Art of Nursing

By Susan Kramer O'Neill, BA, RN

Volunteering at the Orphanage, Hue, Viet Nam, 1969

Outside
inside a courtyard
boxed between concrete walls
turquoise sky and
dust floor beaten grassless by small scarred feet
they stand silent
eyes boldblack with fear
so many barefoot questions
  in shirts sent by earnest stateside churchladies

The fat sergeant revs his jeep
rubs sweatsoaked bald head on olivedrab sleeve
  weve made em toys you know
  me and the guys.
    swings.
      a slide even.
  they break em in one day
  nothin you can do
  little bastards dont know how to play

He waves a fat clean hand puttputts away

The skinny nun in flowing dusthemmed white
speaks French but
only if she has to
her bony hands dance a pantomime
lead me past
  (one shirt: sarasota florida
    the pantless owner scratches lice)
inside
into a darkblind sunless bay

Here i offer
listless skullfaced babies in bare woodslat cribs
bottles of despair in lieu of love
they suck with no will

I hold the babies

After
outside
inside the sunbaked courtyard
i hold them all
one by one
until the jeep returns
  it is my penance
  that it is not enough
  for any of us

Susan Kramer O'Neill is the author of *Don't Mean Nothing: Short Stories of Viet Nam* (University of Massachusetts, 2004) and the coeditor of *Vestal Review,* a literary quarterly. Her poems, essays, and stories have appeared in numerous literary journals, online zines, and mainstream periodicals. This poem is based on her experiences as a U.S. Army nurse during the Vietnam War. Contact author: skoneill@hotmail.com.

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