

the  
SOLITUDE  
of  
**Memory**

**MICHAEL MILLER**

## The Golden Birch

Remember the golden birch  
Beside our first house,  
Its peeling trunk  
With scrolls of bark  
That had no messages?  
I began to write  
My own messages,  
Each one addressed to you,  
Quiet woman who whispered  
My name from that place  
Of tenderness waiting,  
Who took my hand  
And led me to the golden birch.  
“It’s reason enough  
To buy the house,” you said.  
How I wish we could lie  
Beneath the branches  
As drops of sunlight  
Fall between the leaves.

## The Small Island

On Patmos we climbed a hillside,  
Stood upon the rocky summit,  
Spread our arms and gulped down  
The light, swallowing its unearthly  
Clarity, letting it feed our spirits.

On Patmos the lemon trees  
Held drops of the sun,  
Goats stood like sculpture,  
Bread was a bleached piece  
Of earth baked for the gods.

On Patmos our marriage thrived,  
The hot sun led us into  
The cooling Mediterranean:  
I became addicted to you,  
Addicted to light.

## A Different Man

“Salaam, salaam,” he said, leaning toward  
The stricken faces, the cowering bodies  
Pressed into a shadowed corner,  
And he wanted to put down his M-16,  
To leave his rifle behind with the missions,  
The death, then return to his wife  
And say those words for peace.

He was a different man in Afghanistan,  
A man intent on killing to stay alive,  
A man with invisible blood on his hands  
That could never be washed away.  
How can he touch his wife again?  
“Salaam, salaam,” he will whisper,  
Praying to return to the man he was.

## **Semper Fidelis**

In a room with drawn curtains  
He bent over the coffin  
And kissed his son's forehead.  
When he touched the medals  
Pinned on his Dress Blues:  
The Silver Star, the Purple Heart,  
He remembered Vietnam:  
The rice paddies, the jungle,  
The ambushes, with death  
Waiting in the leaves.  
He thought of his father,  
A sergeant landing on  
The beach of Guadalcanal –  
The tradition of warriors.

i

The white cane's handle  
Fits perfectly in his hand.  
The tap-tapping of the tip  
On the sidewalk  
Alerts the birds.  
Are those two robins  
Rustling the leaves,  
Their breasts the color  
Of a faded red barn?  
He pauses at the call  
Of a cardinal, listening.


**xxi**

He thinks of the birth  
Of his daughter, how she was  
Pushed through that amniotic sea,  
Her small head emerging  
Like a blue flower's bulb,  
Her wet body slithering  
Into a surprise of light.

## xxii

Spreading his arms  
And facing the midday sun,  
Opening his mouth wide  
And biting into the air,  
He wishes he could  
Swallow the sun,  
Letting it reside within,  
Feeling its presence  
As winter approaches.





**At precisely eight o'clock  
On every Friday  
His oldest friend calls  
From Seattle.  
Another set of eyes  
From their boyhood,  
Only children who cut  
Their forearms to become  
Blood brothers,  
Their unspoken love  
A binding knot,  
Sixty years.**

MICHAEL MILLER, from "Listening"



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