

Pleiku Jacket

by Jane Hammons

I did not know that your father had died in Vietnam. Or that mine would.

I was not a hippie like you said. I just didn't want to be a cheerleader anymore that summer I grew small. Whittling away at myself, eating nothing but sunflower seeds and drinking Tab. I didn't know how to grow up. I was afraid I wanted to die.

You were big. Two-a-days that summer and still your belly hung over the waistband of your jeans. It was okay for you to be fat. You were Most Valuable Player, a blocker or something.

All year I had cheered you on.

I did not know the jacket had been your father's. I did know that you loved it; you wore it every day.

I was not asking for it like you said. I was not flirting. I was scared. That's why I giggled.

I did not want to go out with you, be your girlfriend, fuck you.

What I wanted was your hands off of me. So I threw your jacket into the water. I thought you would jump in after it. Then I would run away.

The pool was filled with girls their toenails painted rose, coral, ruby red—bits of treasure—flickering in aquamarine and boys with milky white shoulders, arms brown like seared meat from the bicep down. Everyone playing a splash dunk tease until they scuttled to the side and watched.

My bones breaking when you tackled me. Your jacket sinking like a wounded manta ray. Pleiku Da Nang Saigon in gold letters on black satin. Old Glory a small rectangle stitched to the map of that dying beast.

I still dream I died that day. And you were killed for hurting me. Our flag-draped coffins float to the surface of an uncharted sea and we appear together on the cover of Life Magazine.

All those years passed, but you won't look at me when I'm towed into your body shop the only one in town open all day all night 24

hours the coffee burns on the hot plate free to all who sit in the hard plastic chairs spooning powdered creamer into waxy cups listening to the whirr of impact guns tightening lug nuts, smelling the lube of the job you're doing and the cocoa butter sun tan oil chlorine of the summer your jacket drowned.

I would say I'm sorry if I thought you would say it, too.

