

## Buddy

By Stephen Mead

I remember everything:  
The curve of your palms, the shoulders  
Expanse, the compass of my chin  
Tracing custom army soap scents  
Amid duffel bag wool...

Lights on, a scuffling...  
I leapt, scared rabbit, white tail  
Through loose window of rain...  
Nobody saw whom, not even the sergeant,  
A cinder block over...

For this you got Hard Labor, 15 months,  
Shame to the family name, a dishonorable  
brand. They figured you'd name names, break  
Under pressure, your temperament, nervous,  
Not a soldier, but a fairy...

“Son, have a cigarette. Make it easy on  
yourself.”  
Easy. Son. Across the seas Nazis gassed Jews  
& we  
Bombed Japs. From prison you wrote, said the  
fellas  
Were nice. I pictured knuckles, submission,  
Then gentleness covert. You were of use, a  
pro  
In the jungle of Good Behavior, its one rule  
unwritten...

Today, on the radio, some Vet telling of his  
near-death

Experience: shell fire, blacking out, his  
astral soul hovering...

Next: flowers, a tunnel, & kind,  
intelligent light encompassing  
Pain at the end...

Here, in the kitchen, Beethoven's Last  
Symphony.

Outside, a snake-stretching cat, humidity, a  
sponge

On asphalt, blazing, our neighbor's new  
sprinkler

Watering their patch of green, its  
multi-spout streams

Suggesting the shell Venus rode...

I have your letters in a basket, private  
guilt, secret rage.

Some disease the system gave you riddled all  
else.

Buddy, is there really the light that veteran  
talked about?