

*Paul Elisha*

## Four Poems

### **Before The Echoes Die**

I must speak of this, while  
the bittersweet image of those islands  
recalls the same infernal green;  
tell it before a lifetime's jumbled  
residue careens remembrance  
down some trivial cul-de-sac,  
deletes the haunt from Jo Stafford's  
"I'll Be Seeing You" and  
Dorsey's tromboned eloquence  
quavers and fades to daunting silence;

the way it was when Gabriel Heater  
grieved for Europe on the radio news,  
told us how the "Japs" raped Asia's amplitude,  
one sacked city at a time. Oblivious,  
we listened to Sinatra sing  
"I'll never smile again," neither old  
nor wise enough to fathom  
what that meant; invading each  
insidious isle, certain a placid likeness  
lay just beyond its bloody beach;  
fancied Edens awash in Eves,  
their virtues scantily graced,  
Loreleis to sweeten our survival.

As victors, blest to savor  
 home's familiar face, we  
 discovered spaces where trifles dressed  
 the ticky tacky walls like icons;  
 cursed a darkness falsely lit  
 in halls where wisdom earlier  
 was nursed. Now beset by opiates  
 and hate, our fates are fed by hard rock  
 and a thousand points of light.

Though the thought of all this pales  
 outright, in terms of what we saw:  
 ethic etched in body parts  
 marking war's horizon, outrage  
 tacked on a casualty dispatch  
 in the newspaper office window,  
 reduced to yellowed sheets on countertops,  
 what's past is but a page  
 in which tomorrow's fish is wrapped.

## **Boots**

Remember, in the old Movietone newsreel,  
 the mirror imaged rows in black,  
 how they truncheoned power onto pavement;  
 how, with each succeeding step,  
 the inevitable echoed across Nurnberg's  
 bleak concrete, that all those boots  
 belonged there? The boot Remarque described  
 in "All Quiet On The Western Front,"  
 held a Boche private's leg.  
 Its heel, stained with sweet dung scent,  
 hinged curiously near his face  
 while cringing fingers, below,  
 slowly traced a bloody stump.

By the time he'd written "Arch Of Triumph,"  
 Remarque had learned better. The Gestapo

chauffeur, unfazed, thrust himself  
 between a dazed Chech girl's thighs  
 as his captain ordered, tunic  
 neatly draped on a nearby chair  
 but he never took off his boots.  
 Notice how polished ones  
 efface their wearers, homogenize.  
 From the knees down, Hideki Tojo  
 and MacArthur could have been twins.  
 How do we apprise the difference?

Outside that tent on an Attu beach,  
 a red cross hyped the sale  
 of amputations, cheap, no waiting.  
 Baiting us not to linger, there,  
 a medic eyed the growing pile  
 of single combat boots. "That,"  
 he smiled, "is how we handle frost-bite!"  
 Those boots, we learned, lacked prejudice;  
 the plowboys resting unconcerned  
 beside a former factory foreman's;  
 once pallid Pittsburgh jailer's  
 atop a Carolina cotton baler's.

I stomped that lava beach,  
 churned my foot to bloody puree  
 until warm wetness steeped  
 what would still be mine. Now,  
 hugging concrete in a strip mall lot,  
 years of missteps undefined,  
 this stunned Vet hears a cherub say:  
 "Old sport, I think your leg is broken.  
 Sorry but this is going to hurt;  
 we'll have to remove your boot."

## Essences

In that tent on the mangrove fringe  
 Thinking I had cheated death  
 But not quite believing it  
 Looking at splints and bandages  
 Arms in permanent supplication  
 As the kamikaze's engine  
 Droned its die-hard obbligato  
 "Hit the ditch!" A nurse intoned  
 Then dove and landed on top of me

"Don't know how you feel," she bitched  
 "But I'll be damned if I will die  
 Still hungering for love"  
 As our bodies intertwined  
 There in a muddy crucible  
 I recall her kiss had the taste  
 Of something I couldn't identify.

## Taking The Green Goddess

Garnishing the dark horizon, veiled  
 Scylla hugs her verdant shoal,  
 tempts us toward an ages old  
 seduction; its grim embrace augurs  
 indulgence baptized in blood, bone  
 and strife. The summons haunts each  
 tracer arc, bids us revisit  
 life primeval on this pubic shore.

Flickered image on the lagoon  
 hums "The Moon of Manakoora;" Lamour  
 oscillates to sighing guitars, as Hope  
 observes her sloped strand through ogly  
 eyes and Crosby croons lewd  
 lullabies, to every mother's son  
 who's ever teased himself with thoughts of

midnight bliss, laments the loss of manhood's  
tenderest hours. As geysered mortars  
flower, a rocket signals—"Come!" Destroyers  
"Whoop!" and we're off on the road to Charybdis.

**Paul Elisha's** poetry appeared in **WLA's** Spring/Summer issue for 1997. A political commentator and host of music and poetry programs for WAMC-FM, Northeast Public Radio in Albany, New York, he is currently working on a series of poems based on experiences of 27<sup>th</sup> Infantry combat veterans, in the Saipan invasion (June, 1944), under a community arts grant from the New York State Council on the Arts.