

Michael Waters

The Torches

Nicaragua

Limbs lopped off, the fathers
thrashed through the orchard
till a torch was touched to their hair
and they were consumed by the unearthly
love that lifted their souls toward heaven.
How impossible to mute the body with belief.
Women closed their shutters and crossed themselves.
Soldiers jeered. But the burning were beyond
the grievous clamor of the New World.

Clear sky that night, the thousand stars
assuming tentative shapes
like children assembling in the schoolyard.
Ashes smoldered on the hillside.
Then rain. By morning, only chipped dice
and scorched soil remained.

What's irrefutable is that sweeping odor,
not the fume of charred tongues and gasoline,
but the first profuse blossoming of orchids,
a fragrant exhalation from the earth's core,
and those sudden shafts of light
crisscrossing in late afternoon
as the missing bear through the marketplace
their flaming tapers of spine, their wicks of hair.

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Negative

The faces of the soldiers are white
with smoke, with grease.
The soldiers are crossing a field
of black snow. On the horizon,

white barbed-wire snaps in the air.
The blunt tanks are also white,
almost beautiful. They lumber
across the snow like polar bears.

They refuse to recoil from black
bursts of flame that shoot
from flame-throwers. Black
explosions startle the white crows,

followed by white smoke rising
toward the black sky. Negative:
this film unwinding again and again.
Negative: the soldiers are crossing

the field, approaching the river,
bearing rifles like icicles
across their chests. Their faces
are lowered against the stiff wind,

their eyes closed against the black
glare of snow. Negative:
the black letters near their hearts,
folded neatly and wrapped in tin.

The film unwinds and loses focus.
The soldiers can no longer see
into the future. Negative:
black crosses, the white corpses.

I want this film to stop, but
the lights in the theater refuse
to rise. On the screen, the final
frame, frozen, forever a pure black.

Michael Waters is Professor of English at Salisbury University. Recent books include *Parthenopi: New and Selected Poems* (BOA Editions, 2001) and (with the late A. Poulin, Jr.) *Contemporary American Poetry. Seventh Edition* (Houghton Mifflin, 2001). He has also edited *A. Poulin, Jr.: Selected Poems* (BOA Editions, 2001) and co-edited (with Robert Hedin) *Perfect in Their Art: Poems on Boxing from Homer to Ali* (Southern Illinois UP, 2003). He has been the recipient of a Fellowship in Creative Writing from the National Endowment for the Arts and two Pushcart Prizes.