

Roll Call

Every evening at the end of the Nightly News,
We see the grim roll call of service members
Whose deaths “have become official.”
Mute faces, names, ranks, and cities of residence
On a roll that only silence can call.

I wonder what they were before their deaths
Became “official”? Still alive and only waiting to die?
Unofficially dead? Documents waiting to be stamped?
Bits of data on a hard drive waiting
To be transferred to the “Official” file?

It’s all according to the rules, I’m sure,
Whatever rules they have for military ghosts.
But something is already there in the long black bags
On chilled slabs in the morgue.
Chunks of meat harvested from anonymous fields,
Pulled from twisted metal wreckage
Still smoldering and hot,
Found scattered in a town square,
Or sprawled on earthen floor in an empty room.

I search their former faces for a clue,
But they do not speak to me.

I search for the face
Of my twenty-one-year-old nephew,
My sister’s oldest son.
It isn’t there tonight,
So is safe for another day
In the yellowed plastic slip
In my worn out leather wallet
Stitched at the corners with fishing line.
May he live on there in peace

As long as I draw breath
Officially.

-Steven Beauchamp