

The Boot

by Victor Henry

What could he have been thinking
when those 155 mm Howitzer shells
came in on top of him?

How deep did he burrow
into the ground? Did he curse
while the breath was being sucked
from his lungs, did he scream
over and over again
for his artillery support
to stop the death drain.

Today we are gathered in a standdown.
Men have died because a captain
from Bravo Company miscalculated
a fire mission. Short rounds fell
short of their target.

Like those thousands of Vietnamese peasants
caught in a crossfire of instantaneous death
he must have felt what it was like to didi mau
in the face of fire.

Only a few of us have seen the boot.
Shattered broken bone, soft flesh,
coagulated blood, stump protruding
from its casing. Identifiable as a left foot.
I notice the leather toe is scuffed
beyond a spit shine. I see the olive drab
fabric worn through in spots, small holes
burrowing through into festering flesh.

The olive drab sock, burnt and frayed
around the edges, sticks to the tissue
like napalm.

The boot sits in front of me
like an icon, a symbol, a prop
in a one act play. I study it, touch it, pick it up,
talk to it. I knew the whole part.

I give in to war's insanity,
admit this war has reduced the living
and those other men,
those dead men, to body parts.