

## **whippersnapper**

in those cowboy days of summer  
playing in fields of tall grass that rolled  
into sycamore woods  
my sidekicks put on their best  
Red Ryder or Hopalong Cassidy  
and blasted the Code of the West  
in the cap pistol sulfur air

I was different   wore my cowboy hat cocked  
the draw string dangled in the back  
a candy cigarette stuck behind my ear  
a thin black moustache from a burnt cork

and rode my air stallion  
into revolution with Zapata

*vamonos muchachos  
es la hora de muerte!*

with the moves of a bull fighter  
I dreamed through the swinging doors  
of saloons cool as a swagger

licked the salt in the crook of my thumb  
shotgunned a shot of tequila  
then a bite of lime

recited poetry to the chicas dressed  
in peasant blouses and wide dancing dresses  
hair as dark as their eyes

*y tu corazon caliente  
nada mas\**

then swung into a silver studded saddle  
to rob the rich and laugh at laws  
my Cisco Kid  
my outlaw ways  
my time young in the open fields  
that never age

## **flashback**

he lives in the cold dark  
sparked by reluctant ashes  
from fires of forgotten graves

he screams and sweats and shakes  
as he rolls his fighter once again  
into the tracers of a dark dream

he cannot escape the napalm inferno  
the crackling flesh  
the bodies like raw meat on a spit  
cooking in his oven of bombs

or people exploding like firecrackers  
as silver-tipped cannons  
sparkle from his wings

his ears thunder  
as war speaks

*remember me  
there is nothing more  
for  
only the dead understand*

## casting doubts

i like to go fishing  
but the only thing  
i catch is hell

    i know there's  
    somewhere else  
    i should be

    i know there's  
    something else  
    i should do

    I know she's  
    gonna be spittin' fits  
    when I git home

but the  
beer's cold  
and the breeze  
is warm

and that old  
wine cork bobber  
waves lazy  
on the water  
like me

    maybe it's time  
    to weigh anchor  
    time to face  
    the music

    maybe i should  
    dip the oars  
    and toss the bottle

    maybe I should stop  
    and pick up whatever  
    it was at the store

whooooo  
wait a minute  
hold on a sec  
i just got  
another nibble

## spring door

yankee station off vietnamese coast  
flight deck uss enterprise april 1967  
taxi A4 into take-off position  
catapult shuttle hooks plane  
I throttle full military power  
release the brakes  
the skyhawk shivers in position

stomach tight i stiffen in the seat  
cat officer arcs a yellow wand to the deck  
brings it up to a horizontal freeze  
and i know it's coming  
    i know it's coming ...

*the springtime path to the back door  
is dusty and smells of honeysuckle  
the screen door hangs crooked  
on rusty butterfly hinges  
nailed loosely to the house  
i open the door then hear  
the sharp crack  
as the spring yanks it back  
i am home*

the catapult cracks through a wall of steam  
nails me into the seat  
0 to 160 knots in 3 seconds  
flying over flat water  
the altimeter winds out  
the rudder pedals dance  
as I push throttle forward  
ease the stick into a starboard bank  
north towards hanoi  
    shrike missiles and napalm  
    safe under my sheltering wings  
    a darker angel heading home

## **kandahar blues**

he is still nineteen  
stands in a narrow line  
looking straight ahead  
waiting  
to buy a present  
a blue sweater  
for his sister

while other eyes  
shuffled away  
daring only a jerk  
of a glance  
his way

*not long ago  
he played fullback  
for the high school  
soccer team  
and scored big time  
with his prom date  
in the back seat of his parents car*

*not so long ago  
he drove a humvee  
in a convoy along a supply route  
on a clean day full of new air*

now stuck in this stale line  
he is aware of his horror  
the face broken scarred and pallid  
the reassigned rusty skin  
the half mouth twisted around staggered teeth

he feels the screams  
of hidden stares  
the naked rage of flesh  
the burning of his skin  
the soft real touch of a blue sweater

**with a bible and a bottle**

he owned a small print shop  
in a shanty fishing town  
along the chesapeake bay

on friday nights  
he tuned the six-stringed gibson  
and sang hillbilly songs  
in a sawdust tavern  
with smoke to the ceiling  
bellies at the bar  
a number ten coffee can for tips

when he was too drunk to remember  
ernest tubb or yodeling railroad songs  
he'd carefully lay the guitar  
in a velvet-lined case  
and buy rounds of drinks  
until the can was empty

he wrote printed and published  
the local newspaper in hot metal  
the linotype machine  
chattering and clinking  
as he formed slugs  
of lead lines  
like a loaded cyborg

the inventor of the linotype machine  
went mad  
the newspaper went broke  
he sold the print shop  
crippled his leg in the war

my old man

he spoke to me through cigarettes and beer  
stale and hard  
taught me wrong from right  
with solid right and left combinations

sunday mass was a family must  
a resting in the incense and latin  
magic in the incantations  
apologies in the homilies

i left home young to find better wars  
the years between use grew silent and long  
until in his final chapter he would call often  
and we talked long into the whiskey  
about guitars old songs and good old days