

THE ROOT CANAL

The lower right molar explodes like
a slow motion fragmentation grenade
and when it hurts so bad I can't sleep all night
I try to get a dentist at Third Field Hospital
but they won't touch an American civilian,
just corrupt Vietnamese officials,
so I have to get drilled on the economy.
I find a lady Vietnamese dentist
in Cholon who says she got her degree at USC
and she talks better English than
the best of the tea bar girls,
but degrees are only as far
as the nearest print shop.

She is only a 70-pound Vietnamese woman,
soaking wet with a drill in each hand.
How could she be a threat to a 180 pounds
of supremely conditioned American male?
She says the tooth has to have
a root canal and a crown
and that she can do that
and that's the good news.

"Okay," I groan, taking many oaths
about never taking another drink of Coca-Cola,
"what's the bad news?"

"There is no novocaine in Vietnam right now."

Now I know there is a god.
She is a salacious idiot,
a malicious troglodyte.
She is not an American
and she wakes up every morning
and wonders, "Just what can I do
today to fuck up this guy Andrews?"

I sink back into the antique dentist rack,
resigned to my shit-soaked karma.

"Okay," I whisper, "do it."
The drills are old and clatter like jack hammers
and she grinds down into the impacted tooth
like a Texan capitalist sniffing for oil.
The sweat pops out of my forehead,
so many beads on a waxed bathtub,
and I go red all over trying not to scream
and my fingers begin to have serious intentions
about crushing the steel arm rest
and then she stops, packs the cavern
with wads of cotton and says,
"Three days you come back,
less pain and nerve more dead.
You drink whiskey maybe, easier for you."

"Thanks," I mutter, prying
each finger loose one at a time,
"I don't drink," and I crawl outside
to the Honda car and pay off the kid
who acts as my hired gun, guaranteeing
not to steal the car while
I listen to the whir of drill
and pray for an easy death.

Three days later the throbbing air-strike
in my skull is less than megatonnage
and she pulls the cotton and says,
"This will hurt, just very short time,"
and my fingers find their prints
on the steel arm rest and grip.
She has a very tiny wood awl,
just like the one I use for boring holes
in a door for a knob, only
it's just bigger than a toothpick
and she plunges it down into the tooth
already detonated with cold water,
finds the meat of the nerve
and screws it in while my vision
goes to black with stars, twists and yanks
and I am just rounding Pluto on the way
for a little chat with god
when she jerks out a little piece of pink meat
that only moments ago was my nerve
and is probably even now screaming
its own message to a brain
that is no longer taking calls
and just when I know that life has
moments of nearly terminal pain
it stops and I sag back into the chair
whimpering slightly, "shoot me,
don't send me home like this."

She packs the tooth again and tells me
with great compassion, "Next time easier for you,"
and right then I know she is telling
me the good lie, and that she is VC.
She is making a few bucks and some novacaine
to send out to the tunnels in Cu Chi
for some guy who has to get his leg
sawed off with a hit of rice wine
and maybe a hit of local anesthetic.

I mop off the sweat, stagger out
to the VC kid waiting for his cut
and three days later I'm back
because life is simply filled
to the brim with those tiny mirages of choice
that are never really there
and we do it all over again
only this time deeper, going for

the root of that nerve that never
hurt another living thing
and she most certainly lied
because this time the pain
achieves a kaleidoscope of bursting
colors right behind my eyeballs
and she whispers the way a lover
does after a bad night, "Next time
last time, not so much pain,"
and I love her for the lie
and pay off the kid whose smile
is free of dental worry
and whose belly could eat the world.

But this time she told me true
and after some average pain
of super human intensity
she makes the mold and one week later
I am in the chair with my fingers
pressed into their individual dents
and the only pain is the dry, cold
air blowing out the canyon
that used to be my tooth
and the beautiful gold crown
gets hammered in place.
She steps back from the strapado,
smiles at her work and me and says, "Finì.
You brave man, Mr. Michael,"
and for that moment we know we are
bonded forever, like lovers,
in the web of pain that sews us all
into the same quilt
and I pry up my fingers
and I smile back as I pay her in green dollars.
It's the least I can do
for that guy in the tunnels.
I give up Coca-Cola for iced tea
and the kid takes home his final payment.

BUYING BALLOONS — November 27, 1970

It's Flo's birthday and the afternoon monsoon
has blown past. It leaves a bit of cool
and treacherous mud puddles on Hoang Dieu.
I am walking to Hasty Tasty,
across Cach Mang to get us dinner,
the best elephant hamburgers made
in this dandy little war.
I round the corner by the Saigon Milk Bar
where the whores are singing
along with 'Hey Jude'
and a half block from #14, home sweet villa,