William Childress was born in 1933 in Hugo, Oklahoma. He served as an enlisted man in the army from 1951 to 1959, including service in Korea in 1952 and 1953 as a demolitions expert and secret courier. He holds a BA in English and journalism from Fresno State College and an MFA from the University of Iowa Writers Workshop. He has worked variably as a ranch foreman, juvenile counselor, college teacher, editor at the National Geographic Society, speechwriter for Phillips Petroleum, photojournalist, freelance writer, and columnist for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. He is recently retired, but still writes freelance travel pieces.

Childress’ poetry has appeared in such journals as College English, Georgia Review, Harper’s, Kenyon Review, Mademoiselle, Southern Review and Poetry, and has been anthologized in Modern Poets British and American and From the Belly of the Shark, among others. His fiction and nonfiction have appeared in Conde Nast’s Traveler, Cosmopolitan, Ladies Home Journal, Good Housekeeping, Modern Maturity, Sports Afield, and elsewhere. He has received the Stephen Vincent Benet Award, a Devins Award, and an Illinois State Arts Commission prize for his poetry, and a Gold Quill Award for Journalistic Excellence. His books include:

* Burning the Years and Lobo: Poems 1962-1975*,
Soldier's Leave

Beside the river where he walks
boulders like green and moldy loaves
resist the downward pull of water
and hold their own in ordered grooves.

It is October, and the leaves,
once so flexible and green,
grate on each other in the wind
like a surgeon's knife on bone.

Soon ice will form among the trees
in lean cinereous splinters,
but he will be gone before it does
on a cold campaign of winter's.
Korea Bound, 1952

Braced against the rise and fall of the ocean, holding the rail, we listen to the shrill complaining of the waves against the hull, and see the Golden Gate rise with our motion. Some hours previous, bearing duffels as heavy as our thoughts, we wound inward like slaves in some gigantic pyramid, selected by our Pharaoh for burial against our wills. Now we watch Alcatraz sink into the water, and visualize the pale, amorphous masks of prisoners, whose lack of freedom guarantees their lives.
Letter Home

Mother, they line the roads like broken stalks, children with bellies swollen, and O, the flowers of their faces, petals all torn, and the flags of their threadbare garments. Mother, we give them everything in our packs and still they moan so sadly. More with eyes like stone. These kids will never sing again. O, mother, wish me home! With just one field of Kansas grain, what I can do for them.
The Soldiers

In Korea, decomposing shit
chokes the perfume of the stray flower
still seen occasionally on hills,
and the paddies heavily seeded
with napalm mines, can grow red flowers
at a touch, with a blossom that kills.

From the dark immobilization
of earth bunkers, our probing patrol
infiltrates forests. Distant searchlights
paint ridges with something like moonlight,
and a grey rain chills us. Winter’s cold
is not far away. It too will come.

Our ghosts meet other ghosts in the trees:
They appear pallid and luminous
in the eyepiece of a sniperscope,
a tool too complex for the Chinese.
But their simple burpguns never stop,
and their simple power murders us.

In December we start pulling out,
having done little but christen hills
with proper names: Million Dollar,
Triangle, Heartbreak; names that matter
to no one but us. We taste defeat
and like it. Victory is what kills.
No soldier can ignore tomorrow, though finally it does not matter as much as it should. We have today, and by the grace of Generals a stay of execution. Our lives narrow around living's uncertain center.

It is not likely a solution to human problems will come of this, but soldiers can't be soldiers and be human. The cold rain descends softly on scorched graves, where, beyond human praise, men lie in stiffened resolution.
Shellshock

I am MacFatridge as he was then, torn by the mine he was defusing; at the aid-tent door his arm fell off, and a Medic stooped to retrieve it and stood as though lugging a melon that had burst in the sun.

There are those of us who are not tough despite all they told us. If I cry now, no one seems to care, but before, I would have been punished with a laugh. I wish that underneath the green sky of this room, images of terror would come again: that the emerald door I can’t pass would let me out to sleep.
Combat Iambic

Once in a distant war which was no war, mired in the unclean paddies, bleeding clean my buddies died while tracer bullets tore through earth and armored vests like acetylene. Our General, in rearmost echelon, with fancy unfired pistol near his thigh, barked militant commands and acted out his manly role untouched by fire. O, sir, I pray Beelzebub, Lord of the Flies, to rear his maggot children in your eyes, where curled like living lashes they can give the atmosphere that suits a General’s mind.
Death of a General

At the autopsy, the knife inflicted the first real wound his body had ever known. The incision, deep and clean, revealed a petrified heart, and lungs unpowderstained.

He was survived by a wife, who informed the reporters, crisply, of his lifelong goal. He had missed it by one war. We probed for, but never found, any evidence of a soul.

He was famed for discipline, and we saw why. In a corner of his stomach, well-hidden, we found a thick volume of military law. No one was chief mourner at his funeral. The guns for the salute were pointed at him. He was anointed by a cloudburst, but his sins remained. The medals on his chest caught the light like cartridge-brass.
The Long March

North from Pusan,
trailing nooses of dust,
we dumbly followed
leaders whose careers
hung on victory.

The road might
have been the Appian Way
except for the
starved children lining it.
We gave what we could

to hold back the grave,
but in Pusan the dead-truck
snuffled through frozen dawns
retrieving bones in thin sacks,
kids who would never beg again.

When we bivouacked
near Pyongtaek, a soldier
fished a bent brown stick
from a puddle. It was
the arm of someone’s child.

Not far away, the General
camps with his press corps.
Any victory will be his.
For us, there is only
the long march to Viet Nam.
**The War Lesson**

After they taught us guns, they showed us how to throw grenades. We watched the meadows grow momentarily large, then settle down in bits of pummeled earth, and every man saw it as the disrupted flesh of those we were hired to kill. It was a game we wished might end, but no, we had to fight as they would fight, our goals beyond our sights.

At Khe Sanh, when the mortar rounds had hushed and we moved out, I saw upon a bush the burned and dangling genitals of a Cong. Or did I see? We moved as in a dream, a dream that paced our lives to marching songs, and bundled flaming children in their screams.
For My First Son

Shadows of trenchcoats darken his crib, tiny fingers grope towards a future of steel cables on a ship's deck, weighted duffel, and arms that drag him downward.

His small skull is bound in iron confinement, the doll's face pressed to his mother's breast darkens like crisped leather in a flamethrower's blast. I see trenchfoot and worms, wounds spilling gangrene, his delicate skin torn by shrapnel. And then,

with eyes empty as spent cartridges, he is packaged for home. For these are the gifts of male birthdays, wrapped in patriot slogans, and sent by lying leaders.

Happy birthday to you, Happy birthday to you, Happy birthday my son, Happy birthday to you.
Trying to Remember People I Never Really Knew

There was that guy
on that hill in Korea.
Exploding gasoline made him
a thousand candles bright.
We guided the Samaritan copter
in by flashlight
to a rookery of rocks,
a huge, fluttering nightbird
aiming at darting fireflies,
and one great firefly
rolling in charred black screams.

There was the R.O.K. soldier
lying in the paddy,
his lifted arms curved
as he stiffly embraced death,
a tiny dark tunnel over his heart.
Such a small door
for something as large as life
to escape through.

Later, between pages and chapters
of wars not yet written up
in Field Manuals or Orders of the Day,
there came shrieking down
from a blue Kentucky sky
a young paratrooper whom technology failed.
(I must correct two common errors:
they are never called shroud lines,
and paratroopers do not cry Geronimo.)
I wish I could say
that all three men fathered sons,
that some part of them still lived.
But maybe I don’t, for the children’s ages
would now be such as to make them
ready for training as hunters of men,
to stalk dark forests
where leaden rains fall with a precision
that can quench a hunter’s fire.
Burning the Years

Solemn as a priest, he gives himself to fire. His shining face wrinkles and turns brown, a Kodak soldier writhing in paper pain.

Goodbye to the slim youth in paratrooper garb, with boots like mirrors and ribbons straight as his spine. He knew all there was to know about honor and duty. But duty changes with each job, and honor turns ashes soon enough.

Deeper in the cave of years he’s joined by man of War who’s still a boy. Fists full of detonators and TNT, he smiles murderously for the folks back home. At night he scrawls on sweetheart letters inscrutable Oriental signs.
Smoke rises like morning fog:
shadowy pictures, enlarged by time,
dance and preen. Girls of months or moments
feel again the fires
that once swept them and him.
But now the act is over. The fires
go out. All that’s left
are the ashes in his mind.