

“Return to the Graveyard”

by Philip Bartram

Batangan Peninsula, Vietnam

I.

*“Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago”
—William Wordsworth*

In a state once cut from the backbone
Of the Confederacy, Curtis swings his
Aching body into the brown, worn, canvas
Seat of the junkyard Huey. He adjusts his
Bifocals and scans the cracked-out gauges,
And yards of stripped wires running
Pointlessly in all directions.

In the sulky light of mid-morning,
His puckered hands squeeze the
Controls as the ghostly engine spins up.
His feet and hands shift in concerted and
Precise actions as the Huey floats briefly,
Then gains attitude quickly on a
Northern azimuth over the laid-out rice
Paddies below, over the jungle, and along
The river where the mama-sans cache
Rifles in rice, and Charlie crawls from
The mud to unleash a fusillade of lead,
And then fades into the ground as did
The Clay People on Mars.

Curtis banks right, then hard left, as
Illusory bullets smash the tail boom,
Releasing into God’s air assorted Olive Drab
Flakes that fly away like moths in a storm.
But there is an intense and unfeigned
Pain in his chest, and his left arm hangs numb.
The Huey shakes violently, and he struggles

To keep the 'copter from striking the
Shadow that stalks beneath and along the
Ground.

He is a mere passenger now,
His face is cold, and the pain is worst.
His mind is like a broken gyroscope,
Unable to find the horizon, unable to correct
The Huey's slip and heading, and there is no
Solution involving leeches or Merlin's elixir.
His hoarse and confined cries are slurred,
The heart a faint murmur,
And from far-off places he hears
The long-departed troopers drill:

*Ain't no use in looking back,
Jody's got your Cadillac,
Am I right or wrong?
You're right!
Am I going strong?
You're right!
Sound off!
One, two
Sound off!
Three, four
Bring it on down!
One, two, three, four
One, two... three, four...*

II.

*"Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell,
When I embark"
—Alfred Lord Tennyson*

"Oh, it is you, Curtis," the old
Vietnamese women say. "Welcome
Back to *Mũi Ba Làng An*,
We have waited all these years."

After complimentary tea and sesame
Balls, he walks on the paths where
Pink and hairless faces of golden monkeys
Peek from the canopy, and along
The seashore as pristine light of afternoon
Breaks through his body into many layered
Colors on the sand. An old man picks
The monochord's iron string, and Curtis
Does perfect somersaults into the surf,
And plays Dragon-and-Snake with the
Village children.

In the aroma of burnt incense,
Curtis lies back on the sawn wood
Of a makeshift table. With great detail,
Peasant girls clip his gray hair and
Comb it back, rub a thin layer of balm
On his featured, just-shaven, face;
Bathe and massage his body.
Outside, the children sing in high
Nasal tones of missing moon and rain.

Curtis inhales a last, full, drag from a doobie,
Closes his eyes and smiles, having endured
The good and bad of all things.

Philip Bartram lives in Bel Air, Maryland. He writes occasionally and has been published in several literary magazines and internet blogs including: *Camel Saloon*, *Pyrokinecton*, *Stone Country*, and *Black Poppy Review*. He particularly enjoys the poetry of James Dickey. Mr. Bartram served in Vietnam (Jun 1968 thru Jun 1969) with the 5th Mechanized Infantry, 1/77 Armor (Quang Tri), and 3/16 Artillery attached to the 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry Regiment (Tam Ky) as a radio operator/forward observer.