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 bold black with fear
so many barefoot questions
in shirts sent by earnest stateside churchladies

The fat sergeant revs his jeep
rubs sweat soaked 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 puttputs away

The skinny nun in flowing dust hemmed 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 skull faced 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.

Art of Nursing is coordinated by Sylvia Foley, senior editor: sylvia.foley@wolterskluwer.com.