

The Camp

Desire

Khao-I-Dang

Lunch

The Voice of America

Meeting Mrs Ping

Desire

Bangkok, and even the name reeks of it.
The girls in the girlie bars on Patpong
Road, they know that smell, they sell that smell — shit,
cum, curry, poontang, bodies at play, songs
they know you know, dances they know you know,
the English words on their bikini butts,
twinkling in sequins — *WINK. FOXY. GO-GO.*
The smell of dollars, baht, dong, roasting nuts —
they've known that aroma all their lives, who
the hell doesn't? Really, weren't we all born
knowing that smell? The monks, they know it, too,
silent, single file, first dim light of morning,
bearing their bowls, a little day-old
rice, a bit of fish — want reduced to this.
It still smells of suffering — in the folds
of their robes, that whiff of death, saffron, bliss.

Khao-I-Dang

My britches got bigger the day I met you
in a bamboo room, at a bamboo table,
sizing me up (I didn't have a clue) —
so damn sure of a world that never gave
less than what you demanded or deserved
or just made true. Couple of redheaded brats
like us, in a war zone — where'd we get the nerve
and what gave us the right, rat-a-tat-tat
mai pen lai days, Mekong nights . . . we recognized
refugees as people like us: alive,
moon-eyed, bee-stung but still there in the fight,
in a world that needed us, needed our jive —
Khao-I-Dang did too, back when we were brats,
eating up the last of our baby fat.

for Miss Lola

Lunch

They plopped him down (as we would later say)
like a big bag of potatoes, right there
on our long bamboo table, just the way
they (different they) plopped down lunch, right where
we were eating lunch, yes, that's how it was,

right in the middle of lunch, rice with rocks
to break our teeth and stir-fried weeds and what
may have been chicken, or dog, and the docs
were there, and the nurses, and all of us but
the interpreters, just us and the buzz

of flies and the distant pop-pop that made
the border so exciting, good for our
stories, and then they burst in with that dead
kid soldier, Khmer Rouge, alive an hour
before, here for autopsy, just because.

The Voice of America

In Thailand, where it's never cold, that one day was cold, a bleak November day, raw, damp — fresh misery to heap on sickness, guns and hunger, madness, mud and fear. The camp went quiet. Every stitch they had, they wore, rags on rags. We had no more to give them. We did have a radio, reception poor — the Voice of America whispered, trembled from the world we'd left, where election day was ending, the polls were closing, Wyoming clinched it: an old fool, nary a gray hair on a head untroubled by wisdom, would preside over perpetual morning with a smile and thrilling hints of war.

Meeting Mrs Ping

Laughing, forty-two to my twenty-two,
and lovely, still the belle of Phnom Penh
even after college, marriage, kids — then
hell: the war that throttled the city, blew
in on rocket wings, the rumble and pop
closer, every day closer, till the city
fell quiet, faceless boys streamed in, no stopping
them, black clothes, tire sandals, eyes unlit,
jungle boys no bigger than their guns came
from darkness to empty the city, empty
everything, kill everything . . . and then
five years later here you were, tart-tongued,
smiling, sassy, the queen of Khao-I-Dang
Camp, reaching through the wire, to me, alone.

for Sunly