

*Cynthia Harper*

## Dancing the Tango

We eloped. Slipped away  
and married in the cool of  
September in a small town  
in Michigan. My dress had  
lace sleeves and you gave me  
a nosegay of flowers, just like  
the prom. I was nineteen and you  
were almost twenty.

A year later the letter came—  
nothing was ever the same again.  
You came home after boot  
camp thin, tan, bald  
dog tags clicking with  
every movement. The smell of fear  
permeated your new green uniform.  
Orders for Vietnam stiff in your  
front pocket.

It wasn't love, I know that now  
but escape from the terror of  
our parents into a terror deeper  
than we could imagine. Pictures  
came in the letters that I couldn't  
understand. You were holding  
a machine gun between your legs  
leaning out of a helicopter with a  
look so fierce I cried from its  
intensity.

You went three times to the Valley  
of the Damned and I waited. You  
came home a boy warrior with

a sword you used in a dream world  
only you could see. Twelve years  
later I hung my dancing slippers on  
the back of the closet door and left.  
Never guessing that your M-16  
made a wound in my heart  
that nothing would ever heal.

**Cynthia Harper** is the author of three books of poetry *Snow in South, how many moons*, and *Ruffled Socks*. She lives in San Antonio.