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IT WASN'T THE WAR

It wasn’t the war that terrified me
But that late Saturday night when I was alone,
Only weeks from turning twenty-three,
A loaded forty-five holstered at one hip
And a walkie-talkie swaying from the other.
I descended the grimy basement stairwell
And stepped into the dark hall of the Enlisted Club,
Grateful for the baggy fatigues
To hide the tremors in my knees.

And there I stood, the Officer of the Day,
Facing sixty men, scarred from battle
And the tattoo needle, men our country paid
And trained to kill, men who believed in little
Except that they had time for another beer
Or two, men who glanced at me with mild amusement
As I croaked, “Closing time, Gentlemen.”
COMPLINE: CAMP CASEY

There is a monastic order to life
Here, among the relics
Of conflict older than these trees,
Among the vaulted arches
Of corrugated Quonset huts,
Among armed men keeping vigil
Over bridges with pre-chambered charges,
Where retaining walls double as bastions,
And the amber rice lies in open fields
Of fire before them,
Forever and ever
War without end.

Rise, dress, stretch, and run,
Work until I have had my fill,
Then read, write, and think.
The Stars and Stripes is a red,
White, and blue tabloid,
With pictures and box scores
And precious little news;
Letters home, a litany of longings;
Thoughts, more like wishes;
And neither news, nor letters, nor wishes
Can transport me beyond the gates
Of this secular monastery.

Just beyond are those we serve
And those we fear,
And the hell of it is,
We can't tell the difference.
We do our duty,
Killing and dying as infrequently as possible.
We drill and train,
Run and march and ride,
Hugging the misty hillsides,
Fording the pungent rivers,
Avoiding Happy Mountains
(The sacred burial mounds)
Where grass grows lush and full.
They farm rice and ginseng within the range fan,
So we ensure the impact area
Is at least reasonably clear of men
And women before we shoot.
We pay solatium to the families
Of those we kill.

Even as taps sounds, tanks rumble
Yards from where I sleep;
A medevac helicopter hovers
Over the aid station—and yet
There is no war.
But this Godforsaken place
Knows no peace,
And poses all the troubling questions
Without offering any hope of definitive answers
(As any self-respecting monastic order would),
Which makes this the worst
Or the best
Of all possible worlds.