

Vietnam Surgeon

Every Christmas I'm surrounded by
a thousand pendulous ornaments
galvanizing the glow of another
Only to return to rice paddies& kerosene fumes
to find my Grandpa—where he always is
&also other places he won't or cannot name
rested in a backdrop of incandescent green

I ask him for the story about triaging soldiers
in D'nang he can't recall so he tells me
about fixing mitral stenosis in the locals,
mimes sticking a finger through the valve
to make space, sewing up the edges
like cinching a purse string, shrugs
life was as malleable as a heart in two hands,
which is to say it took to shape easy as red wrapping
or blood splashing on sandals, something to wade through
when the pressure wouldn't rise& feeling in the dark
for leaky wounds felt like plugging holes in the hull
of a sinking ship and was never enough
like the cap-full of tequila from Father Perez
with plenty of holy water to drown us all
even the boy who survived
because living was the consolation prize

The story was a riddle. If there isn't enough
units of blood or time to save everyone...&I know
if he remembers anything at all, it's what he chose