

CALLIGRAPHY

Hoping that characters hold true,
for the final class
the master assigns just two words:
war and peace.

In light of tradition,
he examines every stroke,
satisfied our work on war
has nowhere else to turn,

but peace is another story,
looking too much like language
until the Vietnam vet,
a quiet mechanic

who still walks point
through the jungle of sleep,
leads the group outside
with his word on a ricepaper kite

and lets December wind carry it
across the empty sky.

Barry Sternlieb 2003

THREAD

You say it was summer,
1948, in the big white
farmhouse, a memory
clear as the footsteps
of your mother and aunt
carrying their dead mother
to the kitchen, when all
that seemed to matter
was a closer look
at the breathless body
naked on the table.

You saw the sewing basket,
bucket, and sponges, but
your mother moved quickly,
grazed your dark hair
with a single kiss and said,
“We should get grandma ready,”
then led you outside
closing the door.

So many years later,
I can see by those words
the way to love,
stitched, like our histories,
into the world.

Barry Sternlieb 2002

TEA MASTER

(16th Century Japan)

Even light, in humility, bows
to reach his garden through maple,
cherry, and fern. Clay-fed channels
among islands of flagstone
embroider the ritual path
that his son has twice swept clean today
so each dead leaf set upon it
dignifies the plan.

At a granite, moss-lined well
whose water echoes dark ballets of green,
the guests calmly kneel and wash
desire from their thoughts,
then enter the teahouse
where charcoal evolves into ash
below the master's iron urn.

All minds now root in their awareness,
flourish and bear seed
like the ripped eyelids of the tea father,
Bodhidharma, who found sleep a threat
to his nine year devotion
watching one stone wall refine him
toward Buddha. Each lid awakened,
an inexhaustible plant, whose power
steeped in peace
can be drawn from this porcelain bowl
then passed around a circle
until beauty greets the master
with need for use.

Order is accomplished.

And hours later, the ceremony done,
he sits alone contemplating silence
in the satisfied garden of himself.

Barry Sternlieb 2001