Percussive Lights

He stared at the two fans, *thump thump whooshing* above, half-broken and hanging industrial remnants of the 70s. He'd suspended them there, secured haphazardly to the joists of the tropically inspired grass hut shed. His eyes zoomed in and out of focus, his mind plummeting into a world not forgotten. The sound of the fans – normally a constant, reassuring break from the silence of the suburbs – caused him to consciously glare fixatedly at the ground: wave after wave of timed strobed daggers from the fluorescents danced there, reflecting their light onto the hard, packed earth of the shed floor like the strobes from the choppers. Lifting his hands, Noel, now seventy-five, marvelled at his sun-spotted hands, hands of an old man, hands that told him stories.

It was with his hands. . .

Reaching toward the table, he fetched the lukewarm longneck, longing for some comfort.

Raising the bottle to drink, he followed the motion of his arm and shaking hand, the hard glass rattling against his teeth as he drank. Remnants of the day's heat trapped in the shed pressed down from above, sinking into his skin in waves. Sweat beaded and trickled down his arm, the sensation adding to his disorientation.

Intense humidity transported him to a known place, a time so long ago. Half-dropping the bottle back onto the table, he closed his eyes and sat slovenly back into his chair, exhausted from his day's drinking. The rhythmic whirring above and the flickering light invited his memories, sending him back to the past, back to the jungle.

The percussion of the blades and the flashing bursts of covering gunfire from the approaching Chinook rang out as a staccato siren. In his hands, he held the soldier upright in a sitting position, a tourniquet fixed high around a flapping, semi-detached arm. Around him on the flattened elephant grass lay twenty-three men, all wounded, some near death from the dying moans that mixed with the cries for morphine. His throat tightened, and he tried to swallow. Salty excess rose from his stomach to his clenched mouth.

In the distance, through the orange haze of the flares, he could see another two choppers coming, low and hanging close to the ground. The soldier's blood filled the air, splotching his khaki, adding unwanted, metallic-smelling, sticky camouflage. Noel reached for another vial to ease the man's journey. As the chopper landed, the

soldier's grip on his hand loosened, his hanging arm no longer ebbing its life force as though the avian arrival was the signal to sign out. The whirring blades forced him to look away from the dead soldier, only to find another man splayed and reaching for Noel's medic's pack: for the relief contained inside.

He returned to the present and raised his hands to his face, smelling the blood, his shaking fingers alarming him. He refocused and stared at the hole in the corner of the shed he'd dug for a latrine several years ago. He looked at his hands. The age spots were gone... he was still back there, dissociating and caught between worlds: the taste of gore in the air, the thumping in the air and in his temples, a muffled 'hello' in the distance, and the sound of approaching tyres on the gravel.

He stood to attention. The chair teetered and crashed, upside down, onto the dank floor of the shed, left there like a corpse.

The twelve-year-old boy rode his push-bike into the yard, yelling a greeting to whoever cared, and leaned it against the house. Hearing no sound from the back of the yard, but expecting the worst, Noel's grandson — who had been holidaying with him and his wife for the last month — moved cautiously toward the shed. He paused by the house, knowing that the first time he'd found Noel like this, he could do nothing to help. He shuddered at the memory of the arguments between his grandfather and his grandmother while he was meant to be sleeping, the accusations thrown between his grandparents causing him heartache as he lay on his bed. Out of a need to help his grandfather, he'd recently joined St John Ambulance to learn how he could help his grandfather.

Stepping quietly on the driveway, eyes alert for movement, the boy edged closer but stopped when he saw his grandfather standing there at attention, his gaze fixed on the corner of the shed where the boy knew the hole was. *Not again*. He walked towards the mango tree adjacent to the shed and sat down in the late-afternoon shade and waited for the inescapable.

In that moment, Noel was on parade with the dead soldiers, standing firm in his conviction that he'd never forget them. After all of this time, his body retained the reality of those days of battle. Standing there, rigid and solemn, his soldiers

lived again, their death masks animating smiles through sunken eyes. With trembling hands, he saluted to the void.

His eyes shifted sideways to the hole in the corner of the shed. The rancid stench radiating from it filled his nostrils. Bile reached his mouth again, and he broke his stance, crumbling to his knees. He began crawling to the hole. Dirt from the floor lodged under his fingernails. Gasping between breaths, the vile acidity caused him to retch, filling his mouth with regurgitated beer, his head spinning viciously with every pounding heartbeat, his tanned hands stained reddish-brown.

As he hovered over the hole, years of torment flooded his mind: the men he'd lost, the guilt and shame of not saving them, the festering of wounds as they waited, the cries for help. It was always the same: a daily ritual that honoured the dead.

He collapsed over the hole, his legs and arms splayed out as his body convulsed its contents into the hole; its perimeter supporting his forehead, the stench causing him to gag and vomit simultaneously, choking him.

As the mind of the retired medic reeled and collapsed in on itself, dancing images of the aftermath of battle projected in his mind's eye, a collaboration of years of remorse and unwanted guilt. From the ether, Noel could feel small hands cradling his head.

'Grandpa.' The boy whispered gently. 'You'll be okay.'

Noel tried to raise his head from the hole, but was weakened. Mumbling through bile-filled lips, his consciousness returning, he gasped, 'All of them. They've come again. I'm so sorry, son.'

'They can't hurt you.'

'I...' Noel coughed, and his body convulsed.

The boy pushed his grandfather over onto his side, away from the hole. 'Stay there.' Reaching into Noel's hyperextended mouth with his small fingers, he knew enough to scoop the obstruction out to help Noel breathe.

Noel grunted as he did this, embarrassed at his sickly state. With the gunk removed, the visions of the dead soldiers dissipated, leaving him lying in the dirt, his elbows and legs covered in earth. His head throbbed painfully from the exertion, and his lungs heaved as he regained his breath.

'Grandpa, you'll have to get up. We should rinse you off before Grandma finds us.' Beckoning with arms extended, the boy's eyes implored him with fascination and pity. Noel reached out for the young boy's hands, forming a monkey grip. Looking into his eyes, Noel was astounded

to see the same bravery and sacrifice there that he once had. He briefly smiled at his grandson, and the boy returned it with a firm squeeze. 'On three.' As the boy counted, Noel readied himself and marvelled at the young man's strength.

'You're a lot like I was when I was younger. Thank you.'

Once steady on his feet, the boy led him away from the shed toward the outdoor shower at the side of the house. Noel stood as the boy turned on the faucet, cold water from the overhead tank washing the red-brown stains down the drain in the cement pad. He scrubbed his hands and noticed the dirt under his nails: a reminder of his lapse into remembrance, his drinking and the near-fatal consequences. Raising his face to the spitting streams, he rinsed his mouth several times before turning off the tap. Sodden and dripping, Noel turned to look back at the shed.

He saw the overturned chair and the fan blades spinning above. He saw the flicker of the fluorescent lights. There was no sound apart from the boy speaking.

'Come and sit down with me.' The boy walked towards the mango tree and sat down in the shade.

Noel joined his grandson and gingerly lowered his aging body to the ground. The shed stood animated against a blood orange sky, the hole and his humiliation hidden from view. The hole waited for him, for another day, for another attempt at combating his memories. He would not forget.

'What do we tell, Grandma?' The boy asked.

'She knows, son . . . she knows.'

Noel put his arm around the boy's shoulder and stared off into the twilight.