

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

Casualty

If there were a moment captured before, you're
no longer a prisoner there. Your head's cut-

out from snapshots a nurse says are yours.
There's a bed where you lie, and a ceiling

where you find a blank slate for writing another
life. —*That's your mother*. —An arm's around her

shoulder, but the smile's gone.—*This one's you
and your wife*. —A beach in the backdrop, white

sand, the sky turquoise, clouds adrift like a
skywriters' slurred words. —*What's her name?*

—*Janice*. —*Who's beside her?* —*You*. —*That's
not my face*. The mirror's sutured with piano

wire and pink gauze you can't shake from your
eyes. A severed tape whirrs round the recorder

without a name. You remember the fucking new
guy's bad luck charm—a cigarette's red eye—the
ending arc of a muffled poomf in flared shadows
beyond concertina—a flash, a burning and voices
coming through a tunnel of grey light. Your
silhouette drifts along a black river, face flat as
a pop-up target. If you dreamed in color, you
would see red: A red sunset through sky-holes
in a card-board head, a red dot on a topographical
map, a red flak jacket floating you back home...

Want

Baby San wanted horses
mostly, Mustangs and
Appaloosas, a small ranch
outside Tucson with a good
woman and a few sons.
Devil wanted his girlfriend
to take this morning's letter
back, for it to be the way
it was that last night when
she called out his name—"Lonnie"—
Lonnie, the name he had before
he left *The World*. I wanted to
finish school and write about
our days here, this day and the
ones before, us simmering
Spaghetti C's over heat tabs
and drinking our six free beers
in the bunker's dusty shade,
the crackle of green bullets
igniting the air outside—far
away now as we sat and
drank and lied and killed the
day, each of us wanting what
we knew we couldn't have,
till it was time to go and one
by one we stood up and stepped
through the blinding doorway,
and disappeared into the light.

Nicknames

Spike never told me what his real name was.

Nor Baby San, nor Devil, nor any of the others from my squad. When the chopper dropped out of the flaring sky, they stepped waist-deep into the rice paddies anonymous, their clean, green fatigues stripped of names. Later, after the firefight ended and they emerged—mud-born, leeches sprouting from their veins—the bush burned new identities on their chests. Home flashed into a snapshot of “The World”—a back porch in Iowa, a corner deli in Brooklyn, a park bench in Portland under blue-gray skies. Even I emerged—after two purple-hearts—named, pinned with “Magnet Man” like a rabbit’s foot with bad karma: Mortars, AK’s, Bouncing Bettys, Rocket Propelled Grenades, even bamboo pungi sticks had snake eyes for my skin. That’s the way it was. Starlight shadows and one-eyed jacks. Prayers to Elephant and the God of Rock n’ Roll. A silver crucifix to save a bullet to the head. Was. Is. Was. Night terrors and night sweats. Red sand sifting through my fingers—the torn sandbag I filled—the berm dropping two inches too low—the match-head piece of shrapnel severing a spine. Was. Is. Was. What I did and didn’t do. My palm holds a rice-paper rubbing of his name—PFC Jeffrey R. Jennings— but we all knew him as “Florida”, “Florida” with that Tallahassee drawl and Saint Christopher staring down from his steel pot like a benevolent third eye. Would’ve been twenty the day after we walked out the wire on night patrol. Would’ve

been Jeff maybe. Mr. Jenkins. Sir. Father. Friend.
Would've brought oranges to my mouth when

I called, oranges and sand—

The Village

There was no village
there. No one to
tend the green shoots
crowning
from the tepid paddies.

I remember the
sky was
dead, the
canopy of clouds a
gnarled palm, silence the

name for what
remained. Brown
waters shimmered
with leeches and bad
spirits. Geckos skittered

across blood-trails, opened
mouths to scream.
Trang Bang, Spike
said, as if
names mattered, or

place
a history before we
came. Then, a lone
pig squealed, the
poomf of an invisible

mortar, the crack-
crack-crack of a sniper's
rounds, and we

returned to our bodies.
Blood

drowned the new
sprouts. A
medic splashed through
red. Crickets
eulogized on wait-a-minute

vines. We searched.
We destroyed. We
owned. But
there was no
village

there, no names,
no voices
calling from beyond the
Ho Bo Woods. The
hootches were

embers. The rice
bowls spattered with blue-
black skin. The prayer
flags mangled in rubber
trees. Spike

mute as the others—
bleached mouth
stuffed with elephant
grass, breath
quiet as a stone

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