

Searching For God in Vietnam

--after Laura Palmer

1.

He was not in the jar of charlie ears,
not in the napalm dropped by the ton.

Not in the eyes of the forest or in the killing fields,
not in the land mines looking for limbs.

Not on the hills taken and then given back,
not in the poker game bet with young blood.

Not in the colonel's body counts,
not in the journalists' six o'clock scotch.

2.

Instead surely God was huddled
with all the young nurses in Chu Lai,
receiving the broken bodies

one by one, earth's staunch
stunned angels taking in
the endless train of stretchered flesh,
the incessant incoming dread,

their soft firm hands and quivering
hearts tending to the blasted
beautiful ones who would never be whole
or nineteen again.

The nurses worked daily
caked in blood and disbelief,
sometimes prayed out loud
for the bleeding to stop,
or for the dying to live.

And there were the times
they rushed quickly to the scarest ones,
boys become broken men become
boys again in the end
begging for their mommies,
looking for a last hand to hold.

3.

And at night, off shift, exhausted
and finally surrendering to sleep,
some of the nurses dreamed
of their hearts as lone candles,

then as fast melting wax,
then the molten wax morphing
into the disfigurement of flesh
they handled each and every day,

then the dream suddenly shifting
to a fire outside on a busy street in Saigon,
the Buddhist monk a human torch
as he sits in his orange robe in full lotus

impossibly still and praying
as his very flesh burns pure
and his eyes stare cold
and the world looks on in full daylight
astonished,

the monk's final gift
a silent song of God's rage
at what men do to men
every day in an ordinary war.

Newtown

1

At dusk we come
to the small dark pond

at the edge
of these winter woods

to pour our cups
of tears and rage

into the very face
of God,

that cold black
mirror
that remains

still
and dark
and waiting.

2

Tell me
how do you parse
pure evil,

twenty little children
cut down
like so much fodder,

all our sweet ones
who won't ever
rise again

to greet us
laughing,
dancing

on tip toes,
so glad
when we come home?

3

Will our hooded eyes
ever see beyond this muddied
veil, believe again in the sweetness
of gospel or grace,

feel anything again
outside this black granite fossilizing
one cold layer of the heart?

And can we ever hope
to empty ourselves enough to receive
the lost benediction of silence,

this quiet necklace of tears
we will touch and trouble
like a dark rosary the rest of our days?

Will our spirits someday return
to the ancient healing forest
that dreamt us once
in a place outside of time,

before we were born
into this fetal scabbled light
as something human,

before memory,
before sorrow,
before breath?

Will the soul finally wake somewhere
brighter one day in time to join
the lit wing of the egret

banking at daybreak
just above the swamp,
white bird lifting
through a sky so blue it hurts.

Winter Climb

This day
a clear blue ship
I climb the fresh
powdered mountain,

stand after stand
of virgin white birch,
some with their hair
pinned to the ground,
bent as if in weeping.

Halfway up,
in a small striped maple,
sewn to a lower branch
a little snow-peaked nest,
twig-weave of field hay and moss.

Inside I find
two tiny white scrolls,
curled parchments
of thin paper birch.

Gloves off,
I anxiously
unroll them,
half-expecting
hieroglyphics.

Rolled out in my palm
of course there is
nothing, just
the rich stain
of inner orange bark.

I'd still like to believe
in that kind
of miracle, mysterious
messages left by
dark-throated birds,
secrets sent in code
from the other side.

Hardest to hear sometimes
are the clear notes of the given,
how in an empty nest
a cup of snow shines.

Questions On The Cross

*(They say they hung Christ on a dogwood cross.
I have some questions about this)*

Did the builders first strip
the knuckled bark, plane
the crooked limbs true,
or was it a rough and rustic construction,
the wood still green and bleeding,
the old flower petals plastered
brown and rotting on the misbegotten bark?

And what was the joinery
that connected the horizontal
to the vertical, the sullen earth
with the broken sky?

Were the timbers tied
by the gut of some
unrisen animal,
or in the end simply pegged
by a single piece of wrought iron,
one thin pin of doubt?

Did some idiot savant
sing his cracked hymn of healing
in your darkest hour,
and could you hear it
through the jeers of the soldiers?

In those last minutes
of utter despair did you
lose yourself in dreams
of Magdalene,

how she once washed your feet
so gently, her long black hair
damp with tears
in the temple doorway?

And where oh where
was your Father,
and who cut you down
at the end?

Finally, what became
of the cross itself,
was it left leaning
caked in blood
in the mud on the mount

or in the end simply
dragged away by the
poor sorry faithful
to be sacrificed
into smaller pieces,

your final gift
a few hours of heat
and light to pierce
the all enveloping cold,

the dying coals
become risen ashes
the wind would scatter by morning?

BOWIE PASSING

1.

Mere coincidence
the earth served up
that unbelievable double rainbow
over New York skies
the day of the night
Bowie died?

I doubt it.

The Thin White Duke
went out just
as he came in,

in mystery, music, style
and grace, patiently curating
his own last act,

courageously choreographing
his end days
of trembling and fear--

Lazarus, Blackstar--
meditations on time
past and time passing,
the finity of all that is flesh,

his life a performance piece
to the very end, sweet rainbow
arcng into the blue abyss.

2.

Every once in a while
the ineffable
gives us a clue.

You were one of them
and will always be by far
the coolest dude in the room,
the ultimate class act,

that guy up on the catwalk in blue shoes
looking for one more dance,
one more track to lay down,

the jeweled cat collar in the sky
your final costume change, outrageous
astonishing beauty only you could pull off.