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Geometry Problem and Tombstone Blues

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When I was a boy Dad told me about the planet Phaethon, how it used to orbit between Mars and Jupiter before it collided with something bigger and exploded, sending hot metal debris in new directions and random trajectories.

That’s what I was thinking about when the Viet Cong opened fire on us in the bamboo grove. Their rounds hitting the bamboo with a zip, crack, click, making the whistling sound of a flute played with dry lips.

A shredded leaf falling, splintered branches in flight like arrows with indiscriminate destinations, ears to the ground ducking asteroids. Then, the fire ended. The enemy passed.

Leaving the trees bent in odd ways, intersecting angles, geometry problems to be solved by future generations of geometers, bamboo growers, or fathers and sons walking together in wonder, heads arching skyward looking for the place where war and peace intersect.
TOMBSTONE BLUES

Mom insists on living next to the graveyard where my brother is buried to lay fresh flowers on him after dinner and arrange little toys on his stone, talk to him like he's sitting here at dinner waiting for the meatloaf to reach his side of the table.

It's been three years since Khe Sanh, since they brought him home in the metal box and the notification officers came knocking on our door. It's been two years since the war ended, and one year since Dad left, a lifetime since I opened the letter approving my student deferment.

I can see the cemetery from my bedroom window. It used to bother me. I used to have trouble sleeping, but I've grown used to seeing him sitting there in his dress uniform looking up at my window, tossing pebbles into the darkness, his eyes scanning the void between us, his face showing confusion and want while I sit at the window with my guitar, dodging pebbles and singing the "Tombstone Blues."