

R . G . C A N T A L U P O

Say You Carried
(6/8/1972, Nick Ut, AP)

a camera, a Nikon
maybe, and
you were on a
road heading
toward some ville,
and there were
voices, sounds
shimmering off the
tar—a water
buffalo's moans, a
rooster's call, an
F-16 ripping
thru the sky's
blue flag—and,
out of the blue, a
black seed
falling, a shrill
whistle from hell, a
dark pod
blossoming into
licorice flames.
And there is a girl.
Running. Toward
you. Her clothes
burned off, her

flesh on
fire with the
sweet, licorice-
smelling gasoline,
her tears
dry smears of
char.

And so you
click, swallow the
winged terror
fluttering in your
chest and click,
cup her searing
cry in your palms.
"Nong qua.
Nong qua!"
she screams.
"Too hot!"
But the words
don't reach
where you are—
running, flagging a
truck, a medic, a friend.
You dig
through the
chaos of
uncounted bodies,
but you can't
find a pulse.
You breathe in the
killing fire
but you don't die.
Your face becomes
proof, your heart,
witness, your
eyes, this smoked
lens, these charred
pages, this black
silk of her
skin

The Execution (2/2/1968, Eddie Adams, AP)

Van Ken wasn't the one.
Sure, young, male, captured in a
bombed-out pagoda, Viet Cong.
But Van Ken wasn't the killer.

No blood stained his machete—
not the Colonel's, nor his wife's,
nor any of his six headless children.
That one isn't in the photo. Only

Van Ken—arms bent back tight and
tied, plaid shirt ripped open, draped
loosely over his bare, hairless chest,
collar twisted up careless as a boy's—

Van Ken, head winched sideways as
Nguyen Loan, the Police Chief,
aimed a snub-nose three inches
from his temple. Nor do we hear

Ken's last prayer over the blast, or
see him blown backwards, or witness
the dark pool drowning his black eyes.
That's out of frame, beyond our sight.

What we hold is the hand, the shot,
Ken's skull exploding in a spatter of
grays; this stilled moment; our
phantom, severed tongue—

Camouflage

Paint your lips olive drab,
your eyelids the color blue sleep

makes when she comes. If there is
ocher of leaf dye, blood of wait-a-

minute vine, sap drip from a burning
Manzanita, dab your fingertips in

and coat your forehead, smudge the
dark hollows where once your eyes

caught sun sifting through the hands
of fronds. When phosphorescent night

flashes teeth or eyes, palm indigenous
mud over the ribbed cage where a

red canary pecks at an ancient drum
and kill the ghost with a breath, or a

prayer to fire ants, or a burst of tumbling
rounds. Remember what the jungle

cannot see survives, what the canopy
cradles sleeps naked in the hungry

dusk, that you will not die here—not
invisible, not leaf-shadow, not snake,

not wing, not god.

Search & Destroy

Blue breaks through my machete's slash, but
not a wing rises in flight. In slivered light, a pink
lotus sways, a punji's spear hidden in the palm-
shaped leaves. Up the trail, bamboo cages rage
with pigs' squeals, water buffalo bellow our
malevolent odor, faces blank as body bags
await our eternal

return. I lean against a hootch,
light a smoke, finger my Zippo like a charmed
ear. My face, double-exposed in the lighter's
mirror, bleeds thru rushes and clouds; my shadow
ignites, then flares. I rub the thatch, flick, see the
serpent's flame dance in the hellish air. *This is my
power, I command. This snake. This fire. This god.*

A frequent contributor to WLA, **R. G. Cantalupo's** work has been published in many journals, both in the United States and internationally. He received three Purple Hearts and Bronze Star with a Combat V as an RTO for an elite weapons platoon in Vietnam for the 25th Infantry Division. He was medically retired after being wounded in 1969.