

COLORS OF THE COUNTRY

By Gene Hines

At sunrise, he looked across barbed wire toward the west. He liked to see the sun paint the colors of the country, to see the sun erase the dark and draw the clear lines of things, like an artist on canvas. He saw irrigation ditches and huts appear out of the depths. He heard the sound of helicopter blades whumping across the camp. He smoked a cigarette and walked back to his hooch. The other men were waiting, too.

“Where you been?” Steve Best said.

“You keeping track? Taking a shit. You want to go with me next time?” he answered.

“A little touchy this fine morning, aren’t we,” Wendall Jack said. “All together now—”

“1 – 2 – 3 fuck it!” they shouted in unison, their All for One and One for All.

The truck came and took them to the helicopter.

The takeoff always excited him. He loved the feel of lightness at the beginning of flight, to watch the ground

fall—escaping the Earth.

Cleve Rivers chewed gum, his jaws flexing fast as his heartbeat. Erskine Nugent had a wad of tobacco in his cheek and no place to spit. And the others, too, sat staring through the metal skin of the helicopter, toward places far away.

Twenty-eight minutes later, they were on the ground.

“Out! Out! Out!”

They sprinted away from the helicopter. Even above the din, he heard a bullet splat against its metal skin; Jesus-God, they have us already.

The helicopter lifted away, blowing a small hurricane around them.

“Move up, goddammit!”

A muffled explosion and a scream. In the corner of his eye, he saw arms and legs twisting and turning, flying through the air, a cartwheel; a carnival clown—speckled red—tumbled through the sky. The sun was straight above them now, a blinding yellow ball washing out the colors of the country, erasing all the lines.