

John Struloeff

Knee-Deep in the Pacific

Twenty years ago
my father described a picture he'd taken in Korea,
the forests burning,
the crackling of gunfire like branches popping in the wind.
He did not want to forget
the day so many friends had died.
But he had forgotten
the film, left it to burn in the pocket of his uniform
in a fire meant to kill lice and disease.
Now he sees things he can't describe,
no picture to show, explain.

Thirty years after Korea,
he liked to split wood for days alone,
and he would try to answer
questions of a ten year-old son, wanting to give
something I could hold onto when he was gone.

Now I return this Christmas
from years away,
and he is old
and thinks he will take me clamming once,
one thing he has never shown me.
He describes clams as big as my forearm
as we drive onto the sand
and as we wade out into the ocean.
But my father has forgotten the lantern,
and the sun has just set, the roiling water calm for a moment,
the sand darkening like a blackened highway.
Our jackets flap in the wind,
our knees bend against the drawing surf.
He purses his lips and shakes his head,
saying without words for the hundredth time: he has forgotten.

So when we can no longer see our truck
or our feet beneath us,
we still stand in the ocean.
A city of lights scatters along the surf-break,
men, families, all waiting
for the surf to recede
so they can begin searching this darkness
for life.

John Struloeff is a third-year Ph.D. student in Creative Writing at University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where he also teaches writing and literature. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Literary Review*, *Other Voices*, and *Writers' Forum*, among others, and he has been nominated three times for a Pushcart Prize.