

THE EYES OF KOREA

I wanted to escape
the eyes of POWs
hunkered down
resting from filling sandbags
staring quiet hate at me.
I was afraid, dismayed
shakily indignant
what had I done to them?

The old man's eyes
told me nothing
as he stood under his huge
A-frame load of sticks
waiting for me to decide
if he was enemy or not.
Did he care? I couldn't tell.

The smiling prostitute's
wrinkles overran her face
without touching the eyes.

Contempt, brutality
hard-cored the
National Police Lieutenant's
otherwise artless eyes.
He liked our trucks
hated our drivers
pursued his graft in secret.
He gave me a big, big smile
after shooting his own
sleeping guard.

The eyes over the prisoner's
split, swollen cheekbones
flashed helpless rage
with each impact
of the Police Lieutenant's
gloved and weighted hand;
stoically dulled
at the questions in between
closed altogether
when he passed out.

A young soldier
killed his first enemy
then talked too much,
eyes convulsing
as fear and triumph
relief and shame
took turns battering his future.

The sergeant's eyes were tired
when he told him,
"The choice wasn't yours.
Forget it."

Another soldier's eyes looked within
at specters unimaginable
as he tried to tear away his face
from shame, just shame.
My arms tired
holding his down all night
compassion stretched
from talking reason
to the unheeding ears,

of a casualty
who would receive no Purple Heart.

Two boys frozen together
in each other's arms.
I couldn't see the eyes
I knew were in there
looking at their last dreams.

One boy,
hands on stolen wood
to build his hut,
stood wide-eyed, paralyzed
trembling until half way through
the heated C-ration.
Then he smiled
all the way up to his eyes.

The farmer's eyes,
humbly shadowed
under downcast brow,
were warmly grateful
shaming us who could only bring
money and things to support
his compassion for orphaned children.

I wanted his eyes to find mine.

Wilson Powell -- 11/16/93