

CATHY BARBER

Agent Orange

"...on Thursday the United States... will begin cleaning up dioxin from Agent Orange that was stored at the former military base, now part of Da Nang's airport."

New York Times, 8/9/12

*But I just found out this morning, the Doctor told me so,
They killed me in Vietnam and I didn't even know.*

Kate Wolf

Twenty million...the number of gallons
our military sprayed on our former enemy.
But not only our enemy, of course,
we were dumping from planes
and helicopters
and couldn't aim as though
we had a can of Roundup
to point at an errant dandelion
rising through a crack in the driveway.

We carpeted, we spread, like
a generous watering of the lawn
on the forests that might hold
Viet Cong. On the villages
that might hold Viet Cong.
On our soldiers searching
for the Viet Cong.
We stockpiled our supply
and it settled in,
made a home.

Dioxin plays hide and seek now.
It finds such clever places
to lie quietly in wait:
in the fish of the lakes and ponds,
in the gardens of the villages near Da Nang,
on the plates and in the drinking glasses
of the Vietnamese.
It creeps in the blood,
tiptoes barefoot so as not to
give away its hiding places.

Cancer next door,
now a lost baby across the street.

Camouflage

Consider the leaf-litter toad.
He poses as a leaf: freeze-
framed as dropped foliage. A slew
of miscues re-direct your sight:
ridged back that mimics a vein,
legs tucked into leafy seams,

ragged, to seem
more leaf. The jutting-toed
feet become rigid: you'd swear vervain
sprouts on the imposter leaf. A frieze
of edges, spines and curves. Sight,
both predator's and prey's, elides the mottled slough.

If his wait was fruitful, he slew
countless insects; captured and gulped by what seems
to them a devilish leaf. Our sight,
when purposed, will divine the statuesque toad.
Suddenly our eye frees
him, like a leopard stepping from the dark. Vain,

we think he's stark as a weather vane
on a clear day, despite the decomposing slough
in which he nearly disappears. If it frees
enough, the mind will discern varieties. It seems
gray, brown, and russet leaves are all one species of toad.
At the outset, I cited

this amphibian's stellar elusion from sight
and followed the vein,
the subject, of camouflage, but the leaf-litter toad
is not alone in concealment. A slew
of fauna hide all day. It seems
I often become invisible these days, free

to lurk and pass unnoticed, a sort of freeze
tag with unsuspecting strangers. Some days my sight
is keen, my body still, a seam-

less blend with wall behind. In this vein,
I achieve a certain anonymity while a slew
of people chat and pass, heel to toe,

unaware I note who's vain or kind. Posing frees
me to watch my quarry, like a sloop sighting a school of unsuspecting fish.
It seems I'm not playing possum, I'm playing toad.

Cathy Barber's poetry has been published recently in *Literary Mama*, *SLAB*, and *San Diego Poetry Annual* and is forthcoming in *Sweet's anthology*. She is a 2013 graduate of the Vermont College of Fine Arts MFA in Writing program. A past president of the board of California Poets in the Schools and a current member of the advisory board, Ms. Barber teaches in classrooms in San Mateo County. She also writes a humor and musings blog: Is It Just Me. isitjustme-cathy.blogspot.com/