

*D.F. Brown*

## For A Reader

Some nights I need help  
back to my body  
the one I lay down  
where dreams are

I take less each time  
in smaller packages  
plenty of ammo  
quick release pouches  
camouflaged  
in the gravel  
up close to your heart

I stand there  
caught in my shoes  
pulling at the sky

## Even the Spoon Is a Weapon

Let's say you're chewing gum  
 No let's say you read a poem called gum and  
 English doesn't work the way you think  
 you fumble through consciousness  
 like it was an obstacle course  
 tangled in long sentences  
 knotted here in red  
 words heat up  
 flames appear  
 the story glows on  
 What ever knots sentence  
 the road twists back  
 to a low water bridge in the Ozarks  
 summer's aluminum canoe  
 floating a clear river  
 as if grace were a place  
 a campfire on a gravel bar  
 a cooler full cokes and cookies  
 you reach in reading  
 across the stain  
 and into the scars  
 triple canopy Kontum '69  
 Sit ambush above a sleeping hootch  
 in the last gray of day light  
 green turns black  
 Two boys show up from Laos  
 a crazy fusion of glyphs and big numbers  
 like words were scars the shadows fit  
 a history blister people bleed  
 Good guys get gunned down

in the name of the Nam  
the same forever I know each night  
my worst dream in 81 mm mortars  
the Battle for No Place  
200 rounds in three minutes  
the pinball heart of America  
I carve away so much  
I carry my soul like I handle a knife  
and crawl through childhood  
to reach the wounded  
I want to talk baseball  
or tell stories  
about the four barrel carb  
how to burn down the street  
in Chevy's new three ninety-six

As close as words get  
stitched in the paddies  
ankle deep in death  
Which is not capitalized  
and snatches things

Woven or laced over the tongue  
gobs and clots strung along sung  
words show how they left themselves  
soldier boys face down in the muck  
I write as if you watch  
the orange splash flash speed spread  
over that village  
through that green in that order  
You see palms that look like bent matchsticks  
burnt bent matchsticks  
and running children crying  
meaning passed on swollen into flames

Big chunks you don't recognize

show up red one place  
 you could be digging there at twilight  
     several words at once  
     whatever facts come in  
     and they fit darkness  
 the tough kind spills letter by letter  
     nights you button down  
 suck it all into your foxhole  
     like a dream because

What you think is a face  
     is a lake  
     is a lake    is a door  
     an empty ladder  
     between memory and  
 big blond kid from Texas  
     shook like a leaf  
 till he flopped like a fish  
     till he dies

You see the pieces  
 each gesture stiff in phrases  
     first person painful  
 like this repeated anything  
     and what comes back  
     something about survival  
 seems to fit around the pain  
     It comes one music  
 You can damn near sing along  
 I wonder how much can this poem hold  
     then he shits his pants

Think elephant, big snakes  
 and lots of water, more water  
     imagine swimming  
     the motion it takes stay

the stars involved  
Sometimes when you're fighting  
for your life  
any life you can walk through  
you have to stand  
and fire into the leaves  
at people you cannot see  
You put your kisses there  
it gets this close  
You rock in the pivot  
find wings don't work  
all your ache toward lift is pretend

You have to lose a child to understand  
lose a child, fever in the night  
the child convulses in heat to death  
and you stand there waking  
You can still walk  
you go back to the dark  
each night and you do  
sit up till first light  
There are lists each morning  
a calendar to mark days since  
you use it and keep track  
it's a game to keep going  
you figure the minutes, you eat  
one day you manage three meals  
for a while you are full  
you stand there

You're nineteen too long and you know it  
every day and you count them  
you're tired of smelling nineteen  
You wonder about god  
like he lived next door  
like he cares about this war

or it seems Saturday  
 you could buy a ticket on a boat  
 Where are the post cards

Think about Debbie in Dallas  
 she drives a pick up  
 your pick up  
 You think she might be banging your best friend  
 write home about that  
 You'd rather slide through the trees  
 everything you own in a ruck on your back  
 You're going to learn to spell better

As if words were a long shot  
 half hold on the dream side  
 like we needed them  
 Whatever light is worth  
 how far fast  
 The instant falls to freeze frame  
 The catch on burrs  
 we bring back  
 from each trip  
 The stop and go  
 across the understand  
 you understand  
 pitch and spin  
 as though we could forget  
 as there was a dream side

Now this is halfway round the world  
 the Orient with all its smell  
 and it's almost like  
 you don't have to care  
 or there is no need  
 until somebody "eats it"  
 "buys the farm"

then all Asia bears down  
you have never been so put upon  
your whole life and it is your life  
and you are mumbling “it don’t mean nothing”  
and it doesn’t  
and that’s all you keep track of  
it’s all you care about and that’s too much  
one more worthless fucking death  
so you lie, you sleep, you say  
*hometown, girl friend*  
you say ‘59 Ford coupe  
say getting it on in the back seat  
willing to drive her everywhere  
you want to join  
for the first time  
you had to go someplace  
maybe kill someone  
live what it means  
what “Birdman” was cursing  
the day he got shot  
what he was telling himself  
*It was set up*  
They knew this would spin your wheels  
that it could take years to slow down  
They knew it would never be home any more  
never again again

All you got to do is practice releasing tonight  
say to yourself a hundred times  
the war is over and drift to sleep believing  
some of the children were saved  
You try to recollect this guy  
six months back maybe  
F N G from New York  
going to be a lawyer  
that was all he talked

Stepped on a punji  
 his first L Z  
 climbed on the last bird out  
 shot down  
 burned in the paddies  
 What was his name

Night a thing tough shit all over darkness  
 you walk with the medic who picks up the pieces  
 He tells you he's tired of the hours  
 long hours bending and the explosions  
 weird Viet songs up through the brush  
 One damn thing for sure he says  
 next time I won't run short of bags  
 these guys get greased  
 they're going out like they're supposed to  
 no more shift crap  
 some asshole somewhere can afford it  
 for awhile you don't hear the music

Walk into a butcher shop and draw a number  
 everybody gets two wives  
 a taste of hard drugs  
 some time in the slammer  
 You add it up  
 the O.D's  
 "one cars"  
 guys who suck off a twelve gauge  
 By the time you figure out  
 half your friends are dead  
 and you're afraid of the totals  
 Waiting can take hours  
 a step across to the counter  
 you move marching  
 you have orders  
 grill burgers for supper



You see everything and  
sometimes you watch faces  
know they are children  
you know their destination  
You walk into a butcher shop  
In this kid you're a dream  
reaching first light  
you're with a learning band  
that would rather play ball  
You practice blowing  
a short large belled trumpet  
shiny shiny  
You cannot find the notes  
the whole thing tilted tilting  
blowing blow helicopter  
"hot approach" version  
you're not quite looking straight down  
through no door but close  
you do have the belt on  
those boats are fisherman  
bobbing in the waves off Qui Nhon  
Central coast of always  
all teenage death cult crap  
bass line so deep  
you hope it's your heart  
you have to get closer  
something to do with picking a thick tree  
never standing in a fire fight  
and steady step by step  
it carries you  
a no moon night  
just north of Kontum  
50 plus N V A walking the trail  
ten meters from your sleeping position  
and you're awake

Imagine men on their knees trimming around stone  
a sprinkler system at sunset  
drift of light through water  
through beads of waters  
like it was a book of poems  
paddies squared copper  
a bunch of fully armed teenagers  
the dream of dry soaks  
I mean really  
we did not know how to act  
the war we were raised for and  
something going on they wouldn't tell us  
then every two weeks the mower  
let's say people you know are here

## San Francisco Abstract

When you get this far  
and you are turning  
a new leaf or  
just turning the page or  
closing the book—  
who is missing? you read  
all the words, have read  
things brightly, their aura  
you remember what of  
that foggy day  
Golden Gate Park  
(truly which is rusty red)  
(the Gate not the Park)  
and in that dream like reaching  
the fog, those rusty  
towers, the pylons—  
wire braided cables  
twisted thick you can  
walk if they don't catch  
you there standing  
look into the water  
gray today through green  
It could be  
the last time you see  
water if right now you  
place the book you  
hold on the stand  
and fall out of bed  
dead.  
You know you are

at that margin.  
 Try whistling—you  
     want to sing  
     of those trees  
 so many in the fog lost  
  
 the wind pulls constant  
     like the tune  
     you whistle.  
 It's not working  
 not even this close  
     what you hear  
     inside there  
 the book a dream your head  
     and when you get this far.  
 Let's say you're chewing gum

#### NOTES

*Hootch* is a thatched bamboo hut.

*Kontum* is a province in the Central Highlands of Viet Nam.

*Triple canopy* refers to the three layers of growth in a tropical rainforest.

*81 mm mortars* are U.S. muzzle-loaded, light artillery pieces.

*Qui Nhon* is coastal city in central Viet Nam.

*NVA* = North Vietnamese Army

*FNG* = Fuckin' New Guy

*Punji* is a sharpened bamboo stake booby trap.

*LZ* = landing zone for helicopters

Born and raised in the Missouri Ozarks, **D.F. BROWN** served in our Viet Nam War as a medic with Bravo, The First of the Fourteenth Infantry, The Fourth Infantry Division. Educated at San Francisco State University, Brown wrote *Returning Fire* and *The Other Half of Everything*. He lives in Houston with the ceramic sculptor Tracye Wear and teaches writing at Challenge Early College High School.