

Snapshots From A Battle

by Richard Levine

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Crack!Crack!Crack!Crack!Crack!
P-tyou! P-tyou! Splash. In a pitch
hole only one may go, death cordons
life off faster than a silence
dug in in the din of an entrenched
running battle, a foxhole
shoveled out in eternity amid
the dishevelment of flesh.
Can the dead hear dust
hitting the sky?

Crack!Crack!Crack! P-tyou! Hearts
running fast as instinct, feet
running through water, mud; evil
sniffing like a dog, its muzzle
barking flares, marking death's
path from behind trees, behind
bushes; minds running on instinct
teach the lessons of hell: you don't need
to breathe anymore, you're ready to be
brave, cowardly, to pray or be evil
to survive. But don't think
that's true, either. Someone's lost
control of his bowels. Whatever
you do, heart, don't stop. Don't stop.
Please. Don't stop. Crack!Crack!Crack!
P-tyou! Splatter, splatter. Splash. Clank,
clank. Crack!Crack!Crack! Did someone
scream contact? "CONTACT! CONTACT!"

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We lumbered out of the red sun,
setting the world behind us
on fire. Our shadows spread
darkness before us, crawling
elbow and knee, beneath dust

aroused by our boots
and deeds. We were buried
alive in memory, heavy as lead
returned to the solid world
from its molten state.

Out of this cauldron of red
flame and senseless clay,
we came upon the next ville,
casting our towering, contagious
plume of fear.

She sat on a paddy dike -
hair, silk and teeth, black -
a silhouette of herself,
straw-cone hat on one knee.
Her hands moved over the water
as if smoothing a tablecloth.
What made me think of my mother?

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Was she there to think, to pray,
to listen to the mountain, and
the fighters fighting under
the pounding pounding, pounding
paddy water to foam?

But her thoughts and prayers
could not stop the pounding
that fell from the sky and shook
the earth like a rattle rolling
from the hands of a dead child.

The pounding entered
through the bones of her feet,
tuning forks pitched to ring
in her soul. The pounding
pounded pond-sized holes
in her heartland, and her
madness tunneled deep:
she could not escape,
could not forget.

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By day, the sun - like
a temple gong - gathered
its congregation
of sky all around.

Nights - when paddy water trembled
to foam - a million rice bowls
filled with moon-tears that became
her shimmering diet. She ate
and drank war. Her spit was black.

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She saw our armed silhouettes
and the reluctance of the sun
to set, setting off at our feet
instead a goldfish-shaped
torpedo, careening underwater
between the rice-green,
bayonet-shaped reeds.

And just when the light went
poor, everything happened
too fast to recall as true.
Did she enter and emerge
from water? Did three others
fire under cover of the treeline?
Were forty more waiting
unseen? Too fast, too hazy,
too low a cut
of light, but . . . Crack! Crack!
Crack! P-tyou! Splash! Water
spluttered up around us. Crack!
Splash! Willie Greene went down,
shot and drowned. The last floating
sliver of sun exploded in our eyes.

A helmet towed under
by water's weight nested
downside-up like a drowned
turtle, headless and spewing
blood, its ghost swallowing
the sun, leaving a film of red
mud oozing out along the horizon.

Brendan McGown pulled Willie
out and wrapped him in his
green poncho - limbs tucked in,
the fading sky tilting.

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Mortar tubes: muzzle-loaded
cannons: clicked-and-coughed
the sound of the sun sucked
back into the night sky,
hurling down its black
hail, whistling, sailing
over the lucky made fleet.

The rounds fell in in threes,
closing on us like a mammoth
creature, spitting lava-hot
shark teeth, rending everything
in its path with razor-curl
claws and fins. Exhaling
fists of air that jabbed out in
all directions - bone-shaking
belts felt as dull thumps in
the chest and through the ground
to cough us off our boots.

Up and running,
we splashed through the paddy
and single-filed into the dry
border treeline. Edwin Gomez ran
before me. Then, with less fanfare
and only slightly more noise
than a bird exploding
into the distant realm
of flight, his body flew
straight up like a kite.

A tree limb snagged him.
He hung like a railway mailbag
with arms: We could not reach.

Darkness closed tighter
around red lines of bullets shot
in a killing-grid, a geometric

equation chalked in blood and bone:
x = the enemy, L = the shape
of their ambush, Y = why? Solve
for the dead.

The lower half of Lieutenant
Polin's face exploded
open like a pomegranate
with the skin peeled back.
Who heard the bubbling
gelatinous crease of mouth
and jaw call as he drowned
on his own life? Was it
a last order, a plea,
a woman's name?

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More shooters and a pelting
of bullets against a tree
shook Gomez from his perch:
broken, splintered, torn,
landing in awkward coincidence,
he lay with dead-open eyes
eyeing his still undisturbed
foot-in-boot.

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Death stretched out under
ponchos, like garbage
bags set out at a curb.
Waiting in a rough circle,
with unchecked bleeders
dressed in dirty-sterile
field bandages, teething
on morphine, and lit by red
flares and flashes of explosive
light, we broke open the dark-
feral prayer wheel of our night.

The ground trembled under
the pounding of Phantoms
and another night battle, not
too distant to be felt through

our boots. The sky blinked.
Sulfur reduced us like perfume
from a whore, wedding sex and terror.

Choppers landed and flew off
in a few critical heartbeats.
Something of what I was until that
day slipped away, like a snake-
skin shed. I slid out while
a piece of me was carried off,
spinning up, throwing death-dust
in my faceless face; my soul so far.

As the roar of rotors grew
faint and flares faded,
we were returned to our small,
tenebrous state and all we had:
The sky, dark and flashing all
around, the bittersweet taste
of survival, again, and behind
vacant eyes, each other.

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Is it an invasion of privacy
to search the dead? Tomorrow,
we'll see how the enemy lived.
Wallets and pictures will reveal
who they courted before seducing
death - pretty snapshot smiles
in perfumed envelopes
waiting, dry in ziploc.

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They'd hauled away most
of their dead with meathooks.
Still, with the sun high, we carted
three bodies out to the nearest
road, hands and feet tied to bamboo
poles. Waiting, we dug in and found
teeth, bones and leather-skinned
bodies in black silk. Buses full
of commuters rumbled by
raising dust from the corrugated

dirt highway, and the sky -
preaching the gospel of the gong -
embracing all around.

A chopper landed with my orders
to stand down. Home. I was going
HOME! Quick: Embraces, Envy.
Good-byes. Teases. Wishes.
And I flew away just like that,
still tethered to the spit-ready dead,
and waving as the living
and the land that I survived faded.

Postscript

Six months home. Six sleepless
months trying to outrun memory.
When I slept I slept by day.
I pronounced myself unfit to live
among my peers. At every
encounter we found each other
out, fearing and feared.

One night, I woke up crying
in the arms of a girl sweet
and innocent of any experience
that could explain my behavior.
Her heart and eyes recoiled,
afraid to touch the mask
she'd already removed.
How could I explain? If I said
Vietnam, she'd see a raving
front-page headline.

She moved to the edge
of her waterbed. Sitting up,
she looked at me stretched out,
adrift on the waves my sobbing
stirred. She drew her knees up
to her breasts, like a mime
in an invisible box. She'd cleaned
the stains of mistaken lovers
from her sheets before, tears,
too . . . but never like these.
When I regained control, I said,

I better leave. And I did, taking
the stain and the snapshots
from a battle that awoke in me.