

Today I Live

by Norman Belmore

I sit here alone
surrounded by my fellow soldiers And yet, alone.

I can feel their presence
Hear their boisterous laughter
But my thoughts lie not with them.
But, an eternity away with
the people and scenes that I love.

I am here
In the mountains, rice paddies, and jungles of this wretched land, I make my home.
As I look at myself, I see a man Not long ago a boy.
The war has changed me
I walk with the quick step of one alert.
For it must be so, to be relaxed is to be dead.

My body hears mute evidence of the harshness of the land.
Scratches, from a thousand and one thorns. Cuts, from razor-edged elephant grass.
The painful sores of Jungle rot, burn- and fester.
Leaches, cling and gorge themselves on my blood.
And when removed, the flow
of life-giving redness continues To be either wiped away unknowingly
on bushes and vines or
Left to dry, a dirty brown, like smears of mud.

Yet, I do not complain, it is all part of this life
To ignore it, is best.
The wounds will heal, leaving only the pinkness of scars
Fatigue and weariness melt away under the ministrations of soothing sleep.

clothes and boots soaked through by rain and sweat alike will dry

Tomorrow is another day and with it a continuance
A never-ending pattern
More sweat, more mud, more cuts, and scratches to be stoically endured.

Out there somewhere is my enemy. Like a phantom, he comes and goes.
Sometimes old men, sometimes young boys.
With him he brings pain and all too often, death.

I do not want to kill him and yet, I must
I am very greedy in love of life, even life like this.
So it is he who must pay the ultimate price.

I look down at the new still bodies of my enemies
My feelings, like so many caged birds,
Desire release but must remain captive.

Erratically, they flit about, often becoming entangled, they merge,
one leading to another in an unending. chain.

There is pride at having bested my foes in combat.
Relief, that it is he not I who felt the viselike clamp of Death upon his limbs.

Fear that it could have been
me who now lies there shattered and broken, no trace of the spark of life remaining.
sorrow that I have had to destroy life, even one that sought mine.
Pity, the last and very possibly the strongest, clutches at
my heart.
Even as I shout the paeans of the victor, I think of his

Forever for his return.
As I now silently turn away, I cry out a prayer in my mind that their grief will be bearable
if such a thing is possible.
Today, it was he
Tomorrow, perhaps I will feel the coldness of Death reach out his hand to me.

If however, the desire to live will judge whether or not
I do so, then I shall surely survive.

One day, I will feel the arms of my loved ones about me and
bask in the warmth of their tenderness.

Norman Belmore served in the jungles of Vietnam from 1967-1969 before being hospitalized by combat wounds. He received two Purple Hearts and a Bronze Star Medal. He passed away on August 22nd, 2021. This poem was found in his personal effects. It shines enormous light on the mindset of a soldier from the war.