

JAMES F. CONNOLLY

### **The Tet Offensive**

All that winter, snow owned the valley.  
Spring came and the river spilled into our lives.  
Our father could not work, his leg broken  
in early March, a fall at the Feed and Grain,  
My brother and I stacked bags of sand  
to turn the water back.  
We thought we were rich and the Walkers poor.  
I worked our farm every day after school.  
My brother, Donny, studied long hours  
to find a way to graduation.

That summer a man in a suit  
moved the Walkers into town.  
My mother said that he was from the government.  
Old man Walker was a drunk, a “no count”  
to be kept in prayer.  
She prayed for the country.  
She prayed for the “Papists and Jews.”  
Before sleep, on her knees, at the side of their bed,  
she helped our father, who couldn’t kneel, kneel.  
She read the Gospels and he never said a word.

In September, we hung a buck from the barn rafters.  
It dangled in the late afternoon light

and sent shadows across the barn walls.  
Donny said, "It looks like a pregnant woman."  
It dripped blood like wine from a punctured bag.  
By Thanksgiving, our father came into lung cancer,  
his life measured out in her words of the Nazarene.

The oldest, deferred, I watched Donny go.  
At the induction station, he said that Maggie,  
his girl, had given him up.  
Our mother got lost in doing for those in need.  
She tended her husband till the tumor took him.

Donny came home in a flag and the salute of rifles,  
our lives windswept in the heartland's debate.  
Raised to avoid the risk of happiness,  
to be thankful that every lamb's a lamb of God,  
I clutched the woods' improvident shadow  
that grew dark in the contracting shade.  
I tended the silage, the fields, the livestock,  
the countless hours of work that was my mother's hope.  
A country at war,  
our life not much more than the work of getting by,  
my mother and I became a small plenty,  
a fortress against time—

and we never took anything from anyone.

Retired after teaching for forty-eight years, **J.F. Connolly** has published 100+ poems. His latest work is *Picking Up The Bodies* (2014). He is a retired Lieutenant Colonel (USAR).