

## **Reflections on a Vietnam War Memorial**

*Worcester, Massachusetts*

Verdant meadows swim below yonder hillside,  
Ripening with the Spring, the wild dandelions and daisies,  
Grow in clumps, vibrantly pushing through the soil.  
Farther abreast ducks glide in pairs on the blue river  
That rolls along, a partition from the world of golf.  
A crimson swing set rots and rocks by a sultry breeze,  
The snow has left its scars, both seen and unseen.  
My first visit to Green Hill Park since youth, and it has wilted,  
Smogged in by industrialization, the perimeter dwindled.  
Graffiti smears sidewalks, obscenities groove tree stumps,  
Trashcans laden with beer bottles, cigarettes slumber en masse.  
Humanity has flown except for its entrails and decay.

We push down on the earth, confining it in minute squares,  
Forging memory with progress, while they must remain apart.  
Progress when it allays mankind's woes is a blessing,  
But when it impedes the divinity of memory, it must be banished  
To the underworld beneath the grass, allowing Nature's revival.  
On the west edge, fences enclose pens of livestock,  
Goats bleat and peek curious noses through slits,  
Chickens cluck and preen with proud hackles,  
Kindly pigs frolic in the muck and mire,  
A man thrusts a stalk of timothy into the maw of a hungry goat,  
He is dressed in a powder blue shirt, sleeves rolled up, smiling.  
Not another soul crowns my vantage as I traipse onwards to the cairn.

Gray monoliths extend in spires to the sky,  
Etched with names and letters of those long buried,  
Letters sent to loved ones, mothers, lovers, fathers, brothers,  
My heart laments as I read, full of hope and life,  
The urban jungle meets the real jungle and an explosion  
Sears the motherland. Shells burst and limbs crack,  
Strangers from a foreign legion blur with Uncle Sam's: Death.

And here I stand thousands of miles away, eons of days forward,  
Reflecting and pondering, the muses of these soldiers,  
What they felt, the agony, the cheers, the toil,  
And now underground, they are buried and I have not  
A lick on me, never held a gun or faced real danger,  
Nor entered a miasma of no retreat, yet I stand and read,  
Never comprehending true fear, never to flee the fury.

I enter their lives, a thief, stealing their darkest secrets.

Is this fair? What then? Where are they now?  
And these letters, overwrought with emotion,  
Both quiet sentiments and an overflow of passion,  
Engraved in the monoliths, rising to the heavens,  
Where peace reigns. Their lives ended before consummation,  
Before weddings and funerals and happy dances in the moonlight,  
As mine teeters along, lost, torn by dreams without haloes,  
Prayers without creeds, empty jingles, words tossed  
Like ingredients in a salad, tasty but shallow.  
Your paths were chosen, by you or by others.  
Stay or go? The decision. Oh the decision and so the pathos of the chosen swells,  
Forced to die for a lost cause.

Pangs of loneliness strike as I agonize with choices,  
As I set out and get pulled back homeward to my birthplace.  
By the external and the internal, failure, emptiness, longing for  
An unknown principle, striving for the unquenchable elixir.  
Elysian mixes with Hades, the good and bad,  
Sweet and sour, for isn't the sweet always tainted with the sour,  
And then the sweet decays.

Knowledge is hard to escape, hard to obviate or repress  
With words or theories. But words are the only truth, and these letters,  
Stenciled in stone by boys and men and women,  
Are creeds of the sojourning apostle, fighting for sightless causes,  
Dying by the thousands, piled high in mounds, rotting, still striving.  
For what?  
And still today, the battle wages through the largest continent,  
Pestilence strikes over half in enfeebled lands, is there an end,  
A cure in sight? The madness. When will it subside? These Worcester  
Soldiers fought for something, didn't they? And here I stand.

Now I must turn and fight, with beliefs not arms.  
Proclamations and manifestos are empty without action.  
Let their words move and soothe before it is too late.  
I must try to reach, to heal, to attain, but in patience with restraint,  
For the hasty retreat backwards, and the massive Hercules drags us all to the ground,  
And wrestles us to our death. Antaeus, hear our call, teach us from the depths of Hades,  
How to strive without offense, how to prosper without scorning, how to love without hate.  
Teach us what you have learned. We are Titans, all of us, in a world too small, too confining.  
The monoliths are erected by those in celebration of the past, dividing progress  
From memory. What then? In what mode is reconciliation? The bearded Savior?  
But how to reach him, the path is tangled, weedy, full of burrs and conundrums,  
The parables are a gift, but obscure and recondite,  
And the bodies pile high below, pushing forth the blossoms of the new season,  
Mulch men we are, mulch, mulch, mulch, mulch in the gulch, mulch for the minnows,

mulch for the winnows, mulch for the minor and major and all else in between.  
The symphony of life. Eternal carnival. Electricity, the bang, the duo in Paradise, and on  
And on and on; but breathe no more do these lads, skeletons strewn about over  
Thousands of miles, while the honor and the monument is central.  
All things are central after death, all become harmonized,  
Falls into place, our shoes encase our feet to maximum comfort, but in life, LIFE! This is  
The time, the livelong day beckons, the pastoral pleasures, sylvan beatitudes, forging  
Progress with memory has only one purpose: life. Only this, not death. Now!  
Do I dare contradict myself? Yes, but with reason.

We must learn, remember, and create.  
Creation must never stop, the painters must paint,  
The writers write, the lovers love, the comedians jest.

The unison of experience, the ineffectiveness of competitions:  
Why judge who or what's better? Why place prosody into columns and numbers?  
Why classify and scrutinize?  
Is there no other way?

The Spring sends a quick arctic breeze over my shoulders and I shudder,  
The monoliths, connected by a cobble pathway that  
Winds around and back to the beginning, and the sky darkens,  
The festival of death has ended. The way back is closed,  
Barricaded by a new dimension of understanding, a poetic growth,  
Raindrops patter around, jarring the earth, feeding the lost,  
Giving them water when they are thirsty, for all we need is water,  
Heaven's sweetest gift. I hop about and extend my tongue and catch the dew,  
The goats and pigs huddle under the eaves, the chickens scamper into cotes,  
The axis spins and spins, and spills me forward, forward....FORWARD... and so I drive.