

New Fiction from Bailee Wilson: “The Sun Burns Out in Vietnam”



Vietnam, 1969

The world appeared like a ripple in a puddle- a Jell-O jiggle spreading across dark green jungle water. The scene came together but would not hold still.

Caleb did not know where he was. His vision swirled, and his chest hurt, and his lungs seemed full of water. His hand searched for his chest. Found it. Wet. Found it. Empty. A finger sank into it. Wiggled a moment. *Mud*, he thought. *Mud at the bottom of the puddle.*

There was a wall behind him. He braced himself to move, clenching his teeth tightly, and then slid himself against it,

propping himself up. He let out a growl, and a twinge of nausea passed through his stomach. He nearly threw up, but he held in the bile, thinking of a man he'd seen throw up at a state fair once- thinking about how embarrassing that must have been. A grown man vomiting. He could do better. He squinted into the horizon. The nausea faded, and solid shapes began to take form.

He was in a village. A rural village. A smoking village. The huts around him were on fire; their woven roofs blazing orange and deep red, like the flesh of the Gac fruit he'd seen a young boy devour at a rural market in the eastern part of the country. Across from him, a hand lay, palm up, fingers sprawled, totally still. Slender brown wrist and jagged nails. The hand was connected to an arm. The arm was connected to nothing. Its severed edge, too, resembled the wet red meat of the Gac fruit. Caleb couldn't remember whose it was. He wished he hadn't seen it.

The air was smoke and fresh-turned dirt, tinged with feces, urine, and metal. Whether the metal smell was blood or guns, he could not say.

Caleb coughed, and a spray of red shot from his chest. *So I've been shot*, he realized. *I've been shot, and I've been left for dead.*

A groan split the space in front of him. He rolled his head toward the sound. "Hello?" he gurgled. He coughed again. Stronger: "Hello?"

There was a young Vietnamese man sprawled at his feet. The man lifted his head.

Opened and shut his mouth three times, bubbling like a fish. "Do you speak English?" Caleb asked him.

The man stared at him with fish eyes.

Caleb rolled his eyes. "Of course not." *Damn Gook*. He pointed at the hole in his chest. "Are you hurt?" he asked. He pointed at the man. Pointed back at his own chest.

The man rolled his body to the side, revealing a wet, red cavern in which bits of flesh hung free from bone, swinging like sheets on a clothesline. He sank back to the earth with a grunt.

Caleb nodded. "We're both goners, you know?" The man blinked. Sputtered, "Xin Loi." "Gibberish." *Jesus*.

Caleb rubbed his fingers together. He wanted a cigarette. He grimaced. "I'd kill for a drag," he told the man. He'd killed for less before, but what did it matter now.

The man bared his teeth in a rugged smile. "Xin Loi," he said again. Caleb tilted his head towards the sky.

The wall he was leaning against was part of a crude hut. When he shifted his weight, it crackled. A twig wiggled loosely above his head. He snapped this twig off and put it to his lips. He softly sucked in, gritted his teeth, and blew out. He offered this twig to the Vietnamese man, who pretended to take his own hit and then passed it back.

"Nothing like a Pall Mall," he sighed. He took another drag.

On his exhale, he pointed at himself and slowly pronounced, "Caleb Millard." The man pressed his hands to his sternum and said, "Do Hien Minh."

Caleb pretended to tap ash from his twig. "Where are you from, Do?" Do stared at him.

Caleb shifted his weight, winced at the movement, and then settled his shoulders lower against the wall. "I'm from Iowa." A bird played lip harp in a distant tree. "America." He eyed a big sow nosing through the turmoil beneath a burning hut. "Got a lot of pigs there, too."

Drag from the twig. "My family kept a cow, but no pigs." Do bobbed his head as if he understood.

"I had a dog for a bit," he told Do, "but she died. Never had a pig." Do patted the dirt at the base of Caleb's boot.

"How old are you, Do? Can't be more than twenty." Caleb raised an eyebrow. "My brother is twenty. He went to college, so he didn't get drafted." Caleb felt a bead of sweat forming on his forehead. "I didn't go to college, so I got drafted. Now I have a damn hole in my chest."

Caleb met Do's eyes again. "We're both gonna die dumb, you know that? Dumb and uneducated. And young." Caleb shook off a gnat. "And covered in bugs."

"You ever ate a bug, Do?" Do's face was covered in sweat. "I bet you people eat bugs all the time."

Caleb rubbed his chest. "I can't breathe so well. I never could breathe in this country. You must be dumb to stay in a country where you can't breathe. What's the point?"

Caleb squirmed against his inhale. "It's like breathing under-damn-water. Are you a fish, Do?"

Do moved his hands together, intertwining his shaking thumbs and fluttering his fingers like butterfly wings. He flew his hands towards Caleb and grinned.

Caleb muttered, "This is serious." Do settled his hands under his chin.

"You got a girl, Do?" Caleb asked. "I swear, if a bastard like you has got a girl, then God can take me now."

Do's pinky finger twitched under his chin.

Caleb pursed his lips and made a kissing noise. With one hand, he drew the outline of a woman with generous curves in the

air. Pointed at Do. "A girl?"

A soft smile spread across Do's face. "Cô gái xinh đẹp," he said.

"I bet you've got an ugly little thing," Caleb mused. "Beanstalk tall and scrawny, with crooked teeth. Or no teeth." He licked his lips. "There was a girl named Nancy back in the States who I always wanted to go with." Caleb shook his head. "I never even wrote her a letter."

Caleb scratched at his chest. "But man, was she beautiful. All-American, with blonde hair and the pinkest lips I ever saw. Always wore a red dress to Sunday service. And man, she loved to sing. Especially sad songs. Sounded just like Doris Day."

Do repeated, "Doris Day." "That's right, Do."

Do began humming.

Caleb recognized the tune. "Que sera, sera," he half-sang. "Whatever will be, will be." He dropped his eyes to the dirt. "That's real nice, Do."

"Do you reckon that letters ever make it out of the jungle?" Caleb wished a cloud would cover the sun. It was too damn hot. "I don't see how anything makes it out of the jungle."

It was quiet for a moment, aside from the two men's dueted breathing and the rumble of a burning hut collapsing. "When you die, your body will sit here and rot. That's a given. But what happens to my body?" Caleb sucked on the twig. "Will they come looking for me? Will they find me? My parents may never know what happened to me. They'll hold out hope, I know. But I'll be gone. Rotting, with no name. No meaning." Caleb looked at the severed arm. He threw the twig away. "It's sick."

Do followed his gaze to the arm. Then Do looked back at him. "Caleb," Do said. "Not me," Caleb said. "I didn't do that."

Do patted the dirt again.

"It's so hot." Caleb squinted. He tried to shake the sweat from his head. "Do you think that's the sun we're feeling, or the light at the end of the tunnel?"

Do shielded his eyes from the sky.

"That's the spirit, Do. Don't look at it. Don't look at it either way."

Caleb wanted a cup of cold water, or a root beer. The air was thick with humidity- practically liquid- but his thirst remained unquenched. He wished that he had drowned. At least then he wouldn't be thirsty.

He sat back and watched smoke pour out of a hut. There was searing pain in his throat. "To die in a place like this... Well, it isn't Christian. Do the souls of those whose bodies are eaten by stray dogs still make it to heaven?"

Do coughed up a sticky string of blood. It sank into the dirt at the base of Caleb's boot. "Damn it," Caleb said. "Damn it all."

"What's the point of this anyways? Why am I talking to you?" Caleb was dizzy. He thought again of the state fair. The vomit. "What's the point of me prattling on and you not knowing what I'm saying? Do you know what I'm saying?" Caleb kicked at Do's hand. "Can you feel what I'm saying?"

Do's face was pale. "Doris Day," he said.

"That's right," Caleb let out a low whistle. "Que fuckin' sera, sera." Do rolled in the dirt.

"I killed a man who looked like you, just east of Bo Tuc." Do's hands curled into claws.

"And another just north of here."

Do's mouth opened into a near-perfect circle. "And another, north of that."

"When my dog got ill, my father shot her in the side," Caleb's chin began to tremble. "She rolled that same way, rolled until my father shot her a second time. Shot her in the head." Caleb held a finger gun to his temple. Pulled the trigger.

Do jerked sharply, arching his back into the shape of a mountain, and then fell flat against the earth. He became still on impact, save for his fingers, which twitched and twitched like the wings of a gnat. His eyes locked on Caleb.

"Thing is, I think I'm sorry for what I did. But this is war. I don't know how to feel sorry. They tell me not to feel sorry. I'm not sure that 'sorry' cuts it anyways."

"Do I pray for you?" he whispered. "Does it make a difference?" Caleb swallowed. "What can one do?"

Do's earthquaking hand extended back towards Caleb's shoe, traversing the dirt like a snake stalking prey. The hand met the boot and encircled it. Squeezed once. Then his eyes glazed over.

Eyelids half shut, mouth agape. A gnat landed on his thin lip. He was gone.

Caleb felt tears well up in his eyes. He resigned, "What can one do?"

He struggled for breath. He touched his chest again and found that the wet had expanded. His vision was a tunnel. He saw Do at his feet. Saw only Do. The gnat on his lip. The look of sleep on his face.

Caleb trembled. He knew what would happen next. He'd be a casualty of war with no story. No one- not his commanding officers, his parents, his brother, Nancy, no one- would know what had happened to him. The fire from the huts would spread,

his flesh would fall to ash, and he'd be gone. There'd be no story, no burial, no resolution. Nothing. Forever, nothing. Alone in the jungle for the rest of time. For what? Nothing, nothing, nothing. What can one do?

Alone, but not alone. Do's hand on his boot was a message. "It's alright," the hand said, "we're in this together. We're going to die, but we're not alone. It might be for nothing, but we're not alone."

He saw it now. *Xin Loi. I'm sorry. At least we're together.*

That gave Caleb as much peace as he could hope to get. That evening, the sun went down as it always did, but for Caleb, it burnt out. The jungle dirt lapped up his blood the same as it did anyone else's. After all, all blood tastes the same. All blood nourishes the same. Caleb was still in the jungle night, with Do's hand on his foot and a gnat crawling on his lip.