

Two Poems

Stephen Benz

Uncle Jack's War Wound

Shortly after Parker's grisly death,
Jack went on furlough to the Philippines.
During war, things just happened, no use
asking how one moment led to the next.
It was all totally, brutally random, and that
was that. One day chance has Parker sit down
next to Jack in the mess tent. Small talk
turns up things in common. Stock car racing,
Bama football, Johnny Cash. Couple of
red dirt farm boys pulling jungle duty.
So they say, hey let's hang out some more,
maybe do something together next furlough.
Not twelve hours later, Parker's gone.
Accident. Mishandled mine. Blown to bits.
And Jack ends up strolling alone
down a stinking street in Olongapo.
The place was crazy with flies and girls,
very young girls standing in doorways,
hanging out windows, waving, whistling,

making these wacko sucking sounds.

At a sidewalk café, Jack sat for hours

watching it all, nursing a beer and pondering

where Parker was now: six feet under

the Punchbowl grass. The statue

of a Catholic saint, gravely wounded,

wavered in the hot breeze. Coals glowed

in braziers and sent up coils of smoke.

The beer went flat and Jack, absorbed

in the city's stinks, watched an old woman

pushing a fish cart, the pile of gray fish

clouded with flies. Blood trickled from mouths.

Blood smeared the fishmonger's apron.

Jack didn't move, not even when the sky

darkened and brought on a downpour, rain

blowing hard into shops, the shopkeepers

hurriedly dropping plastic sheets

over their wares, lowering awnings.

Rickshaws scurried for cover, girls vanished into

bars and makeshift bedrooms, stray dogs

whimpered for shelter. It was all helter-

skelter but Jack sat on, mesmerized.

His glass of beer filled with rainwater and ran over,
and the gutters were raging with runoff
that had strangely turned a deep, deep red.
It was then he knew he'd never make it through,
and if there was a way—any way at all—
he had to get out of this goddamn war,
whatever it took, whatever it took.

Uncle Bill's War

He went along with shipmates to drink beer
in bars where disco lights flashed
to synthetic music while girls
shook and shimmied and gyrated
on tabletops, somehow keeping balance
despite spiked heels and valium cocktails.

Rain was constant, rain in Olongapo,
rain in La Hermita, rain so furious
it drew him from the disco lights
and the dancers and the barkeep's chatter
about Japanese baseball and the low,
low bar fine for the girls. *You like? You like?*

He did not want girls. He only wanted to watch
the fearsome monsoon, marveling at the filth
its mad waters carried down the streets:
rotted fruit, chicken bones, dog shit,
bottles, cans, condoms, fish heads
swirling in the gutter rapids.

So he turned away from the girls
and stared out windows in the bars
that had windows, or stood at the doorway
squeezing a San Miguel by the throat,
rain splattering his Navy blues,
and for hours he watched
what the torrent carried past.
A doll's head. A straw sandal.
A carved water buffalo. A sailor's cap
blown off some drunk squid's head.

Once, during the height of the downpour,
runnels and ripples in the overflowing street,
the sodden corpse of a cat eddied past.
"Sweet Jesus," he said.

Behind him someone shouted,
What the hell are you looking at?
The girls giggled nervously,
the barkeep clucked *no good, no good,*
and his pals urged him back into the bar
where he could be spending his sailor's pay,
having a little fun and forgetting,

if only for the time being,
this fucked-up war and the many,
many ways it messed with your head.

Stephen Benz has published four books of creative nonfiction, including *Topographies* and *Reading the Signs* (both from Etruscan Press). He has also published a book of poems, *Americana Motel* (Main Street Rag Publishing Co.), along with essays in *New England Review*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *River Teeth*, *Boulevard*, and *Best American Travel Writing*. He lives in Albuquerque, where he teaches at University of New Mexico.
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