

*Dale Ritterbusch*

## Going Back

Tigers stalk royalty  
in a green so dark  
it nests in your lungs.  
Temple smoke crawls  
through your ear, listening.  
A prayer grabs hold of your arm  
with its teeth, pulls you along.  
You can't go back, not like this:  
The pock-marked walls  
call to you, the green rain  
in half-filled craters beckons.  
What they want you do not know,  
do not wish to know;  
it is a matter of trust  
like the scrawny dog skulking  
along the edges of your lie,  
its wary eyes following you  
with every move.  
What they want you do not have—  
you lost it here, remember? It is no use  
calling it back; a flicker of green insists:  
A man accustomed to exact obedience  
says nothing, but you follow his command.  
The woman who lost her children,  
the old soldier who hobbles on a leg  
made for someone else, another  
showing the long rope of his scar  
binding his ribs, and the others, all  
look at your face, expecting  
something  
*I couldn't have known* claws at your heart.  
Only the tiger lying silent  
in afternoon shadows prays for you.  
From deep in the green flame  
faces gnaw at your soul like a bone.

## A Thousand Cranes

You wonder why it never changes  
when change is the basis of everything—  
cranes move across the sky, but it is not  
the same sky tomorrow, although  
the image, hand shading the eyes, stays  
and stays until the next time  
when the present moment  
eclipses some old remembrance.  
But this is too abstract, you cannot see  
the cranes from what I've said—  
you may remember the first time you watched  
a pair hunting in the shallows for fish,  
the sharp, quick stab into the muck,  
and the fish wriggling in its beak;  
you watched until they rose above  
the brackish water into the orange light  
of dusk—that is what you remember;  
it is yours, nothing I say will change that  
nor will my memory of their flight  
across the sun, their voices calling,  
be altered by your wise remembrance.  
But today, when I listen to a woman  
say nothing is happening in Kosovo,  
the Kosovars are making it up,  
the men separated, beaten, taken away,  
this is all a lie, nothing is happening,  
no one is dying—no one ever dies—  
I note how F-16's rise like cranes across the screen,  
but the metaphor will not hold—  
it is the memory of seeing war again  
that passes across the sky.  
It is good that you and I see things  
differently—maybe the cranes weren't even cranes,  
herons perhaps? Great blue herons  
or something else entirely.

It is good that you and I remember  
separately, as one war melds  
into the next; it is good  
that nothing changes.

**Kosovo, 1999**

**Dale Ritterbusch** served in the U.S. Army from 1966 to 1969 as a hazardous munitions escort officer and liaison officer attached to JUSMAAG/MACTHAI where he was responsible for coordinating shipments of aerial mines for dispersal along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. He is an associate professor in the Department of Languages and Literatures at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater and the author of *Lessons Learned*, a collection of poems on the Vietnam War and its aftermath.