

New Nonfiction from Ciel Downing: “Burn Baby Burn”



“Fire in the belly!” “Be all you can be!” “Get fired up!” Slogans to incite, ignite, excite and encourage living on the edge—the thrill of defying death on the pages of peril. “Fire in the hole!” The acrid tang of sulfur and gun powder odor, the tympanic thrum in my ears. “Drive on!” “Hoorah!” Be honorable—I wanted that. “God! Duty! Country!” Be a part of something greater than yourself; ask what you can do for your country. “Lockdown, lockdown—fires take your position!” Words seared into my adrenalin. The Pavlovian response to leap from the warm comfort of my bed to draping myself with combat gear, bare feet to boots, racing to a foxhole.

Each time my Sgt. copped a quick feel, each time I screamed “Cover me!” the soft and good and kind parts of me fragmented and fell away making me sharper, more linear, more chiseled. Each leer and lip lock, each lock and load inventoried in perpetuity in my brain—tiny registers of offense, stacking up sandbags of resistance, numbness, defenses inside me precariously high—get ready, keep vigilant—always on the alert. Balance, balance—those sandbags teeter and threaten to topple unceasingly.

“Ruck up!” (time to move out). “Tits up!” (dead person ahead). “All one big Charlie Foxtrot,” (cluster fuck). Sing along with the cadence, “We’re gonna rape, kill, pillage and burn!” and the stack gets higher, sleep gets leaner, readiness gets sharper and the air gets thinner. Tight rope walking on concertina wire. It’s all about being one of the boys, only I’m not. It’s all about embracing the aggression and dismissing the vile, only I don’t and I can’t. It’s going all in...only I don’t belong “in.”

Silverfish in shower drains, rats and rodents running rampant in streets where school children play crawling on warheads, where raw sewage seeps into rice fields. It's hookworms in the topsoil, cockroaches in the quarters, abandoned Amerasians, beggars, parasites and prostitutes—too much to keep up with. Jackhammering at my privilege, burrowing into my core, nicking away tiny shards of me. Increasing the pounding percussion in my ears, behind my eyes, throughout my head. Grinding my teeth unconsciously, knowing the expectations roll like an unstoppable boulder: higher, faster, smarter, more than, stronger, better, first place, tight group until yeah, that edge is now a razor; my nerves electric current, my heart in a chronic race with my respiration. The alert sirens and flashing lights of gray matter pinwheeling wildly, working their way into a tornado-like funnel of frantic preparedness. Ever vigilant, ever ready, every day, every second.

“So get fired up Kid—get that fire in the belly!” with a yuk yuk solid slap on the back. Aspirations of the American Way. But more of me keeps dying. Splintering off, bleeding out, disfiguring like a Picasso. Bits of me swept up and away like smoke off a moth's wing; dust motes of shoulds and oughts with nowhere to go. A wail chafes my throat, “God! Help me!” But god is a hologram bubble here; visible one second, then evaporates and is gone. What would there be to help anyway? All that fire leaves—is ash.