

“For This”

by J.D. Isip

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*“When I was in the military,
they gave me a medal for killing two men,
and a discharge for loving one.”
—Tech Sgt. Leonard Matlovich*

Naked as my head after the feast of clippers
on the first day of basic,
a tabloid life, served up in yellow
legal pads, lay before the feeders.
Inside, razors rained down, pinning
papier-mâché butterflies drowned in blood—I trembled.
I thought of you, Sgt. Lenny, shining—
My hero, history was ours.

A guise, a rouse, mummy gauze wrapped
on our years like the star-spangled
stripes of Old Glory they allowed
on your coffin before mine.
Did Sgt. Lenny cry on the rough blue
jacket he'd never worn until
wet coffee ground earth slapped on him;
and could it cover the cold?

It was cold, the Celsius of alone,
and I would have froze, but, Lenny,
for this? Survival, Leonard—
they taught us that...
Sometimes the marches trail in the memory
though, and regret resumes
its prominent place, holding the flag
I still salute, with you.

To dig ditches knee-deep in Turkish soil
or inhale heat of South Korean
monsoon winds—Did you, too,

long for Vietnam?
That time of my manly duties and manly attire
wielding the metal barrel of my .50-cal
heavy like desire in a foreign land
where OSIs never closed

After I, too, shed my ribboned and ranked skin
I thought of you, Sgt. Lenny, shining
following your northern star, and I sleep
in the peace of one lover's arms.

“A discharge for loving one”—you ask?
Our injuries, our military pageant prosecutions—
high above—self-shame, discharge—
like bombs bursting in air, they fade away
In a kiss, freedom, emancipation
those hard-won spoils of wars—
a declaration of independence...
For this, Sgt. Lenny, for this.

J.D. Isip's full-length poetry collections include *Kissing the Wound* (Moon Tide Press, 2023) and *Pocketing Feathers* (Sadie Girl Press, 2015). His third collection, tentatively titled *I Wasn't Finished*, will be released by Moon Tide Press at the end of 2024 or early 2025. J.D. teaches at Collin College in Plano, Texas, where he lives with his dogs, Ivy and Bucky.