

**ROBERT BORDEN**

**Meat Dreams**

A poem of the Vietnam War

**1949**

*1949 was a good year  
for meat:*

*Marilyn Monroe  
posed naked on  
blood-colored velvet  
for calendar photos,*

*men would soon return  
in boxes from Korea,*

*ground beef was selling  
for 49 cents a pound,*

*and this poet  
was in the womb,  
dreaming  
of his own bloody birth*

**1969**

*1969 was a good year  
for meat:*

*Jim Morrison  
was exposing himself  
in concert,*

*ground beef was selling  
for 59 cents a pound,*

*men were returning  
in plastic bags*

*from Vietnam,*

*and this poet  
was in that war,  
dreaming  
of his own bloody death*

## **1. QUESTION**

In Chicago  
at the recruiting station  
the sergeant said  
to answer the question  
about our communist activities

One young man  
filling out the form asked  
if such a question  
didn't infringe on his  
First Amendment rights

Two marine sergeants  
pulled him from his chair  
and threw him against  
a wall,  
knocking his glasses  
off

They dragged him downstairs  
and questioned him  
all day long

## **2. PLATOON COMMANDER**

It was the birthday  
of the U.S. Marine Corps  
in boot camp

8 p.m./ the platoon commander  
calls us together  
with unusual solemnity

Each and every one of you  
has my respect, he said,  
for joining an organization  
in which you might

die  
die  
die

It was the one thing he said  
that I still remember

The platoon commander  
was a hero of the Vietnam War  
with a foot full of plastic bones  
where he was machine-gunned,  
a purple heart  
and a bronze star

Four months later  
he was in the newspapers  
again,  
the first body  
of nine expert swimmers  
from Quantico, Virginia,  
Marine Officer Training School,  
dragged from the Potomac,  
blue and cold  
like the river itself

The recording never made  
of his boot camp speech  
plays back  
on nights  
when I'm not standing guard

### **3. CAMP PENDLETON**

A white rabbit  
ripped open in demonstration

white fur  
peeled back over  
moist, pulsing  
meat  
still breathing through  
skin-stripped nostrils

shrill rabbit screams  
of instant  
insanity



## 6. GREETINGS

Each morning at six,  
radios started with  
*“Goooooooooooooooooooood morning,  
Vietnam!”*

a cheery, insane greeting  
to a day  
some would not live through,

a curious blend  
of comedy and horror,  
like a fighter bomber  
with a smile painted on it

## 7. WAITING

In the hold of a ship  
just before dawn  
the men sit in stunned silence  
waiting for  
    The Word

Out on the beach  
we can hear faint rifle fire  
and see smoke rising  
in blue-gray bursts

but it is quiet  
    on the ship  
too much like a movie  
in its twentieth re-run,  
overacted, too dramatic

How can I believe  
there's real death  
on that beach  
when I know a commercial  
is imminent?

Who's sponsoring this?  
Let's have a brief message  
of importance from  
some local dealer,  
let me hear someone say



and there are houses,  
made of cardboard and chicken wire,  
and there are children  
in the streets  
selling photographs  
of a beautiful young girl  
fucking a dog

At midnight  
on armed forces television  
a Vietnamese girl  
teaches three new words  
of the language  
to the American troops

### **10. IN THE JUNGLE**

In the jungle at daybreak  
I am just waking up  
to a slither against my side

A bamboo viper  
just passing through

### **11. TRUCK**

I step out of a tent  
where I have been drinking beer  
and listening to Jim Morrison  
singing

*The End,*

and turn to see a truck  
headed up the road to the hill  
explode

Next morning dawn  
lights up seven rifles  
topped with helmets,  
stirring in the wind

### **12. SEARCH**

A girl working in a field  
was approached by a patrol  
of American marines

who shot her water buffalo  
stripped her naked  
and fingered  
every opening of her body

looking for hidden weapons  
and thrills

### **13. WITH PENCIL**

I sit in a bunker  
covered with sandbags,  
safe from all danger

and with mathematics,  
with charts and maps and pins,  
and with radio, with paper  
and with pencil,

*I kill*

Men die from my penmanship

### **14. TYPHOON**

Near the coast of Vietnam  
a typhoon rolls in  
off the ocean,  
tents flattened and waving,  
belly on the ground  
like manta rays

I stand out in it  
soaked more completely  
than ever in my life,  
watching rats as big as dachshunds  
scurry through the whipping grass

*Days left in Vietnam: 283*

### **15. CRAMPS**

The monsoon season  
comes in autumn,  
falling rain to replace  
falling leaves

One night I sleep  
beneath a leak in a tent  
and wake up  
in a pool of cold water,  
shivering  
with stomach cramps

And like a girl spread open  
for her twentieth rapist,  
I watch it begin to rain

again

### **16. POEM**

A spiral of smoke in the air  
marks the collision  
of two helicopters

Twenty dead bodies  
burning in a rice paddy  
chopped by spinning blades

### **17. OFF**

A moment after a fire mission  
we are notified by radio  
that an artillery shell landed  
in the center of a platoon  
of South Vietnamese soldiers,  
killing 28 men

We check our guns  
and find one of them  
180 degrees  
off

### **18. YOU NEVER KNOW**

When it rains in Vietnam  
the foot-long centipedes  
go where it is dry  
    into boxes  
    into bunkers  
    into boots

You never know  
when you'll feel the bite  
shooting you up  
with a foot's worth  
of your last nightmare

## **19. CIGARETTE**

I hear shots  
popping and sparking  
in the jungle

The marine patrol comes in grinning  
carrying a North Vietnamese soldier  
they shot through the brain,  
his head exploded  
like a kernel of corn,  
whatever thoughts he had  
were left in the jungle

They put a lit cigarette  
between his limp fingers and said  
*"Show us your Lark pack!"*

He didn't laugh  
at their brief message of importance

## **20. BIRTHDAY**

Two men were sitting  
inside a helicopter  
on a quiet Sunday morning  
washing the tinted glass windshield

In Illinois, my friend  
was having a birthday,  
and I was thinking of him  
when I heard the whistle  
of the rocket at dawn

After the explosion  
came deep silence  
and when I got up from the dust,

I saw the burning helicopter  
with two indistinct forms

rocking  
like flaming monks  
in silent protest



"The Burning Helicopter" photo by Robert Borden.  
A rocket attack in Da Nang in November of 1968  
killed two men and injured several others.

## 21. REPRISE

Reading the KIA list  
feels like reading the phone book

so many names  
of so many strangers

until I read the name  
of someone I knew in boot camp,  
and I gasp, choking on it,  
cannot help hearing that voice  
from under the Potomac saying

Has my respect  
for joining an organization  
in which you will die

die  
die

Each and every one of you

## 22. TRACERS

There's a hard rain falling  
on the road up to Hill 65  
just past sundown

I am in the back of a troop truck  
trying to breathe  
through the sheets of water,  
too tired to care  
about the tracers  
streaming over the truck  
in red glares

I bow my head in the rain  
and try to sleep

### **23. TEMPLE**

In the deep jungle  
the truck passes a temple  
more beautiful than any  
I ever remember seeing,  
which I will see only once  
in my life  
as the truck goes by

Further up the mud road  
a Vietnamese girl  
watching the rain

As the truck lurches past  
she looks into my eyes  
for the only time  
in my life

without bitterness  
without sympathy  
without recognition

### **24. RIFLE NUMBER**

“What's your rifle number?”  
the sergeant asked.

I told him:  
“Seven, sixty-nine,  
double-O seven.”

“Don’t fuck around,” he said,  
“gimme your rifle number.”  
“I just did.”

He grabs the rifle  
from me and reads:  
“Seven, sixty-nine,  
double-O seven.”

*Days left in Vietnam: 99*

## **25. EPITAPH**

Malone, the truck driver,  
shot in the stomach  
on the day he was to go home  
died on his nineteenth birthday

## **26. CIVILIZATION**

I am in Da Nang  
stealing materials  
from the U.S. Navy

I step inside a building  
looking for a drink of water  
and find:

waxed tile floors  
electric clocks  
air conditioning  
water coolers  
suits and ties

*Oh God, where am I?*

I back out  
into the sun  
and shiver  
in the 114 degree heat

## **27. MESS DUTY**

The sergeant in charge of mess duty  
was proud that all the men  
hated him.



Marijuana dipped in opium oil  
makes Lucy in the sky with  
diamonds in one claw,  
arrows in the other,

more terrifying than the six  
North Vietnamese regiments  
they said were surrounding  
the hill somewhere, out there

*"I don't caaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaare!"*

screaming down  
with that familiar whistle  
and exploding  
beside a friend of mine  
inside the perimeter

At dawn I trudge up  
and find a crater  
deep as a well  
and find psychedelic bits  
of shattered brain  
smeared across the bunker wall

"One less nigger" says a man,  
beginning to laugh

and before that laugh comes out  
my rifle is locked and loaded  
and on the firing line, and I say  
"What was that again?"

He says nothing, amazed  
because I'm white,  
but not half as white  
as he is

### **30. WHISKY**

R&R in Honolulu,  
the Eden of the Pacific, they say,  
six days to forget the war  
and myself

I go to a night club  
looking for humanity,  
and they refuse me admittance  
for being too young  
to drink

I go back to my hotel room  
where I drink my own whisky,  
alone,  
until I fall asleep

Who's sponsoring  
this cruel dream,  
this lost child in Eden?

### **31. FIFTEEN MEN IN BLACK**

Just off Hill 55  
fifteen men in black  
carrying rifles  
run across a wide clearing  
toward a tree line

*They are the enemy*

I load my rifle,  
aim in,  
and do not fire

### **32. MEAT DREAMS**

*Days left in Vietnam: 0*  
It is my twentieth birthday

I have died  
          died  
                  died

I have died a thousand times  
without ever being part  
of a column total,  
I have turned on a spit  
between dawn and sunset  
like a sizzling piece  
of meat,  
dreaming of digestion



bleeding, lacerated dawns,  
I have been soaked in so many  
storms of proud hailstones  
big as mortars,  
I have thought to myself  
so many times  
that I was witnessing  
the twilight's last gleaming  
on those pockmarked hills,  
I have taken so many malaria pills,  
heard so many brief messages  
of impotence,  
been bought and sold  
over the counter of dead bodies

I am America's sacred cowboy  
riding off into the sunset  
after a job

well-done/

*Yippee-yi-o-K.I.A!*  
*Roll out the cannons*  
*and we'll have a blast!*

Lyndon Johnson,  
so far away from  
that Lodge meeting  
in Paris

From the jungle  
I watched them discuss  
not peace  
not even war,  
only the shape of the table  
collapsing  
beneath the weight  
of what everyone had a steak in

And then it was Richard Nixon  
brought to us by  
Peace with Honor,  
and anyone can see that POWER  
begins with P.O.W.

And now the proud bird  
with the golden tail is coming  
for to calley me home,

dragging me back  
over the date line

But I had a date,  
I had a real hot date  
with Vietnam,  
currently 108 degrees  
I couldn't break a date like that,  
the longest fuck I ever had,  
thirteen months long,  
a long and heavy  
plunging dream of meat

How much difference can there be  
between My Lai and My Lay  
when the Pentagon is a vagina,  
and the Washington Monument,  
a phallus?

I wonder when they do it?  
When is there a chance  
for those two aching organs  
to go at it in Washington, DC?  
Does everyone turn his back?  
How else could they produce  
so many misshapen children,  
so many recurring  
American Dreams?

*"Gooooooooooooooooooooooooodbye,  
Vietnam!"*

As the jet screams away  
from the Asian coast,  
slanting into the ocean black night,  
I realize from the cramps  
that I am in labor with the new  
American Dream,

kicking its way from the blood bath,  
clawing through the blind night,  
slashing with bayonet through the wall of meat  
that contains it,  
slashing through the red tape,  
through the copies in triplicate,  
through the jungle,

slashing through the presidency,  
slashing its way out of the womb-like shelter  
of America's dying dream

America,  
where any boy can grow up to be Burger King,  
America,  
where free stallions are ground into dog food,  
America,  
where the cash flow pumps its purple heart,  
America,  
where even the eagle is not safe from slaughter,  
that proud bird with the golden tail,  
plummeting from its blue sky perch,  
crying the death scream of America itself

And as I scream  
finally  
down  
onto that San Francisco runway,  
one-tenth the age of America itself,  
I carry with me the dust and the blood,  
the fear and the loathing,  
I carry with me the mincemeat carcass of my teenage self  
and a plastic bag containing the remains  
of the American Dream