

## **sacrifice**

they returned

hearts caked with ride-paddy mud  
memories embedded with desert storms  
dreams etched with bloody hieroglyphs  
    of disembodied arms, feet, eyes, mouths  
marrow of their own bones  
    turned to dust, waiting for a ration of reason

some never left the homeland

bodies taut and tense like bees in unshaken hives ready to be jostled  
drudgery of duty: loading, unloading mislabeled pallets and barrels  
others the watchers in the desert, “ollie ollie oxen free” after the bright light  
    they all wanted to be free, so  
    they all waited and obeyed: readiness  
    see-saw balance to the rush of combat

shaped by service

some imprinted with a grandfather's story  
born to carry knapsack of tradition  
through next generation  
no questions

others caught in the cross-fire of

society's schismed ideals  
unsure of who or what or why  
tried to forget the dog tags rubbing  
against their era's hidden wounds

civilian world reentered, secret duty and wars stowed away

in the dark box of the soul,  
wrenched open when the unexpected implodes  
wresting the heart,  
quickenning the pace,  
stuffed back, hoping no one saw  
the terrorized face

they wear caps emblazoned with branches, wars, honors

proclamations on their carved and bent bodies,

like the thinning forests of their units  
tainted by undisclosed toxins  
waiting to be officially claimed so  
minds, hearts, lungs, livers rife with the diseases  
lurking in ambush long after soldiers  
faded into veterans gathered at VFWs and Legion Halls  
can be treated as casualties of war

sacrifice finally noted

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