

New Poetry from Scott Janssen: “Bottle Tree”



VIETNAM DID I / *image by Amalie Flynn*

On my first visit I asked
A stock question about
Whether you'd been in the military.

Marines, nineteen sixty-six, you said,
A hint of menace in your eyes.
I never talk about it.

On my way out the door

I asked your wife about a
Tree in the front yard,

Its branches capped with
Blue and green and pink
Bottles made of glass.

It's a bottle tree, she said.
Pointing at a cobalt blue bottle
Glinting with sunlight,

She told me it had
Special power to lure in
Ghosts and lurking spirits.

They get trapped in there, she said.
Then sunlight burns them up
So they can't haunt us anymore.

Eight months later
You could no longer walk.
I rolled your wheelchair

Onto the warbled porch
Where we sat and talked
About how rough life is.

I never told you about
Vietnam, did I? You whispered.
I shook my head.

As you spoke,
Your eyes averted,
I looked at that cobalt blue bottle

And imagined it slowly filling
With blood and shrieks
And grief and the sound of

Rotor blades and the smell

Of burning flesh and the
Taste of splattered gore

And the sensation of
Adrenaline pulsing and
Memories of home and

Buddies who were killed
And of fear and rage and
betrayal and weeping

That lodge in your throat
Before you swallow
It all down

Into your belly.
Don't ever tell anyone
About this, you said,

Your hands trembling,
Jaw shivering.
I asked if there was

Anything else.
You started to say something
But stopped yourself.

No, you said.