

## Denise Pendleton – Two Poems

### Painting the Room

We began with steam, pressing its machine against the walls. And after forty years of holding, the paper let go. We scrubbed the walls down to their true brown and ugly selves, then painted them in layers of white. We climbed one ladder often and often it swayed. *If I fell, I told you, if I couldn't move again, you would have to leave me.* As you rolled and I outlined all the edges we said what if this was our house and as we painted the room became our room. We grew quiet in that space for a long time. It took much longer than we had thought to make one room truly white, and by the end we found so much to say again that it grew dark for a third time in our painting. But the walls, having become our world, gave us light.

### So Much Underneath

*"Most of you....do not know how hard it is to survive."*

Le Ly Hayslip

I.

I see my mother hand supplies down into hands that reach up under her bed. I count how many soldiers disappear beneath our crockpot. I'm old enough soon to stand guard in the heavy dawn mist, and I fasten my eyes on the jungle beyond the rice field, never forgetting how terror begins in the eyes and hands of soldiers then unfurls itself into the forest and fields, crossing our yard on its way to the village.

Outside our door we dig bunkers that zigzag, deep as the deepest roots. Twenty steps away, my father has buried the relics of our ancestors, my mother the dowries of her daughters. How much earth is there? Beneath our feet, our houses, beneath our village, how much can be held? Each villager caught in crossfire and my brother, the soldier, hiding in a tunnel for months. By day, we memorize the song of Republicans, but at night we swear loyalty to the Viet Cong who slip from the jungle into our homes. So much underneath. In the end, my father drinks poison to put himself there. "Find life in the midst of death,"

he had told me, “and nourish it like a flower.” He knew where the green stem begins.

## II.

In another country, I’m a different girl frightened by dreams of green uniformed men approaching from the woods behind my home. Curled in my grandmother’s stuffed chair, my fist full of donuts, I study their blackened faces in a magazine. And as they crawl through the grass toward me, I’m slow to turn the page. I linger over the families of dark thin bodies barely clothed, their eyes open and dry and waiting. I hear my grandmother’s worry of gypsy children coming to her kitchen windows

hungry with their eyes and my father’s mutter comes to us: “Her mind...not hers anymore.” And if I begin waking to strain my eyes beyond curtainless windows, is it because of what I do not know or because I know how night covers our fields to hide secrets that could step into our lives to change everything we see.

**Denise Pendleton** is a recipient of The Jinx Walker Poetry Prize of the Academy of the American Poets and Washington University Fellowship in Creative Writing where she received an MFA. Her poems have been published in *Tar River Poetry*, *American Sports Poems Anthology*, *Acorn Whistle* and *Northwest Review*.