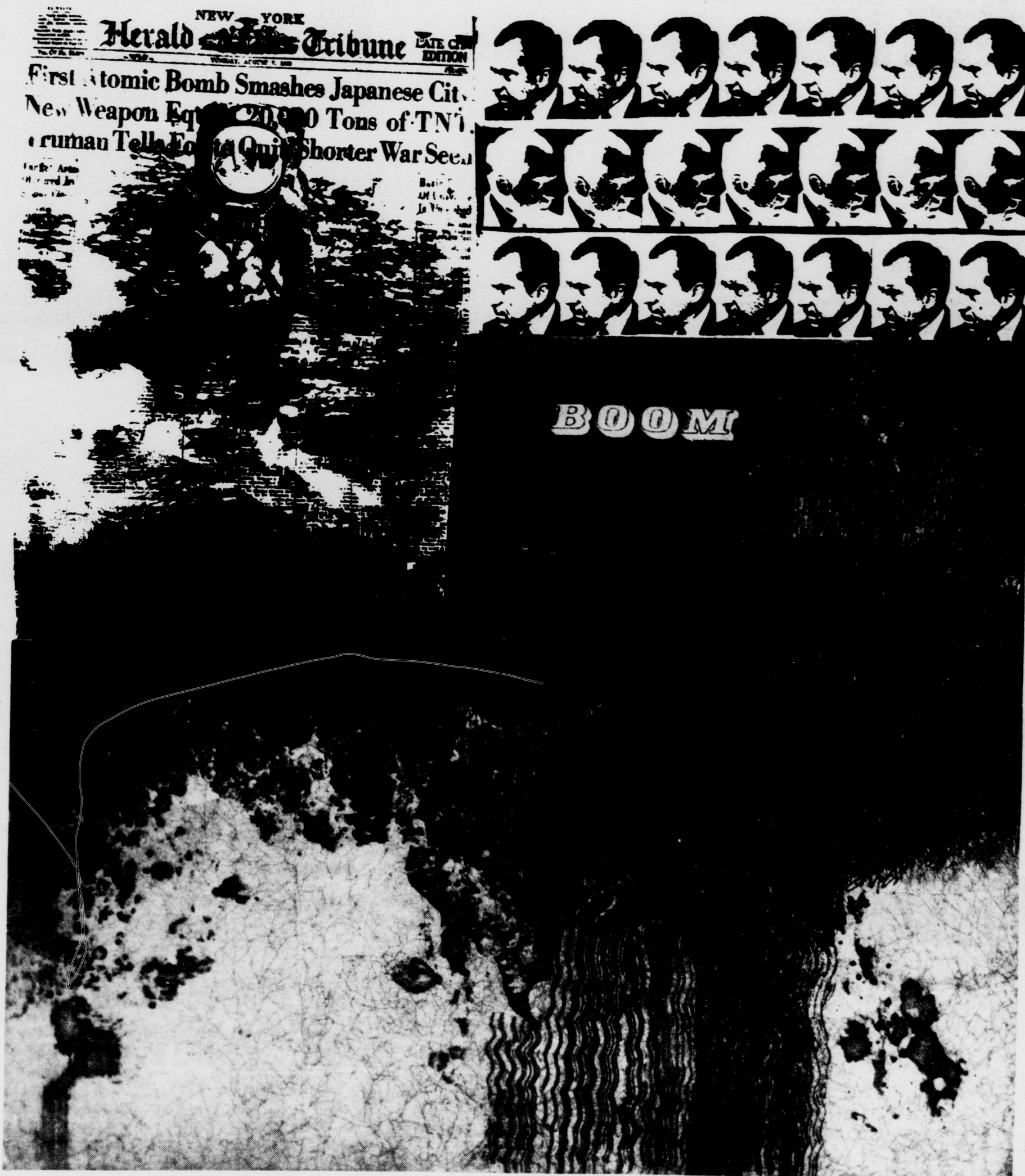


April 20, 1971

# TUESDAY

Throughout history men have given vent to the frustrations of war in numerous ways - from violent demonstrations to literature and art. The impact of the Indochina war has moved students to express personal reactions in a variety of forms. In light of mounting support for Saturday's march on Washington, Tuesday devotes its pages today to examples of this expression.



Mixed media/Anthony Bodenmiller



# Survival in War and Sanity in Peace

A personal narrative

by Michael Cain

## Part I — Pre-War 1966

I am an only child, 19 years old and living at home with my mother (56) and my dad (55). Today is special, since I have received a letter from President Johnson, requesting my presence in the armed forces. I don't really mind — anything is better than what I am doing now. I can see my picture now hanging beside Dad's and Uncle Lowell's. You have never seen two finer men in uniform. My uncle, like my dad was in World War II, but Uncle Lowell received the silver and bronze stars. He is the family war hero.

I probably could have stayed out of the draft if I had stayed in college, but I just wasn't ready for college. From the time I dropped out my folks have been worrying about me. They always wanted me to have the education they never had a chance to get. Now they are concerned that I may go to Vietnam. It's funny, we never used to be so concerned about Vietnam until now. The war always seemed a long way off. One thing is certain, if we don't stop them in Vietnam, they will be taking over all of Southeast Asia and eventually pose a world threat.

This narrative exemplifies my limited viewpoint before entering the Army. I expected to be drafted and, in fact, I was hoping for it. If it took any longer I would have joined the Marines. The question is why? I think the answer lies in the fact that I had no place else to turn. Like many young men I was bored and restless. It's the type of boredom and restlessness that the Army breeds upon, a mental state the Army can mold into a storehouse of latent violence. Of course, I received love from my parents and was taught to love in return. However, that does little to alter the facts that I and most all American youths were and still are socialized to accept death and violence, as the "American way." When a child is old enough to walk he is given toy machine guns to play with, toy soldiers to shoot down, pistols to draw and countless other toys of destruction. I, like most youngsters, spent many hours watching television where I witnessed interminable deaths — by — violence. Couple this indoctrination with an unquestioned sense of nationalism and the nation at war has the ideal fighting patriot.

On Aug. 19, 1966, I started basic training. For three months we played war games and were fed military dogma. Actually, I enjoyed this. For the first time my life had direction and a definite purpose. I was a squad leader and exempt from some of the military harassment, making my experience more conducive to further commitment. It was undoubtedly this background that prompted me to volunteer for Vietnam.

The next three months were spent in Ft. Polk, Louisiana, for advanced infantry training. My zeal was weakening somewhat under the arduous repetition of exercises demanded by the war machine. "I wanna go to Vietnam, I wanna kill the Viet Cong" rang in my ears after shouting it habitually for months. Before, what was out of sight was out of mind, but now I could see the time drawing near when somebody would actually be trying to kill me.

It is interesting to note that at that time I started attending church and praying quite regularly. When training was over and my leave had come to an end I had to face the difficult task of saying goodbye. First to see me off was my girlfriend who was an MSU student and is now my wife. We had been together for three years. Then finally I said goodbye to my mother at home instead of at the airport because I didn't want to see her or me cry, especially after I had volunteered to go. Dad and I drove to the airport

alone in silence. Upon reaching the terminal, we walked quietly to the departing ramp; his last words were "Son keep your head down," which I never forgot.

## Part II — The War 1967-68

I arrived in Vietnam on Feb. 4, 1967, about 2 a.m. at Ben Hoa airport. As I walked from the Braniff jet into the warm night air, the sky would intermittently light up from flares, and off in the distance the booming of huge artillery rounds echoed. Suddenly I felt anxious to be a part of it all. Goddamn, all I needed was my M16 and I was ready to go.

I stayed in a placement center for two days before being assigned to the 1st Cavalry, 2nd Battalion, 7th Brigade. The division headquarters was at Ake Khe, which is where I went to report for duty and receive my equipment. We were supposed to go to a three-day training school, but due to an immediate request to get us to the field our initiatory program was reduced to a few hours. The next morning we were flown to our field location. Little did I know then that about half of the replacements that I arrived with would never see home again.

Upon arrival at my field location, which was about 200 miles south of Ake Khe, I heard that my company was out on an operation. They returned the next day, and what I saw wasn't like the John Wayne movies. They looked more like pack mules than soldiers, smelled like goats and were damn happy to be back. There was a semi-rest period for the next three days before we went on a three-week search and destroy operation. I was somewhat disappointed; I had come 13,000 miles to fight and for four days all I did was wait.

During those three days the men ate decent food, took showers, swam in the ocean, sometimes got drunk, went to the nearby town of Phien Thiet and walked the smelly alleys with



AP wirephoto

the town prostitutes.

My initiation to the company wasn't flattering; I was assigned to the weapons squad as an ammunition bearer for the M60 machine gun. When the weapons sergeant looked at me, I swore he didn't see a six-foot two-inch tall, 180-pound youth but a laboring pack mule. I remember him saying, "Let me have the big one" (referring to me).

The morning we left I was given enough C rations to last for three days, a sleeping poncho, four canteens, 15 magazines of M16 rounds, an M16, two hand grenades, one smoke grenade and 400 rounds for the machine gunner as well. Two of the experienced men in the squad helped me get packed. I never thought I would make it over to the chopper pad (helicopter lift), let alone walk for miles in the blistering sun and then be able to fight.

I survived the first operation, although there were times when I felt getting slightly wounded would be less painful than the heat and burden of my equipment. Once the GI in front of me fainted, and I subconsciously thanked him because one step further and it would have been me. We encountered little enemy resistance; at the most it would be a 60-minute firefight that would sometimes take a GI's life.

One month after the first operation I was made a machine gunner. The life expectancy wasn't encouraging but with the position came some prestige, minor responsibility and loss of that blasted 400 rounds I had been carrying. Within the next three to four months I earned the unofficial reputation of being the best machine gunner in the battalion. At least my platoon thought so, which was good enough for me.

Everything was going smoothly. We had killed several Viet Cong and suffered few casualties. That was until April 4, 1967, my third month in country. We were on a typical operation when word came over the radio that we were to prepare for extraction and would be going to an



AP wirephoto



area where one company was pinned down by enemy fire. From the chopper I could see F-4 fighters bombing the enemy positions and chopper gunships firing rockets into the area. We landed a considerable distance away and grouped with the company that had been pinned down. As we waited for the bombing and shelling to stop, I remember a young lieutenant saying "When that shelling stops there is going to be nothing left but rolling heads." For some strange reason I didn't share his optimism. The bombing stopped, and we preceeded toward the bunkers on line, in the fashion that the English fought the Minutemen. There was no firing. We just walked closer slowly. Sergeant Byrd, our platoon leader, motioned for me to stop and cover him while he went to drop a grenade in a bunker. He pulled the pin, held his rifle up with one hand and fired into the bunker twice. While raising to drop the grenade, shots rang out and Sergeant Byrd crumpled. As he fell he took the live grenade and pulled it under him, where it exploded. He had saved my life and the men that were carrying my rounds.

From that point on everything was confusion. Shots rained on us and GIs fell. I tried to fire but my gun jammed. There was a machine gunner across from me who fired over the bunker where Sergeant Byrd was killed just as a hand appeared on the top. The hand jerked back. This probably again saved my life because the Cong must have heard me trying to fix my gun. I was easy prey. Then his gun jammed, and, as he raised the lid of his weapon to clear the bad round, enemy shots ripped into his head. Beside me my squad leader had taken a piece of shrapnel from a rocket just below his eye. Half his face was covered with blood as he shook his head saying "We got to get the hell out of here." Just then we all got up and ran like hell to the rear, leaving lie whatever dropped from overloaded packs.

This episode happened within a few minutes, but the battle continued for a couple of days until the enemy pulled out one night. It was incredible that the only thing we found was a few enemy bodies so shattered they could not be carried and a complex cement bunker system that could easily take a direct hit from an F-4. Our job now was to retrieve the dead bodies which left an overwhelmingly putrid smell. One of them was my best friend who had been with me from the training days in Louisiana. He concluded his Army term shattered on that meaningless hill. The war lost all its notions of heroism for me; it all became a horrible nightmare.

There were other times similar to April 4 but I will move on to the month of June, monsoon season and my fifth month in the country. By now the desire to fight had left me; in fact it had been gone for months, but I still had seven more months to go. I started to weigh my odds of getting injured or killed during the months I had left and the prospects seemed perilous. The only thing left to do was to think of ways of getting out of the field. My Rest and Recuperation leave was coming up this month so the two - week operation before I was to go didn't dampen my spirits. However, the rain did dampen my comfort. I was sopping wet for two straight weeks, day and night. Coming back from that one left me with a great appreciation for the luxury of being dry. But best of all I would be leaving for Bangkok where there was beer and girls and . . . I guess that's all I thought about then. However, my high expectations could not stop the feeling of nausea which turned into a fever the day before I was suppose to leave. I had contracted malaria. This didn't surprise me too much for I had not been taking my malaria pills for weeks. I just wished I caught it after R and R. The type of malaria I had meant 30 days in the hospital. To me this seemed better than the possibility of getting killed. The first week was tough but compared to being in the field, the last three seemed like heaven. I was sent to a convalescence center at Cam Ron Bay.

I returned to the company in July with an R and R to look forward to. However, things were no better in the field. My assistant gunner had taken over for me. I was praying they would let him stay with it and give me another job. But no such luck. His name was Tom Jones, age 19. He stayed with me as my assistant for five months until he was killed in September. We were on a daylight ambush. It was about 2 p.m. when Tom woke me up and pointed toward two North Vietnamese soldiers walking down the trail toward us. I signaled the rest of the company to keep down, but the soldiers noticed movement on our right flank and retreated off the trail into the thicket. Then our company commander executed the worse command he could have given. He wanted us to follow the enemy. We did and fell right into their ambush where Tom dropped at my feet from a bullet that went into

his eye and came out the top of his head. Another friend to my right took a bullet in the leg. As he crawled toward us, he saw Tom, who was beyond help and making loud moans as he struggled to breathe. My friend, seeing Tom, asked the question that soldiers have been asking for centuries, "Oh, my God - Why?"

In October my dream of R and R became a reality, this time in Tokyo. All of the GIs brought back wild stories and pictures; I was no exception. Coming back to the war after such an accommodating experience was worse than damnable.

I learned while in Vietnam that Uncle Sam gave nothing away. For the few dollars he spent in my training, blood was expected in return. The battalion came up with a bounty that awarded any GI a three - day in-country R and R for killing a Viet Cong. I collected twice, and each time I stretched my three days into five by devious measures.

In the closing months to come my stamina weakened. I never knew if my eyes would open to see the next morning. Then Thanksgiving Day came, and it was nearly the breaking point for me. A fine meal was prepared to be brought out to the landing zone where my company was securing an artillery company high on a hill, but we didn't see the meal until four days later. Word came from battalion headquarters that helicopter gunships were receiving heavy fire and we were to prepare for extraction. I sensed that this was a real bad one. I had serious doubts about my ability to hold up. By now every company in the battalion had entered the fight except us, and they were suffering heavy casualties. Our platoon leader told me to give up one of my machine gun crews to accompany half of our company into the fight. I asked for volunteers, and one of the gunners volunteered his team. They had only been in-country one month. The other half of the company remained until further orders and secured the artillery. I was one of those who stayed. The fear of not knowing when I was to go was one of my worst experiences in Vietnam. From the hill, the battle could be seen far off in the valley below. The radio kept me informed on what was happening. I could both see and hear

the slaughter going on in the valley below. Anticipating the order to join the rest haunted me. Sleep was impossible. Finally it ended. Only two of the crew of five I sent returned. As a whole, the battle was a cataclysmic loss. Although I remained safe on the hill, what I lost in fortitude was inconsolable.

After that incident, I decided I would do practically anything to keep from engaging in this absurd warfare. Three months remained on my tour and the desire to return home was immense. I devised a plan which eventually lead to a job driving a jeep and supervising details at a well - secured landing zone. The rest of my tour was spent away from the fighting proper. As for the rest of the company, during this time half were either injured or killed.

### Part III - Post War

I have been back from Vietnam three years. I am now 23 years old and a senior at MSU. The death and destruction that I have witnessed - of friends, of the many faceless soldiers that I never knew, the months of sub-human existence in the jungles and the empty moments of not knowing when it was my turn to die, have all shaped my present attitudes - toward war, toward peace, toward mankind. I now embrace pacifism and all its ramifications. Never again will I participate in any military action. Never will I teach my child how to shoot toy guns at toy soldiers.

My change in view was not solely the product of the war. At the time my hatred of fighting was a base reaction to fear and disgust. Attitude change takes time. It is extremely difficult for GIs to accept the fact that the hell they went through was nothing purposeful - that their friends died for reasons that now make little sense at all. Not until I was at MSU for some time did my convictions take their present form. However, today American society is having a difficult time repressing the absurdity of war, especially when young men like me eventually realize they were duped into a fight for "God and country" that turned out to be little more than a senseless slaughter.



AP wirephoto

Tuesday directors/Robert Sickels  
Denise McCourt



AN OPENING STATEMENT FOR THE PROSECUTION AT  
THE WAR CRIMES TRIAL OF RICHARD MILLHOUSE NIXON

(for lenny, bishop, gary, john, and bruce)

Gentlemen—

right out of Vietnam  
and hot  
a steaming mad laughing son of a bitch  
tensed when he phoned and now at my door  
joking  
"denny it's been two years and how are ya"

Gentlemen—

this boy has been dead for over a year  
and now you stand him at my door  
mud on his lips  
his scalp nervous  
the feet alternately rising  
and now you give me his eyes  
his eyes move with his words  
to the impulse of nerve and noise  
their dance traces lines on maps  
red lines that run off paper  
red lines into air where they focus and follow  
stop heavy at night listening for me

he talks quickly and in a whisper

you have taught him things  
which I have not imagined nor written  
dream things which lace his world

the delicate morning trajectory of the mortar  
the subtle certainty of the trip wire at night  
the warm damp and surprise of tunnels  
the pink spiral and pattern of shrapnel in flesh

these fill his mind  
and where he once dreamt of probabilities  
the matter is simplified  
down inside hard  
below the guts  
a deep longing for death  
survives

and the movements are geared now  
each gesture deftly to reaction  
the discipline of his world  
sits in tight knees on straight legs  
a simplicity of extension  
the laugh scraped across 4000 miles  
slowed  
to an easy bubble in mud  
fingers carry his hands beneath his thighs  
pinned restless  
no  
things ain't changed  
it's '68 and you're laughing  
hair down to your ass  
'bout grassers and classes  
that chick with the creamy hair  
and small breasts  
you know it  
and baby would love to get into

your smile is clipped  
your words flow thick down my face

I would rise now  
walk across the room  
and take your head in my arms  
look out the window  
and tell you it is late winter  
that the frosts are lighter now  
the days noticeably longer  
and that small green plants  
already sit silently  
waiting  
under the snow

