Anne Shelby
Appalachian Studies
HAPPY BIRTHDAY, CAPTAIN AMERICA

— to a Vietnam vet on his fortieth birthday

For your twenty-second, I made a cake:
Waldorf Astoria, red velvet with white icing,
topped with a postage-stamp-sized flag —
Old Glory, stapled to a toothpick —
and my best blue-icing cake-top script:

Happy Birthday Captain America

You sat cross-legged on the rug,
hugging your present to your chest,
a thirty-dollar Buddha, painted gold,
and rocked back and forth
to the stereo’s heartbeat:

“Bad Moon Rising,” “Kosmic Blues”

Six months back in the world,
you’d come home
with a kilo of good grass, some acid
wrapped in tin foil, black pajamas,
far too small, and a story you could not tell.

In their backyard in Charleston,
your parents dug a pit,
welcomed you home with barbeques.

The air hangs thick
in South Carolina in summer,
thick with the breath of slaves. They lurk
behind the lattice work, sigh in Spanish moss.
That summer there were newer ghosts, boys
in polished loafers and button-down collar shirts,
who’d slipped out the door of the gym
for bourbon at high school dances,
found the ways of love
in backseats on county roads.
You’d seen them
in pieces,
blood on sunlit ground.

Now when you phone, we roll our eyes.
It’s just that you let so many
horrors in the house.
You’ve married again,
lost your southern accent,
got a job on the railroad,
working the night train
through Ohio cornfields — Louisville
to Cincinnati, Pittsburg
to Detroit — just once in a while now
flashing back
to body bags
at DaNang —
Dutch Baxter
from West Virginia
squatting on his heels
rolling a joint
that last afternoon
at DucLap —
IN-coming
and the sky lit up
like the goddamn Battery
on the Fourth of July
IN MY COUNTRY

— conversations in the language lab

To come here is very hard.
I miss my family.
My English is not good.
I remember birds
in the garden of my father.
Here you do not have such birds as those.
And with my brothers to ride bicycles
in the evening beside the river.

In my country is trouble,
much poverty.
In the cities, a few are rich —
the cars, big house,
very much money.
But others do not have.
In the countryside, in the villages,
are poor. The people have a little food.
There is no work for the men.
The land does not produce.
Maybe the school
is far. Many cannot read.
There is sickness, few doctors,
and always the government
in tumult. The people are confused.
Soldiers come to the villages.
The people are afraid.
Here, in U.S.A.,
the people are laughing,
wanting fun.
They do not know
this thing —
the world is a house
made of dirt,
wood and stone.
Many rooms
and many people live in.
Your room here
so big
but the windows
very small.