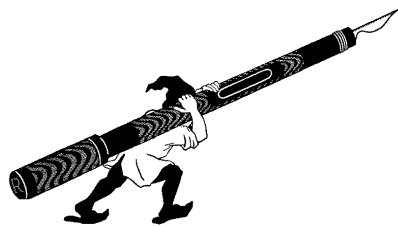


Back Home

by Larry Greco Harris

the Poet's Pen



The ex-Marine, 23,
sits at a machine
in the weight room
working on "his guns"

even though he knows
muscles won't matter here
so much.

Back from Iraq a month ago,
he pauses between reps,
intent on retaining the sculpt
of the body he has brought back with him
from the war: *standard issue*
lean trunk,
cut & ready,
a gift from the older men
whom the boy grew willing
to die for...but didn't,
and now won't
because he is home.

Grunting into the pain of the machine,
the sweat that begins to roll
down his neck and back
reminds him of such steel perspiration
as dripped like honor

down his face over there...down
the face of every soldier
with whom he walked, shoulder to shoulder
along the *car-bombed cruises* of Baghdad.

That sweat on their faces
was how his buddies showed
that they had his back...
... *or at least his arm*
... *or a leg or some fingers ...*
should the *snake-eyed* dice
of a car bomb appear,
approach,
(*at first quietly, innocently*)
closing in on where his feet stood (had to stand)
in the road...
... and detonate.

Back home at the gym tonight
releasing his final rep, the breath
explodes from his lungs, and his body
wilts, melting over the top
of the machine.
Heaving there, he knows what he is:
meat on steel.

Stopping now, purged, he looks up at the clock;
wants to get home, get to bed;
needs his sleep for tomorrow
when he will rise, cover his bronze muscles
in soft, civilian clothing,
and walk the 13 blocks
through the center of his home town
toward his very first job interview
since leaving the guys and that other job
he knew how to do
so well
over there.

And, oh yes, there will be ***fear*** in his walk
tomorrow—
fear about the interview;
about that possibility
of being *unwanted*
when *unarmed*.

But it won't be ***that*** fear
that will cause his pulse to race,
his muscles to flinch
and his eyes to wince and dart
along the route of his path
through this peaceful American town
tomorrow...

it will be ...(*in the absence of brothers,*
*and as it is, nightly, in ***the dream****):

the cars—*from around every corner*—
the cars
...appearing

...approaching

...getting closer.



Unsterile Environment

by Patricia Wellingham-Jones

Around the globe the wind swirls
in soft gusts and monsoons carrying particles
of the quick and the dead
to our lungs, into our cells,
making us all, as long as we live-
and thereafter -part of each other.

We all breathe -no exceptions- recycled air:
nomad's sweat swept on a desert wind, bull elks
panting in the clash of rut, the last squawk
of a chicken caught in owl's talons, a sick
old man's groan. And star jasmine wafting,
on a summer night, pine branches broken under snow,
a packed-diapered baby's howl of rage.

I smile at the new mother
who wraps her infant against the warm breeze,
double-boils his bottles of water,
wards off big family kisses,
as if the baby weren't already
inhaling the second-hand breath of the world.

