

STEPHEN CLOUD

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## Minor Incidents of War

### I. Borderlands Outpost

The day we attacked the village I took off  
the headset and went up the tower to watch  
with the nocks. Mortar exploded like seeds  
from overripe pods. Ricky shouted,  
*Hombre! Look at that! Woe!*

Ricky: my friend from East L.A.  
where the girls were so pretty, he said,  
sitting on car hoods and combing  
long black hair, singing siren songs.  
Man, that's where I want to be, I said,  
and Ricky laughed as if to say, No way,  
*puto*, no way. You're never getting out  
of here—not none of us.

Then one, two, three, four gunships  
lifted up like insects and crossed the swamps.  
Someone said they're going for the wounded,  
and Ricky said, Nah, they're gonna strafe

the survivors running the road to the north.  
Go get 'em, boys. ¡*Vamos, cabrones!*

At night, radio static was our white noise  
muffling the mortar fire. We slept in our sweat,  
Ricky tossing and groaning. He never slept well.

I tried to think of girls, those pretty girls  
in East L.A., but when I closed my eyes  
I saw only bomb-seeds spurting  
like dandelions on an August day back home.

## 2. What We Did

About half a mile from the hamlet  
we started a trench. The idea being,  
Lieutenant Bullneck said, to find a place  
close enough for us to haul the bodies  
without too much effort, but far enough  
so the frigging human rights hounds  
and jag-off journalists wouldn't find shit.  
A logistical nightmare, he called it.

He decided on this muddy embankment,  
the far side of a canal. Bullneck ordered me  
to pour out the lime. Did I complain?  
No sir, not a word. The clouds of powder  
stung my eyes, but I was glad  
I was only hauling bags.  
Myers, Sanders, and Duarte  
he detailed to the village,  
gave them the canisters and gas masks,  
and told them, Do it double time.

### 3. Foraging in Enemy Territory

After five days without a supply drop  
the lieutenant sent us out to forage  
in what remained of the villages.  
Earth and air seethed with chemicals.

We coughed as we walked,  
throats burning, bellies aching.  
God damn it all, Ricky said  
and let out a howl. Myers told him  
to shut the hell up and did he  
want every fucking sniper  
to know we were coming?  
The trees were all shredded and stripped,  
the swamplands stagnant and fetid,  
oily rainbows staining the water's surface.  
What's the map say, they asked me,  
and I made a show of reading it  
though we all knew damn well  
the land it represented was long since  
blown to kingdom come.

We found a village in the heat of day,  
a collection of charred huts  
circled around a well. Ricky pissed  
into the well and Myers told him to stick  
his goddamned cock back in his pants.  
Ricky's laugh echoed in the empty village.

We found nothing—not a rooster, not a dog,  
not so much as a kernel of rotted grain.  
But in the last hut there was a girl,  
naked, lying in thatch, her small breasts  
and belly striped with dirt. She looked up  
at us through animal eyes and babbled.

Myers said, Where is everybody?  
Ricky talked Spanish to her.  
The girl moaned. A lunatic, Myers said,  
abandoned when her family fled the gunships.

Ricky parted her legs with his gun and stared.  
Blood trickled from the girl. I had never  
seen this before. Forget it, man, I said.

We reported our failure to the lieutenant,  
who sure as hell wasn't pleased.  
He climbed the tower and scanned the horizon,  
said he gave us three days at best.

That night, I dreamed about the girl.  
I saw her blood as food. I touched her  
and licked my fingers. I knelt to bite her.  
When I woke up in the dark  
I was trembling and sick to my stomach.  
Ricky held a flashlight above his Bible  
and whispered verses from the Psalms.



After kicking around the West for a while (with stops in Spokane, Flagstaff, and Sedona), **STEPHEN CLOUD** has settled in Albuquerque, where he's fixing up an old adobe and working on poems. Recent publications include work in *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Portland Review*, *New Madrid*, *Shenandoah*, and *Tar River Poetry*.