

A Field Day for the Heat

Jim Fairhall

The hot season pounced like a dragon. Its breath scorched us as we waded through elephant grass in the lowlands near the Perfume River; during breaks we sheltered from the sun under poncho liners tied to clumped stalks. We cheered up when a breezy flight of Hueys lifted us to the shade of the Rocket Belt's jungled mountains. Then we weren't so cheered, since we'd gone from sauna to steam bath. Sweat dripped down our faces from under our steel pots. The towels around our necks, which we wiped across our foreheads to keep our eyes from stinging, were sodden. Hair on forearms streamed. During pauses Doc Adams handed out salt tablets. When a trail led us under a gap in the treetops' double canopy, sunshine burned like a too-close welder's torch. The five-gallon water bags topping our packs flattened. That was when the CO had to concede. We broke off our mission and humped down to a dappled valley where a stream, no longer a blue squiggle on a grid map, bubbled its indifferent grace.

I'd welcomed the heat. It reduced me, while humping and panting, to a creature without worries or memories. Sure, on guard, submerged in insect-buzzing darkness and the darkness of my mind, I remembered rainy cool Co Pung Mountain. But afterward my spent body fell asleep at once. I remembered the World with a vividness that dimmed in intervals between my girlfriend's letters. She was my link not just to home but to my old self, the would-be writer and passionate critic of our tumultuous country. She hadn't written for a while.

Late one morning, we stopped for a break near a recent night defensive position. A fire-darkened mound occupied a bare spot where the trail swelled out. The last unit to bivouac there

had followed SOP by leaving nothing of use. Bookless, bored to death, I surveyed ashy half-burned debris: green C-rat cans, white plastic spoons, a gold cream-substitute packet, a charred rabbit's foot charm, a damp Archie comic, a letter in blue script (which dismayed me—why hadn't the recipient saved it?) and the corner of a newspaper. I pulled the paper loose. It was a *Stars and Stripes*, a bit soggy, dated May 6, 1970.

The fat bold headline made no sense. What sort of "clash" would have killed students on a Midwest college campus? I sat down beside Piers, who was lying propped on his arm because his butt still ached from shrapnel wounds. He wasn't his old mellow surfer dude self. He avoided mentioning Co Pung but was bitter about his surgeon, Malpractice Mel, who'd lied about digging out all the metal, and the buck-toothed nurse (braces, man! not that they'll improve her looks) who'd refused him anything stronger than Darvon for his pain. I handed him the sports pages. I read the top story:

4 DIE IN CLASH ON OHIO CAMPUS

KENT, Ohio—Four Kent State University students were shot to death Monday in a football field gun battle between National Guardsmen and 3,000 rioting students. At least 15 students and two Guardsmen were injured. The gun battle broke out after the antiwar protesters defied an order not to assemble and rallied on the commons at the center of the treelined campus...

Huh? I read the article twice in case I'd missed something. It was like parsing a broken-up radio transmission from another world. Why were those students protesting? No clue. The

next biggest story on the front page was about halting air raids on North Vietnam. The third story, at bottom left, had a jokey title, *Big Catch in the Fishhook*. It described the 11th Armored Cavalry, a unit I'd never heard of, finding caches of rice in Cambodia. I hadn't known we were in Cambodia.

I read the lead again in case I'd missed something. I didn't find out why the students were protesting, but I caught on to the rest. Outrage was called for. I didn't feel it, or much of anything. I felt empty and hot, sitting there in the shade, my fingers smudged with newsprint. What bothered me were the story's language and the premises. They were those of bad fiction. What was "a football field gun battle?" A gun battle—I knew something about battles now—had to have two sides armed with deadly weapons. My memories of student life didn't include anyone packing a gun. True, the Weather Underground bombers were dangerous—but they were dropouts, not students anymore. Anyhow, I didn't need a weatherman or an uncensored reporter to tell me which way the wind had been blowing on that Kent State football field on May 2nd. I already knew.

I handed the paper to Slow Eddie, who'd gotten curious about my absorption in the written word.

"Shee-it!" he said. "Honkies wastin' honkies. That's a promisin' change."

McCoy peered over Eddie's arm. "College students. What the fuck *they* got to protest about?"

"What honkies got to protest about?"

They began to argue. It was spontaneous combustion: deep-seated feelings, deeply different views of America, expressed in the differing rhythms and diction of Plaquemines Parish,

Louisiana and Chickasha, Oklahoma. The words they shot at each other—"Black Power," "jumped-up farmer," etc.—didn't rise to communication. They were hand-me-down, only barely suggesting their lived experience, the mysterious real relations between Americans.

Slow Eddie said finally, "Yo, motherfucker, you done started this ruckus. Step closer I'll slap you to next week."

Sweat dripped glistening down their foreheads as they jostled. Sergeant Melnik, Toby, Doc Adams and I pulled them apart as Lieutenant Larkin galumphed up. His tomato-red face looked incredulous.

"Do you shitheads have any idea what you're doing? Fighting 'n hollering out here in Indian country?"

He let loose a stream of rhetoric and threats, mostly justified, before ordering us to saddle up. America's Military Newspaper lay in the dirt, crumpled from someone's boot. I was sorry I'd plucked it out of the trash. Now I knew what would be in Susan's next letter. Part of our five years together had included protesting the war. A week ago American soldiers had murdered American students. What picture did she have of me now? Luckily, I'd never told her what arms I was carrying besides my rifle: nearly 252 rounds in 14 magazines in two bandoliers, two fragmentation grenades, two smoke grenades, a claymore mine and two belts of ammo for Toby's machine gun, crisscrossed Pancho Villa style across my chest. All dead weight, like my recent past. In the heat I hated humping it, but otherwise I was used to it, like hoisting a school satchel packed with books, pens, notebooks and an apple. I could handle the war better, I thought in my heat-struck lassitude, than I could handle Susan's loving anger.

The war was routine now. Each day of humping was like punching the clock, except when

some phrase or small event reminded me that I'd come here to witness and to write down what I saw. One night last week, under the star glow of the inky sky, I'd been sitting awake on a hill of elephant grass. I wasn't on guard: the heat had kept me from sleeping under my poncho liner, which I'd pulled over my head to ward off whining mosquitoes. From the mountains' darkness three white streaks—*what?*—arced across the sky toward the light-pricked darkness of the lowlands. Transfixed, I stared. They were so beautiful I hoped there would be more.

At dawn, before sunshine dried the dew streaking the tall grass blades, I wondered what damage those rockets had done. None, I hoped. The attack—a hit-and-run before counter-battery artillery replied—probably did nothing, though it must have been duly entered into two or three units' log books. Armies march on their bellies, some general once said, but this one marched on records. Records heavy with numbers, dates, places, unit names, like the orders in my 201 file. As a genre they aspired to be objective: just the facts, ma'am. No room for the beauty of three rocket streaks against a starry sky. Even if I'd told Plotnik what happened—he was a sensitive cat for a company clerk—he'd have laughed and said, Don't tell Top. Maybe put it in a song or poem.

Susan's letter arrived after we'd hiked up from a stream to a sunbaked LZ, an ocher patch on a jungled ridge, with a view of Nui Khe. It was the tallest mountain in the Rocket Belt. I could see only its hazy peak, rising above two green ridgelines. It looked like a whale's head. All rock, Army Armstrong had said, because Phantom jets bombed it to shit during a battle that included a bayonet charge. Army knew that from Cowboy Coggins. I'd doubted him at first—and I couldn't ask Coggins, killed on Co Pung—but the war was rife with legends that fleshed out the military's facts with their own truth. Now I guessed Army's story was true. After all, just about

anything could happen here. A storyteller's task was to make it believable.

After the resupply bird veered away, I sat down on a log. I gingerly slit the flimsy blue envelope. I sniffed. Jasmine: a faint scent from a reopened drawer.

Tuesday, May 5th

Dear Chris,

I'm so horribly sorry about Matt! You must be humping your grief like a sack full of stones. Was there any ceremony to commemorate his death? And the others' deaths? Sitting shivah is no fun but it's useful—and I know you haven't had time to mourn like that.

I still don't understand what happened. Co Pung Mountain & the A Shau Valley are places I can't find any information about. You told me so little! Why did your commanders drop you off near an enemy regiment? What exactly happened to Matt? (If you can bear to tell me...) Why did they send you to Firebase Arsenal while you still had stitches in your wounds? I keep crying when I think about everything that's happened. This horrible, horrible war is tearing me apart through you. This is selfish since you're still in danger & you lost your friend. But I feel so helpless!

Darling, I think you don't know what's going on here. Do you? I haven't got a letter since I wrote to you about the protests that began April 30th after Nixon announced we've invaded Cambodia. The atmosphere in what you call the World is much worse now. Yesterday National Guards shot thirteen student

protesters at Kent State. They killed—murdered—four of them. Now there's a gross cover-up of lies about students firing at the Guardsmen. Amy, Pete, Karen & I have been protesting along with thousands of other students here. Friends of ours hung a king-size bed sheet from three windows on the third floor across the street from Union Square. It reads THEY CAN'T KILL US ALL in black outline letters filled in with pink. I've been at Loeb Center every day. Dozens of students have been occupying it. It's half-organized bedlam: readings, protest songs, strategy meetings, announcements cranked out by a portable printing press, with security guards patrolling outside. New York's finest have looked in now & then, but they're not trying to take it back—not yet. Students have also occupied Kimball Hall & Weaver. Cops cordoned the ROTC quarters to keep it from being burned down like ones on other campuses. Pete knows some of the hard-core radicals but Amy & Karen & I are really just fellow travelers. The rhetoric's way too simplistic, but I'm so angry I'm suppressing my critical sense. I wish you were here, Chris! You'd feel what I feel, but would articulate it better. Classes have been suspended. When they'll start again no one knows. Mom wants me to come home but I'm not going. It's right to protest! Plus, I'm living in history as you are. Even though I'm anxious & not sleeping well, I want to see & feel it all.

Chris, I need to tell you something difficult. I really feel hurt that you didn't tell me about Matt until your most recent letter—& then so little. I thought we'd agreed to share everything. I wonder who I am to you. That's harsh. I'm sorry! But darling, I've put all my soul into making our love work despite the

distance between us. I want to be as close to you as possible. You don't have to tell me every gory detail, but you can tell me how you feel. Can't you? Also, what do you want me to tell CeeCee? She called. She doesn't believe the cheerful letter you wrote to your Mom.

The students' deaths have shaken me up. I can't believe American soldiers shot them. I know it's different where you are in those mountains—no civilians, just American & North Vietnamese soldiers. Your being there & writing to me has helped me understand the war a little. I just pray (not that there's a God who gives a damn) that you stay safe, first of all, & don't kill anybody. Of course you may have to shoot people to save yourself. I hate writing that down—like I'm somehow justifying the war. ~~Anyway~~ Oh, what am I trying to say? I wish we were back at New Rochelle High when we were so cocooned & didn't have to think about war. Since then it's like some tectonic plate has shifted. We're different people living in a different world.

Chris, my sweet love, write to me! Tell me what has happened with you & how you feel. I want to know.

With all my love as always,

Peaches

In the dark shade around the sunstruck LZ, everyone was eating lunch. I swigged the stream's almost cool water from my canteen. I pulled out my pad and a pen.

May 10

Sweetest Peaches,

Yes, you're right. I didn't learn about Kent State and Cambodia till several days ago. I read two articles in a Stars and Stripes I fished out of a trash heap along a trail. They left out everything important.

The murders disturbed me. But without Matt there's no one to talk to about them. So the news just sank somewhere deep inside me. It's hot. Every day is like the hottest summer day in New York. I'm just surviving. Maybe I have cafard—a sort of depression French people in Indochina used to get. Matt taught me that.

I'm proud you've been demonstrating, occupying the student center—everything. You're doing what I should be doing together with you.

What happened on Co Pung Mountain? Hard to say. One beautiful, sunny afternoon choppers dropped us partway up. Everything afterward happened in rain and fog, under three layers of dripping leaves. We had to to reinforce a company near the top. We climbed old, overgrown trails to avoid North Vietnamese soldiers, though three walked into us. Then we collided with that regiment. The word "battle" doesn't say much. What happened was pandemonium. Shots and explosions and bugles (theirs) and ghosts—the "enemy"—turning into human forms, distant, surging, running past Third Squad because they didn't know we were there, cut off from the rest of Alpha Company. A few on the flank ran near Matt and me. ~~One of them~~ The CO didn't know we

were there either. Or didn't care. He was "walking in" artillery rounds to break the attack on Alpha's perimeter. They stomped toward us. Matt yelled, "Go!" He scrambled up. I ~~didn't~~ ~~couldn't~~ ~~get up~~ He ~~waited~~ I was flat on my belly when the earth rumbled. When I came to, I thought Matt was just standing there, dazed, his back against a mahogany tree. Shrapnel had pinned him to it. ~~If he hadn't~~ ~~if I~~

My head swam. I folded the letter and placed it inside my ammo box with my writing materials. I'd finish later. But how would I finish it? There was more than one way. I could write that I shot a wounded North Vietnamese whose cheek imploded red. I could write that the battle sounded like dinosaurs roaring, so violent I couldn't think. I could write that Chris didn't exist at that moment—that he'd been reduced to some instinctive common denominator shared with everyone, even the enemy, as the war took over our lives like a tsunami or hurricane or maybe like history's flow, its shape unknowable. Or maybe I killed that young man, needlessly, because of a flaw in my character. A flaw that Matt—braver and clearer-minded than me—didn't have.

I killed my friend, too. If I'd kept my quivering finger from the trigger, if I weren't paralyzed by that soldier's face blossoming red, I'd have fled with Matt. He wouldn't have had to pause for me—to halt among the trees, looking back, beckoning.

Heat. It crouched over us like a dragon. McCoy and Slow Eddie side-eyed each other but were too beat to bicker. We tramped down to a maze of water-threaded small valleys. Pulling guard beside gurgling streams, in pitch dark, made me jumpy. I heard movements, swallowing, tree breaths, bug heartbeats. We called the streams blues from their map color. Most weren't on

maps, and they weren't blue. G-2, Intelligence, guessed that enemy squads camped near them when they weren't firing rockets from ridgelines. A plausible guess; humans like us, they needed water. On the map we kept edging nearer to Nui Khe. It was a swirl of brown contour lines—a big mountain—yet all we saw from the stream banks were sun-specked trees and shrubs. We couldn't see its outline, nor its beginning nor end. I hoped we'd skirt around it. I didn't want to climb another mountain.

Jim Fairhall is completing a story cycle set in Vietnam. Four stories have won national awards, including the Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival Award for Fiction. Jim is also an award-winning poet and scholar, and has won the John Guyon Prize for Nonfiction for his memoir "Nui Khe," which was chosen as a "notable" essay for *Best American Essays*. He teaches modern literature and environmental studies at DePaul University in Chicago.