

*Juan J. Morales*

**Minesweep on Highway  
13 near Lai Key, 1968**

Inch by inch, the minesweeper checks the road,  
listening with his feet  
placing his heel then toe down.

When his detector gleans a claymore,  
it hisses, heavies his grip.  
He stops us by holding up his hand.

The Captain tells us to stay off the road.  
We look outward into the trees  
and columns of yellow grass. Sometimes, we glance down

the road at tank tracks, fresh holes  
behind us, claymores he already found.  
And everything still feels lucky

when he pinpoints the spot.  
He sets down the detector and kneels; the headphones  
droop over his helmet, static and clicks in ears.

We stiffen up when he pulls out his knife  
drags lines around the mine.  
The minesweeper works the blade like he was blind.

He looks away, and feels blade skimming the sides  
and draw a circle. Metal clinks metal; he moves  
the knife under the mine where dirt resumes. As he lifts

the claymore, no one sees the grenade underneath.

He disappears into a rain of dirt.  
We duck instinctively. Hands cover faces

as dirt and debris falls in a cruel hush. That quiet  
that comes after echoes the blast. Nobody  
ever finds a trace of the minesweeper.

Every day afterward knocks us down  
like every cigarette smoked and smashed under our boots.  
We hold every bite of food

and bit of water we swallow,  
bitterly holding on to the shame of being alive.

## The Cloverleaf

The day Pop gets shot, he follows every order and procedure. He repeats prayers, reads letters from home twice, cleans his gun. His lieutenant tells him to use the Cloverleaf with five men to sweep the next mile, to move the unit up. They stem up and make three-circled sweeps. Pop counts steps, ending one leaf at the start of the next. Then, on their last loop, automatic fire ambushes them, echoes in their helmets, a sound hot as splintered tree bark. They take cover near the hole the V.C. stops digging when he hears Pop's patrol.

Bullets rip through air and leaves. Pop doesn't see his wound until the radioman points to where bullet cleaves past ligaments, bone, and slides through his shoulder. The tiny slit drips until his sleeve soaks dark green. Bullshit, he yells, shooting on an emptied clip. They regroup after Kennedy flanks the V.C. Even Pop shakes his head and looks away when Kennedy cusses at the corpse. When they withdraw, Pop leans on McDaniels.

At base camp, pain scrapes into Pop's thoughts. Violet smoke swirls then fizzes upward with the voices lost in the propellers. A medic lays him on the gurney, bandages him up. When the helicopter takes off, McDaniels and the big black man, whose name Pop forgets, waves. Before he loses them behind the tree line, Pop watches both relax, light cigarettes, and study the grass folded under their boots. He wonders if they'll be alive when he comes back. The helicopter is cold. He ignores the landscape, the lucky gash scarring his shoulder.

## Siren

This woman, her naked body, scoops up  
brown water in her hands like fabric,  
lets it slide through her hair, down her body,

clinging to her skin. When the American  
sees her bathing in the Mekong, he wanders

to the bank, dips his helmet into the water.  
A rifle shot cracks. He convulses, falls. Flies

float around him like old friends.  
She creeps to the bank, slips into the jungle.

Nearby, another American on lookout sits  
on extinct ant piles devoured by the wet seasons'  
floods.

He hears only garbled river voices  
as he skims a razor across his face,  
eyes attentive in a tiny mirror.

**JUAN J. MORALES'** first book, *Friday and the Year that Followed*, was chosen by Vern Rutsala for the 2005 Rhea and Seymour Gorsline Poetry Competition and is published by Bedbug Press. His poetry has also appeared in *Blue Mesa Review*, *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, and *Poet Lore*. He received his MFA from the University of New Mexico in 2005. He teaches English at Pueblo Community College, in Colorado, where he lives with his wife.