

### What If I Didn't Die Outside Saigon

*So what do you want?* he growled inside the chopper, strapping me roughly to the stretcher as if I were already dead. "Jesus," I swore, delirious with pain, touching the hot mush of my legs. "To see my wife. Go home, play with my kids, help them grow up. You know." His face was granite, camouflaged, a sergeant or colonel who'd seen it all. He wore a parka in the rain, a stubby stale cigar bit tight between his teeth, an old machete like a scythe strapped to his back. He raised a hand and held the chopper. He wore a gold wrist watch with a bold sweep-second hand. The pilot glanced back, stared, and looked away. Bored, the old man asked, *Then what?* his cigar bobbing. I swallowed the morphine, about to pass out, and said, "More time. To think, plant trees, teach my kids to fish and catch a ball." *Yeah?* he said, sucking the cigar, thinner than he seemed at first. Through a torrent of rain, I saw the jungle closing over me like night. "And travel," I said, desperate, "to see the world. That's it, safe trips with loved ones. Long years to do whatever. Make something of my life. Make love, not war." I couldn't believe it, wise-cracking clichés, about to die. He didn't smile, but nodded. *So? What then?* "What then? What then? Listen, that's enough, isn't that enough?" His cigar puffed into flame, he sucked and blew four perfect rings, which floated through the open door and suddenly dissolved. Without a word, he leaned and touched my bloody stumps, unbuckled the stretcher straps and tore the *Killed-in-Action* marker from my chest. And I sat up somehow in bed, stiff-legged, out of breath, an old man with a room of photographs of children who've moved away, and a woman a little like my wife but twice her age, still sleeping in my bed.

*Walter McDonald*