

Remains

By Karen Brown

On the outskirts of Tucson
there were no garbage men.
Instead, when it was time for a dump run,
you braced yourself
rifle-steeled yourself for a piece of work.

Hoisting the remains of last month's chicken,
the maggots brought the smell of war
jerked you to a halt,
brought you to your knees,
knocked you to the ground.

In Vietnam you hoisted the remains
of last month's victims,
and swore you'd never take another order.
I hadn't imagined
what might be a soldier's duty
in the remains of rice fields and burned out jungles.
I hadn't imagined what else might happen,
that getting out alive could be less than enough.
Imagined the war was over.
Done with.

What can remain of a marriage
when the smell of death crawls Orange in your skin
ever ready to erupt,
screams in the night
fist through the door,
sobs with the garbage,
- or the news?

In a marriage always more gear to carry
more questions to ask,
more understanding,
more help.
More than love.
Oh yes, we did "make love"
(a circle of rainbow lights tender on scars)

yet couldn't make "not war" (our flares only broke the sweet night and exposed the wounded ground)

I wanted to be a partner,
but can anyone ever be more than the buddy
who lived through hell with you,
who gave his life for you,
who you tried to save.
My rival hidden, with other secrets,
like the tortured buzzed scalp under your long hair,
the scars beneath your beard,
the panic behind a quiet man,
admired, but unknown.

The war continued long after the protestors stopped,
long after we,
fatigued,
stopped trying.

And every day new orders are given
and fresh recruits try to
make it stop,
still another Viet Nam
another war against peace,
against love
against every two of us,
abroad
and back home.