

A GEOMETRY PROBLEM

When I was a boy Dad told me
about the planet Phaethon,
how it used to orbit between
Mars and Jupiter
before it collided
with something bigger
and exploded, sending
hot metal debris
in new directions and
random trajectories.

That's what I was thinking
about when the
Viet Cong opened fire
on us in the bamboo grove.
Their rounds hitting the bamboo
with a zip, crack, click, making the whistling
sound of a flute played with dry lips.

A shredded leaf falling, splintered
branches in flight like arrows
with indiscriminate destinations,
ears to the ground ducking asteroids.
Then, the fire ended. The enemy passed.

Leaving the trees bent
in odd ways, intersecting angles,
geometry problems
to be solved by future
generations of geometers,
bamboo growers,
or fathers and sons
walking together in wonder,
heads arching skyward
looking for the place where
war and peace
intersect.

TOMBSTONE BLUES

Mom insists on living
next to the graveyard
where my brother is buried
to lay fresh flowers
on him after dinner
and arrange little toys
on his stone, talk to him
like he's sitting here
at dinner waiting
for the meatloaf
to reach his side of the table.

It's been three years since
Khe Sanh, since they
brought him home
in the metal box
and the notification officers
came knocking on our door.
It's been two years
since the war ended,
and one year since Dad left,
a lifetime since I opened
the letter approving my
student deferment.

I can see the cemetery from
my bedroom window.
It used to bother me.
I used to have trouble sleeping,
but I've grown used to seeing
him sitting there in his dress uniform
looking up at my window,
tossing pebbles into the darkness,
his eyes scanning the void between us,
his face showing confusion and want
while I sit at the window with my guitar,
dodging pebbles and singing the
"Tombstone Blues."