

R. G. Cantalupo

Letter to a Fiction Writer

To be honest, I never saw Saigon.

Closest I got was a hospital at
Ton Son Nhut lost in a Demerol haze
from the shrapnel a surgeon'd cut out
of my brain—Saigon a red flare dying out
in the night sky through a purple window
on my way back home.

No, I'd jumped from chopper
to point man in some village called
Trang Bang green as the World
I'd left behind nineteen hours earlier,
replacing a kid from Detroit who'd
been wasted on a mine that morning.
And my best buddy, "Florida" we
called him, disappeared into the jungle mist
one night-patrol.

I heard his cut-off voice on the radio
hours later, and the AKs cracking through
the rubber trees behind him.

We never found his body.

He's lost among my many shadows
now, silhouettes running through bamboo
chased by napalm tongues licking men

into flames, blackened bones I counted
like burnt matches for victories.

You imagined I flashed back from
stalls of souvenir t-shirts beside *The Wall*
to thatched huts spilling with plaster Buddhas
along Saigon streets, saw me searching
for lost buddies among the opium pipes
and boy-soldier faces painted on black velvet
you'd seen in movies.

But I was never there.

I have my own war movie flickering on
beneath my eyes, except in mine, my skin
is the film light projects images through,
and inside my chest is the dark paddy
where buddies squirm and rise.

R. G. CANTALUPO'S work has appeared in numerous journals in the United States, Great Britain, and Canada, including *The Pinyon Review*, *The Wisconsin Review*, *Nimrod*, *The Cape Rock Review*, and **WLA**.