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Knowing

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KNOWING

MARILYN M. McMAHON

("Recent research indicates
Dioxin is the most potent
toxin ever studied." ...
news report, September, 1987)

I watched the helicopters
flying slowly north and south
along the DaNang river valley,
trailing a grey mist
which scattered the sun
in murky rainbows.
I never wondered if I knew
all I ought to know
about what they were doing.

I knew that it was called
defoliation,
that the spray would destroy
the hiding places of snipers
and ambushing guerrillas.
I did not know to ask:
at what price?

Every evening,
the sunset choppers arrived
filled with soldiers burning
from jungle fevers:
malaria, dengue, dysentery.
We took them directly
to the cooling showers,
stripped their wet
dirt encrusted uniforms
as we lowered their temperatures
and prepared them for bed.
I did not ask where they had been,
whether they or the uniforms I held
had been caught in the mist,
whether defoliation
had saved their lives.
I did not know to ask.

I knew part of the price
when nine other women
who had watched the helicopters
and seen the mist
talked of their children:
Jason's heart defects, and
Amy's and Rachel's and Timothy's.
Mary's eye problems.
The multiple operations
to make and repair digestive organs
for John and Kathleen and little John.
How lucky they felt
when one child was born healthy
whole.
How they grieved
about the miscarriages
one, two, three, even seven.
Their pain, their helplessness,
their rage when
Marianne died of leukemia at 2,
and Michelle died of cancer at 2 1/2.
Their fear of what might yet happen.

I knew more
when I watched my parents
celebrate their fortieth
wedding anniversary,
four children, three grandchildren
sitting in the pews.
I knew what I would never know,
what the poisons and my fears
have removed forever from my knowing.
The conceiving, the carrying of a child,
the stretching of my womb, my breasts.
The pain of labor.
The bringing forth from my body a new life.

I choose not to know
if my eggs are
misshapen and withered
as the trees along the river.
If snipers are hidden
in the coils of my DNA.