

Gunships

Guilt

for not getting there soon enough to save some
for having to leave station too soon and losing more
for killing so many
for not killing more of them to save more of us
for living while they all died
for leaving comrades behind without cover, while I went
home
for forgetting the names of my friends who died
for turning away from those who meant so much to me
in the Nam—
after our return—because they knew me too well.

Only now am I able to begin to mourn
for those I couldn't cover
for my enemy, whom I killed and whom I now can only
think of as other men
for my friends lost to my isolation.

We were boys revelling in the terrible power of our
gunships.

Alive and living by our wits and our skills.

Knit close in our dependency yet each alone with his
fears and unable to show them to anyone—
not even his wingman.

Not able to ask for help and support from anyone—not
even his wingman.

Alone.

After returning home, forced by a country that didn't
care, to put all these things away, to collect interest.
So that now, when debts must finally be paid, the price
is so very dear.

Costing friends, a wife and years without living fully—
and doing it without the cover of a wingman.

Alone.

Only now, 15 years later, I'm learning that I have
feelings.

The first to come are hurt for all the losses, past and
present, and fear that people will turn away in horror
and disgust if they see the real me, without all my
defenses in place—
a killer without *absolution*.

I don't wish to forget. I only want to be rid of the guilt
and be comfortable with the memories—bad and
good.

By starting to mourn, I start down a path that will allow
me to forgive myself and make it unimportant that
this country failed to bring its soldiers home.

I will bring myself home.

Not alone, but with the help of others who were there—
we'll bring each other home.

Dave Paduan