

Sheila Smith McKoy is a native of Raleigh, NC. Her work has appeared in numerous publications including the critically acclaimed Schomburg series *African American Women Writers 1910—1940*, *Callaloo*, *Obsidian: Literature in the African Diaspora*, and *Research for African Literatures*. Her book, *When Whites Riot: Writing Race and Violence in American and South African Cultures* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2001) received critical attention in the United States and South Africa. Currently an associate professor of English at North Carolina State University, she is the director of the Africana Studies Program and the editor of *Obsidian: Literature in the African Diaspora*.

Sweetness

I heard your voice before I saw you
and rushed out of my bed.
There you were, AWOL,
straight from Viet Nam.

I got to you before my sister and brother,
the first to get to your outstretched arms.
We all piled on you, awaiting your absent smile.
But the sweetness of your life
had already sunk beneath
the rippling waters of the Tra Khuc.

There in the flesh you stood.
You, black-enough-to-be-navy-blue,
our favorite bastard cousin,
unshaven and handsome in your uniform
as if defying the lead story on the news:
fifty-five US soldiers killed that day.

Here, you said, and put your army jacket on me.
It hung all the way to my ankles.
You didn't take the time to tell me
about all the pins on the lapel
like you would've done
before we knew about a place called My Lai.

When you took Mama aside,
we were ordered back to bed,
lost in sleep,
placated by the miracle of your return
while you went home to kiss your toddling girl,
to reclaim your wayward wife,
but instead found your mother-in-law,