

from *As They Were* by Milton J. Bates

## **As They Were**

*As you were!*

The sergeant's voice was stern, peremptory,  
unlike the weary drone he'd opened with:

*This is Instruction Block Three hmnnn,  
Chu Lai Combat Training Center hmnnn,  
"Securing Your Perimeter" hmnnn . . .*

The first mortar shell shattered his monotone.  
It seemed to come from somewhere deep inside  
the earth, burrowing furiously upward  
until it punched through the floor of the Quonset  
hut where they sat in rows. Then the roof  
thundered with the heavy hail of jungle stuff.

*Hit the deck!*

They hit it just in time to feel the second  
blast along the full length of their bodies.  
The floor bucked again, and the walls did  
something they'd never seen before, the metal  
folding neatly inward like a bellows pleat,  
then folding out, as though the building,  
too, sucked in its breath and then exhaled.

The roof rattled as before, and all was  
quiet. Block Three would have to wait.  
Perhaps tomorrow they would learn  
how to secure a perimeter, how to hit  
the deck with grace and dignity, how to be  
as they were before the war turned real.