

FRED MARCHANT
Quang Tri Elegies

—*for Kevin Bowen and Nguyen Ba Chung*

Route 9

I am pretty sure that I would have died here
 maybe here in the rain that comes down to pick at
the red clay hardness of a long snake-road upward,
 and I am pretty sure I would have killed here,
and wanted to, or had to, or tried to, or didn't mean to,
 with no god, and few others, to forgive me.

Joss

As I bow so that I and the burning sticks bow,
 and my spine, my complex, pliable inner organs
bow with me, each filled with a sorrow I hardly
 know I have but which the honeyed, musky scent
calls out, a sorrow that curls and rises like a dragon
 before which all I am bows, and then bows again.

Batteries

Double A's die on the road heading west, near rubber
 tree plantings the Swedes donated to bring back
the land, miles of trees in rows so straight my camera
 orders me to change the batteries, but I let the cells rest,
and they recharge for more, one or two at a time so we
 can get through the rows of graves, acres limed by them.

Dug In

Mist holding to the trees as if it didn't want to leave,
 stones engraved with provinces the dead came from,
my legs unsteady on the wet gravel, mind wandering
 to what the nights were like, what lights shone across
the valley, what smoke wisps would rise over the trees,
 what low clangs, or whispers I wouldn't understand.

Combat Base

Practically nothing there, a sandbag bunker restored,
plus a one-room museum on stilts, into which we walk
empty handed, no straps over the shoulder, no mirror lens
to zoom and widen, nothing to hide the face with,
nothing to see with but retina, cones, and rods, the wires
to the brain cells running for cover, huddled, shaking.

Museum Pieces

Still I love the web belt, its brass eyelets and cloth
strong enough to hang a pair of canteens on,
a bayonet, first aid pack, ammo pouches and holster,
the thick fiber in the bottom of the display case,
this durable gear, the stained canvas of jungle boots,
a green helmet cover that belonged to someone.

Quang Tri River

Next day coming down from Lao Bao, you tell me
you would sometimes swim here, the snipers asleep,
old farmers and women working the fields, river children
eager to bathe with you, your body given to this cold
mountain stream, sweat falling away, pure flesh left,
your open hands, your fingers, your mother's own.