

JOSEPH T. COX

Shaman

for John Wolfe, 2/327 Infantry

In cloud-hidden summits of the Annamese Cordillera,
your God was a local deity without jurisdiction.
Ancient game trails lead nowhere, suffocating heat,
sponge-footed slogging through leeches-leafed jungle,
sudden jolts of adrenaline when the point hesitated
over sandal track, bloody bandage, or dark distant log.
Sometimes it started with the woosh of an RPG,
sometimes with fire squalls shredding vegetation
and flesh, splintering tree and bone. Amidst red
and green tracers, a gun-smoke shadow touched
those it took when night falls and contact breaks,
and estatic exhilaration dissipated in silent
scenes of rubbery, skull-shattered masks,
dead boys' faces, and schemeless mutilation.

Try to hide the fear and hope for clarity as you turn
in the churning wave of hot, dry vapor. Lie
oddly joyous in blood-drenched numbness and become
the grass waving in the warm, summer breeze.
And at this point of saturation, accept his hand,
and chant that war's mantra—"It don't mean nothin."

Joseph T. Cox is a Vietnam veteran and a professor of English at the United States Military Academy. His poetry has appeared previously in *WLA*. "Shaman" was written for John Wolfe, whose art work is featured on this issue's cover.