

C A R I G R I N D E M - C O R B E T T

Constellations

I can't tell you his name.
I shouldn't tell you who he is
because of who he was, and when.
But he showed me Cassiopeia,
Orion, the Big and Little Dippers,
made me watch Haley's Comet
—I swear you couldn't see it move—
wanted me to remember all the names.

I knew all those Greek gods,
why couldn't I remember
where they are forever in the stars?
I was told when I was little
he didn't exist "on paper"
but when I was nineteen or twenty
I found a list of Silver Stars
on the internet.

And his name, full and real,
Year: '66, PFC, Private First Class,
on a website soaked in middle school enthusiasm
for death, colored backgrounds, blinking links,
only this time, it was Vietnam.

Through the link, faces,
specters laughing with guns,
smoking short cigars,
leaning, one foot on a tire on a green jeep,
or looking at the tan dirt,
or even smirking for the camera
bare-chested. Among these ghosts

I found his face,
a young stranger's,
unreal, like the Polaroid of his first wife
I found in his medicine bag, and never saw again.
His only real wife is my mother.
That other woman was just a black hole
that stole his big house and drank
while pregnant with my brother.

I remember being told how
some of the people in the pictures died,
but I'm not supposed to say;
it would hurt him too much to read this
and recall,
even names without faces
and so many faces without names.

When I showed him the list, links and pictures
he went out to sit under our porchlight,
saying he needed to have a good talk with god.
I imagine, though, after words faded
and the reel of images stopped,
it was the pin-prick lights in the violet sky
that really kept him out all night.

Does he remember, I wonder, the names
of those immortal men whom the gods let live
forever in the stars? Does remembering names
even matter at all? Remembering facts? Faces?

The web of stars, the honors, medals, lives.
A constellation with no name, forever
with no time, no face.

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