium-powered machine

Designed to detect how the Agent Orange has
Dripped through lungs, liver, kidneys, brain, skin
Finding its way to arteries, to his heart.

Dropped by low flown aircraft, hiding, clinging to,
Coating jungle vines, branches, elephant grass
Mixing in streams where he walks and drinks.

Soaking through fatigues and into open, sweaty pores
Rubbing into eyes, soaking into lungs
Coating arteries, waiting in ambush to kill.

Killing jungle vines, branches, elephant grass
Water buffalo, fish, babies, papa san, mama san, those born
And still yet to be born. Slowly killing all it touches.

Turning lush hills into brittle dead dusty thickets
Clearing a path for the searchers and destroyers
Passing through, breathing ash of Agent Orange.

Clotting quietly over forty years, it is finally
Squeezing the life out of his heart while the doc,
Punching a hole in his femoral artery,

Snaking a scope up to his heart
Searching on a black and white screen
Finding, snagging clots

Opening tunnels to his starving heart
Clearing the way for oxygen
Giving him time.

Until, returning, the black moon, fixed on its course
Across the meridian, stops,
Blocks out the sun and cloaks the world in forgetfulness.

*... bloodshed follows bloodshed. Because of this the land dries up, and all who live in it waste away; the
beasts of the field, the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea are swept away. Hosea 4:1-3*

Newt Ronan is a US Army Infantry Vietnam War veteran who led platoon size operations in the DMZ and near Chu Lai during 1968 and 1969. His awards include the Silver Star, Purple Heart, Bronze Star, Combat Infantryman's Badge, a case of Malaria and an Agent Orange injury.