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Nil Ductility

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Abstract
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laminated timber beams out of his Fargo office,
the old growth forested in Oregon and East Glacier...

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DEBRA MARQUART

NIL DUCTILITY

Time now to wonder about Bryce who sold laminated timber beams out of his Fargo office, the old growth forested in Oregon and East Glacier,

then planed, bent, glued, and shipped cross country from Montana in semis. The Douglas fir arches and load-bearing trusses that supported the canopies

and curved interiors of tall churches, office buildings, and shopping malls, all the gracious spaces where hallowed work is done. Winter afternoons in the eighties I’d sluice from campus through the snow in my Fury to his office, Building Materials, Inc., and sit in the second desk, across the room, as Bryce took complaints, argued with architects, calculated lineal feet. I’d type, file, read my school books when my desk was empty, then talk across the room after all the estimates were faxed. Bryce taught me about nil ductility after my Fury broke down in twenty-below zero, explaining how even steel has limits, in extremes,

becomes brittle and shatters, rather than bending or deforming as it would under normal conditions. Even then, Bryce was going blind from MS,
from exposure to chemicals during his tours with the 79th Combat Engineers. Even then, sometimes he’d call me over to read the fine print,

and sometimes at the end of the day, he’d pull open his bottom drawer, remove the pack of photographs, some faded color, some black and white, all frayed and graying at the edges, ringed with a rubber band which he’d remove with careful fingers, then hand to me, one image at a time, describing the concussion of the blown bunker, the green sandbags raining down, how the white femur and tibia of his friend shattered like fractured timber from a land mine.

The photos were contraband, he explained, yet everyone took them, smuggled the film out of country to be developed, then stored for safekeeping after the war. By the eighties they were stashed in lockboxes and offices where wives and children would not find them.

How many times did he hand me the framed glossy smile of his younger self on leave in Da Nang, beer in hand, arm thrown over a buddy, ready to ship for R & R in Singapore. How many times did we hold in our hands the flat profile of the Vietcong—the open eyes
and the swollen lips of the boy who attacked
their camp that night, whose skin was bruised gray
and buzzing with flies by morning, whose body
lay on the periphery in mud until light made it safe
for the GIs to come out and discover the identity
of their attacker. Rare to see the enemy, he said,
so they were amazed to roll him over and find
this boy—his body so thin, his small hands,
his young face, all they could do was circle him
and take photographs like the ones we held
in our hands. I looked because I thought I should,
I listened because he needed me to, still bearing
all that weight on his own, the pressure
reducing him, I could see, even as we sat together
those late afternoons in the darkening light.