

Three Poems

Larry D. Thacker

The Math of Tet

There are six sides an army jeep might
land upon after flying into the air
and returning to a parking spot in the back

of headquarters in the middle of Saigon
in January of 1968. All four tires
are only on one side of the six chances.

These are facts. Finite numbers.
But no one knows the number of times
a Viet Cong might have rigged booby-trap

charges under random US personnel jeeps
in preparation for the Tet Offensive
only to have half the charge detonate

when the driver flipped the vehicle's key,
tossing the jeep into the air, two soldiers
still seated, driver and passenger, as it

landed miraculously on all four tires,
bounced, intact, a mathematical mystery
for my father to wonder on to this day.

Phantom Limbs

1

Where are they? The phantom limbs
so often spoken of? Bringing the ghost
tingles. Walking into the black path.
Some destination never accomplished
peddling in sleep, sought for
with darkened eyes, imagined grips.

From the parking lot to the pharmacy
I count six missing body parts:

Three legs, one arm, a hand, an eye.
Two legs gone from one man, wheelchair
bound, pushed by his daughter; one man
missing a leg swinging his camo-painted
prosthetic; part of an arm gone with
the dress shirt ironed neatly, folded
and pinned over the stump; a hand
now a stainless steel double hook;
and a leather patched left eye.

2

There's a cemetery back home
with a tombstone raised for a

man's leg. No one knows the story.
And no one knows where the rest
of the man's body's gone to now.
Did the man outlast his leg long?

I've wondered that if a man's leg
was that important to bury, if
he ever visited, brought flowers,
or if there's anything really down
in there at all. Maybe it's just
an old man's joke on all of us.

3

There were 60,000 amputations
during the American Civil War.
Surgeons were known as "sawbones."
It was an ugly, diseased business,
with piles of limbs, soon alive
with flies and vermin accumulating
outside splattered ambulatory tents.

Can we find the mass graves of all
these legs and arms, feet and hands?
Where did these long columns march
away to in search of the men they
abandoned? Did they clasp hands

with one another to muster roll call
in the dark, raising quiet huzzahs
for every year the soldiers stayed
away from the inevitable reunions?

Smoke Break

His hand shakes, the fingertip
a grimaced reach just short

of lighting up the G for Ground Floor
and his hourly cigarette trip I figure,

but the quake in his hand isn't
from jonesing for a little nicotine,

it's from the half-inch chunk
of "Commie Scrapnel,"

regretting "zigging when I might
should've zagged," up at Khe Sanh,
he jokes with a rough cough,

favoring the jagged little gift
lodged deep under his shoulder blade,

pressing on a nerve just right
every time he leans and reaches
out the wrong way for something

everyday and simple like the mail,
or cups of coffee, door knobs,
handshakes with buddies at meetings,
a DAV document, or an elevator button

just to go have a damn smoke.

Larry D. Thacker's poetry can be found or is forthcoming in more than ninety publications including *The Still Journal*, *Poetry South*, *Tower Poetry Society*, *Mad River Review*, *Spillway*, *The Southern Poetry Anthology*, *Mojave River Review*, *Mannequin Haus*, *Ghost City Press*, *Jazz Cigarette*, and *Appalachian Heritage*. His books include *Mountain Mysteries: The Mystic Traditions of Appalachia and the poetry books*, *Voice Hunting* and *Memory Train*, as well as the forthcoming, *Drifting in Awe*. He's presently working on his MFA in both poetry and fiction. Visit his website at: www.larrydthacker.com