

## WHEN THE STARS GO DARK

By Jim McGarrah

There are no stars out tonight  
in the alley behind Maidlow's Liquor Store.  
Here, Charley Waters used to lean against another old veteran of WWII  
way back in the 60's when I'd come  
down the block after high school  
civics class and give him my allowance.  
"You ain't old enough to drink," he'd say,  
buying me a quart of Sterling Beer and himself  
a fifth of Thunderbird to quench his guilt.  
They'd sip the wine, he and his buddy,  
without saying a word, staring upward,  
waiting for stars to pop through  
the dusk like white kernels of kettle corn.

I'm in this alley decades later to piss  
on the whitewashed wall and look  
for those same stars. I've done it before,  
bought bourbon and snuck out here  
always to wonder, going to my car  
as those blooms, some ice and some fire,  
flowered somewhere in the distant darkness,  
what Charley found in the vacuum  
of the universe that caused  
tears to swell in his blank eyes.

I almost had it once when I first came home  
numb from Vietnam, a shadow in the primal brain  
forming a vague shape,  
gathering substance as it seeped  
through me like hot tar,  
that connection we've all had and lost  
with our one beginning.

Tonight, it's possible to imagine again  
when all that's above me is a black  
well of nothing hung on nothing.  
What connects us is our loneliness  
tearing through the endless sky,  
arms outstretched begging the darkness  
for a glimpse of those same stars  
that always made Charley Waters cry.