

The Man in the Doorway

by Michael Ryerson

They came in low and hot, close to the trees and dropped their tail in a flare, rocked forward and we raced for the open doorways. This was always the worst for us, we couldn't hear anything and our backs were turned to the tree line. The best you could hope for was a sign on the face of the man in the doorway, leaning out waiting to help with a tug or to lay down some lead. Sometimes you could glance quickly at his face and pick up a clue as to what was about to happen. We would pitch ourselves in headfirst and tumble against the scuffed riveted aluminum, grab for a handhold and will that son-of-a-bitch into the air. Sometimes the deck was slick with blood or worse, sometimes something had been left in the shadows under the web seats, sometimes they landed in a shallow river to wash them out. Sometimes they were late, sometimes...they were parked in some other LZ with their rotors turning a lazy arc, a ghost crew strapped in once too often, motionless, waiting for their own lift, their own bags, once too often into the margins. The getting on and the getting off were the worst for us but this was all he knew, the man in the doorway, he was always standing there in the noise, watching, urging...swinging out with his gun, grabbing the black plastic and heaving, leaning out and spitting, spitting the taste away, as though it would go away...They came in low and hot, close to the trees and dropped their tail in a flare, rocked forward and began to kick the boxes out, bouncing against the skids, piling up on each other, food and water, and bullets...a thousand pounds of C's, warm water and rounds, 7.62mm, half a ton of life and death. And when the deck was clear, we would pile the bags, swing them against their weight and throw them through the doorway, his doorway, onto his deck and nod and he'd speak into that little mic and they'd go nose down and lift into their last flight, their last extraction. Sometimes he'd raise a thumb or perhaps a fist or sometimes just a sly, knowing smile, knowing we were staying and he was going but also knowing he'd be back, he'd be back in a blink, standing in the swirling noise and the rotor wash, back to let us rush through his door and skid across his deck and will that son-of-a-bitch into the air. They came in low and hot, close to the trees and dropped their tail in a flare, rocked forward, kicked out the boxes and slipped the litter across the deck and sometimes he'd lean down and hold the IV and brush the dirt off of a bloodless face, or hold back the flailing arms and the tears, a thumbs-up to the right seat and you're only minutes away from the white sheets and the saws and the plasma. They came in low and hot, close to the trees and dropped their tail in a flare, rocked forward and we'd never hear that sound again without feeling our stomachs go just a bit weightless, listen just a bit closer for the gunfire and look up for ...**The Man in the Doorway.**