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Made-for-TV Abandonment: Saigon, 1975

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G. Wesley Houp
Made-for-TV Abandonment: Saigon, 1975

Everything Changes

Spring 1975.

A convoy of Chinooks descends
on the United States embassy,
Saigon, South Vietnam.

choppers, one after the other,
dip into a parking lot,
pull away from a rooftop.
Bodies dangle hand to foot to hand
a chain of bodies falling back to earth.
When the last chopper lifts away,

South Vietnamese workers who fear
being left behind to face
the North Vietnamese army.
Some of them are trying desperately
to push their children on to
the overloaded helicopters.

The indelible image of abandonment.
Innocent children abandoned
to their fearful parents abandoned
to their ravaged country abandoned
to the advancing enemy.

Birth

I sit bundled on a sofa bed
still warm from my parents' bodies,
eyes glued to a small black and white
Zenith, where Annette and Tommy
and the rest of Mickey's club should
return in syndication; instead,

I think about an anthill where ants are
trying to pull a struggling bird
into the ground. Later, I'll find out
those "ants" are

*

Birth

Autumn 1970.

I join the citizenry
of a United States
of America that is
changed forever.

Nothing Changes
 The river rises and falls
 and continues to flow.
 Old men still gather
 at lock and dam #7 to fish
 and schools of white bass
 continue to run.
 Trains continue
 to cross the bridge
 and tobacco keeps growing
 tall in the summer.
 My life continues to unfold
 and the simple surprises
 of each new day continue
 to amaze and instruct me
 like any other kid growing up
 in paradise.

Everything Changes

I won't really understand
 the significance of Vietnam
 for years.
 I only know that my
 best friend's dad
 no longer plays guitar,
 staggers everywhere he goes
 and either shouts or slurs
 what he means to say.
 And he's been there—an M.P.
 and then a casualty.
 My friend explains,

"He was hit in the head with a grenade. In combat."

Later on, when he knows that I know
 it was really friendly fire,
 that a couple of young marines
 didn't take too kindly
 to his dad's gung ho demeanor
 and lobbed a grenade at his feet
 that blew off part of his head
 and left him paralyzed in his left arm,
 that he had subsequently been
 a mouthy punk all his short life
 before going to 'Nam
 but could never have deserved this,
 and that all this is already

common knowledge, we never mention it.
 Some relationships are predicated
 on certain mutual silences.

*I always thought that no one was
 at fault for not speaking the truth.*

*

During those final days before collapse, someone placed a handmade sign in the embassy courtyard in Saigon. It read, "Turn off the light at the end of the tunnel when you leave."

*

Everything Changes

When ancient feuds
 threatened Europe,
 America was the light
 at the end of the tunnel.
 Later, when fascism
 threatened Europe and Asia,
 America, again, was the light
 at the end of the tunnel.
 We like to think we have
 always represented a light,
 a justice, when the dignity
 of humankind has been threatened.
 But in 1975 in Saigon
 when the last Chinook lifts away
 from the embassy's roof
 and the human chain breaks off
 and falls back to earth,
 a surge trips the breaker.

Birth

I am born into America
 at the end of the tunnel
 when the light goes out.
 And with that final image
 at the end of a decade of war,
 I, an unknowing and largely
 unconcerned witness
 to a television premier
 of royal abandonment,
 am made complicit.

*That's how it seems now.
 That's why I'm writing.*