

New Fiction by Bryan Thomas Woods: “Dirt and Bones”



Somewhere near the Hối Vân Pass, Vietnam, 1969

I found her body tangled among a thicket of vines on the jungle floor. Our patrol stopped for the night, and we were digging into our defensive positions when I tripped over her shoeless feet.

“Grab your e-tool, Private,” the Sergeant said. “Let’s get her buried before sunup.”

I slung my M16 across my back and pulled the collapsible shovel from my rucksack. With the serrated edge, I hacked at the undergrowth snaked around her legs.

“Slowly,” the Sergeant said. “Check for wires.” The Viet Cong, we called them Charlie, booby-trapped the entire jungle. The Sergeant slowly ran his hand along the thickest vine, which wrapped around her shoulders. He followed it to the ground before slicing the root with the precision of a surgeon.

Around us, our platoon recovered from a nine-hour push through an uneven mountain pass. But in the boonies, sleep was elusive. Most nights, we sat back-to-back, resting in two-hour shifts, awaiting Charlie’s arrival. Their sadistic game of hide and seek.

Finally loose from her planted chains, the moonlight illuminated her body. She was short and thin, with calloused hands. Probably from a nearby farming village. The cotton threads that covered her torso were torn and blood-soaked. Her brown eyes peered through a veil of knotted black hair and followed me like Mona Lisa’s gaze. My stomach knotted.

"What are you going to do back home, Private?" the Sergeant asked. With the tip of his shovel, he drew a circle in the mud. A place to start digging.

I wrestled my gaze from hers. "I'd like to write. Fiction, maybe nonfiction. I don't know."

"Really, a famous author? Book signings, cafés in Paris, all that crap?"

"Not like that. I wouldn't even use my real name."

"Who in their right mind would do that?" the Sergeant said.

"Mark Twain was Samuel Langhorne Clemens." I slid my shovel into the muck and tossed it off to the side, accidentally splashing across her face. With a rag, I wiped away the mud and pushed her hair from her eyes. In the trees, the nightbirds bellowed like a chorus of trombones.

"Is it one of ours?" the Sergeant asked. The hole in her ribcage was the size of a cherry tomato, but that wouldn't tell where it came from. Charlie's AK47 and our M16s made similar entry wounds but exited in different spots.

The AK47's 7.62 round was powerful enough to blast straight through a femur. Our 5.56 rounds were smaller but faster. The bullet tumbled around inside the body, wreaking havoc on tendons, muscles, and organs before exiting somewhere completely different.

But she had no exit wound.

"Everyone knew who Twain was. He got the money and the fame," the Sergeant said.

"The Bronte's didn't. Sure, they used men's names because women had a tough time getting published. But Emily hated the notoriety."

In the distance, the bushes rustled. Then, the jungle went silent. I froze. The Sergeant grabbed my flak jacket and pulled me into the hole. I strapped my helmet, pulled my M16 close, and held my breath.

Her body laid still at the mouth of the hole, staring up at the night sky. For over an hour, we crouched in silence, searching for eyeballs in the brush. But that night, no one came.

"I get it," the Sergeant said after we went back to digging. "You just want to be broke."

"No, it's about the message. Orwell was a pen name to separate himself and his family from his ideology."

"What kind of man puts ideas like that into the world and won't stamp his name on it?"

"That's the point. The story is more important than the name."

"That's where you're wrong. I think that's just what people say because, in the end, most names will be lost. The story goes on without them."

We finished the hole and tossed our shovels to the side. It wasn't 6 feet deep, maybe half that. The Sergeant grabbed her shoulders. I lifted her feet, and we slid her into the muddy ditch.

"Do you want to say a prayer?" I asked.

He shook his head no. "You're the writer. You say something."

But I couldn't find the right words. So, we bowed our heads in silence. Then we picked up our shovels and filled in the hole.