time. He took us past burnt animal pens, each with its own dead water buffalo. The blackened stalks of palm trees towered above us as we entered the village. First we came upon an old man whose skin was burned green and black. He lay on his back on a raised bed of wood and thatch that had not been burned. He wore a tattered purple robe that had caught on fire but was not completely burned. Rigor mortis had raised his hands and arms toward the lowering sky. His eyes were closed. Flies buzzed around his open mouth. The wind blew at his scorched white hair. Next we passed an elderly couple whose bodies lay curled like fruit peelings in front of a house that had burned to a bed of glowing coals. The old woman's mouth was open and revealed teeth and gums blackened by betel nut. The thin man hacked through a wall of broken and smoking bushes with a machete. We emerged from the ruined hedgerow into a stone courtyard that was bordered on three other sides by a low stone wall. At its center was a house, its white walls built of stucco and mud topped by a peaked clay cobbled roof that had partially collapsed. The walls were stained by moss and in parts overgrown with vines, some of which had been set afire. The courtyard was filled with the bodies of children. Some of them were terribly burned or mangled. Some seemed only alseep, their skins a bright cherry color as if they had been sunburned. Some bodies did not seem to be complete, and others seemed to be more than one, possibly fused by heat. There were at least a score of them, perhaps more, and their ages ranged from adolescense to babies.

I stopped and stared at them. I almost vomited at the same moment my eyes filled with tears. I felt thin callouses that I had spread over my sanity blister and rupture like the scabs of wounds, and I was engulfed in despair and shame. My mind raced with ugly sights of broken children in cities and villages, starved and emaciated children whose arms or legs were fly infested stumps, whose small bodies were raw and bleeding from wounds and infections, children who begged and stole for food like desperate young wolves and died horribly alone and unmourned. I tried to shut them out of my eyes for months, I had deafened my ears to their screams and pleas, but they persistently haunted my thoughts and horror ridden dreams. I knew instantly with the most chilling horror I had ever felt that the dead children had been left in the courtyard intentionally, that they had been carried from all parts of the burning village by survivors who fled into the fields away from us, perhaps most of them to be chopped down by the helicopters that hunted in the wake of the jets on the far side of the valley.

Willie Mac stopped and stood with me in the deep silence of the evening wind, the sounds of rain, a faraway shooting. His shocked and deathly tired eyes were empty. His gaunt face was expressionless. He tried to speak but his voice broke. Marines passed us, moving deeper into the ruined village, their rifles held low and arcing nervously like snakes searching for prey. Some of the men looked at the children, most of them tried not to. They did not want these deaths to their lives, they wanted to sympathize only with themselves.

"They left them for us," I said almost in a whisper.

I felt Willie Mac's sudden hard gripping of my arm, pulling me away. "Come on," he said. "It's no good." I stumbled along with him and moved deeper into the village. We came across more bodies, steaming with flies, and in some instances parts of bodies, and the bodies of several dead pigs, dogs and water buffalo that had been cremated in pens behind burnt houses. We found some marines sitting on the hard dirt floor of a partially roofed house fringed by a grove of blackened palm trees. "Find yourselves some place to crap out," one of them said. "We're staying the night."

Heavy rain fell most of the night. For a long time I leaned against the door frame of a house that was not completely destroyed and stared out into the dark toward the moldy courtyard and the dead children. My vision was obscured by smashed burnt dwellings and hedgerows, and by the ghostly density of rain and the fogs that rose from the mud and were whipped by the wind into tattered streamers that seemed to be souls leaving the dead, wreathing about the scattered ashes of their homes a final moment before vanishing into the stormy sky. I imagined the bodies of the children, withered and curled like leaves fallen from trees, pounded by the monsoon rains into a compost, their blood leeched by the rain, their horrible burns cooled and softened.

I turned and shouted into the darkness of the hut. "Why didn't they get the hell out of here, they knew we were coming, they knew we'd blow them away. . ."

"Shut up," Willie Mac hissed. "You almost got yourself convinced it's their own fault they're dead."

"Bullshit!"

"You probably wouldn't even give a shit if you hadn't seen the kids."

"I've seen kids blown away."

"Sure, but not like that," he said quietly. "You're scared. You think those kids are your death warrant. You think they're going to get us for this."

"What about the sniper?"

"What about him? All he did was pop one of our boys. We turned their kids into torches."

He was right. I was horrified by the hatred behind the display of the children and at the justice of their vegeance.

I smoked a cigarette and rolled into a poncho but was unable to sleep. I lay awake until I became aware that it was my mother's birthday. I had forgotten. Perhaps the children made me remember. I wondered if any of their mothers remained alive, and felt again my fear of their hatred. I wondered also if I would ever have the courage to tell my mother of these children I helped destroy.

"Happy birthday mother," I whispered. "Your kids are dead."

"You say something?" Willie Mac's sleepy voice croaked.

"I was thinking about my mother."

"You're a cesspool of neuroses."

"I just remembered it's her birthday."

"Happy birthday mother," Willie Mac said.

The next morning we left the village and climbed the mountains on the far side of the valley.

— Michael Paul McCusker
(from an unfinished book)

GYNECOLOGY:

The medical science of disease, reproductive physiology, and endocrinology in women.

OBSTETRICS:

The branch of medicine concerned with the care of women during pregnancy, childbirth and the period following delivery.

PEDIATRICS:

The branch of medicine that deals with the care of infants and children and the treatment of their diseases.

HOME BIRTH:

The act or condition of birth at the home of a parent; birth outside of a hospital.

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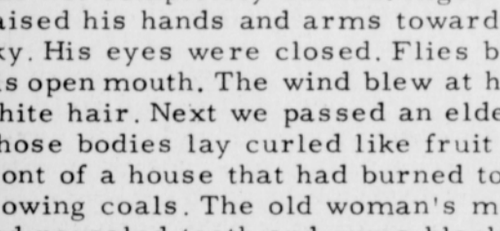

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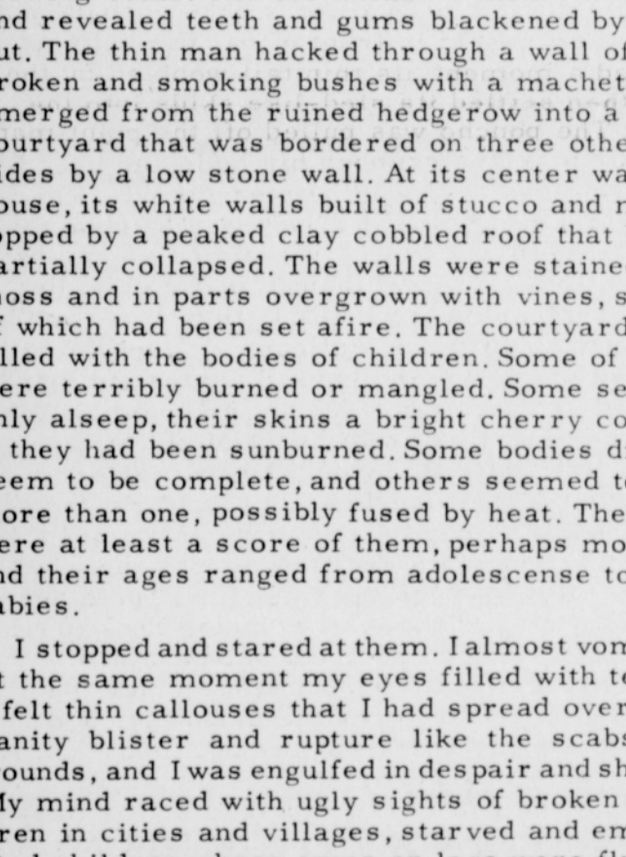

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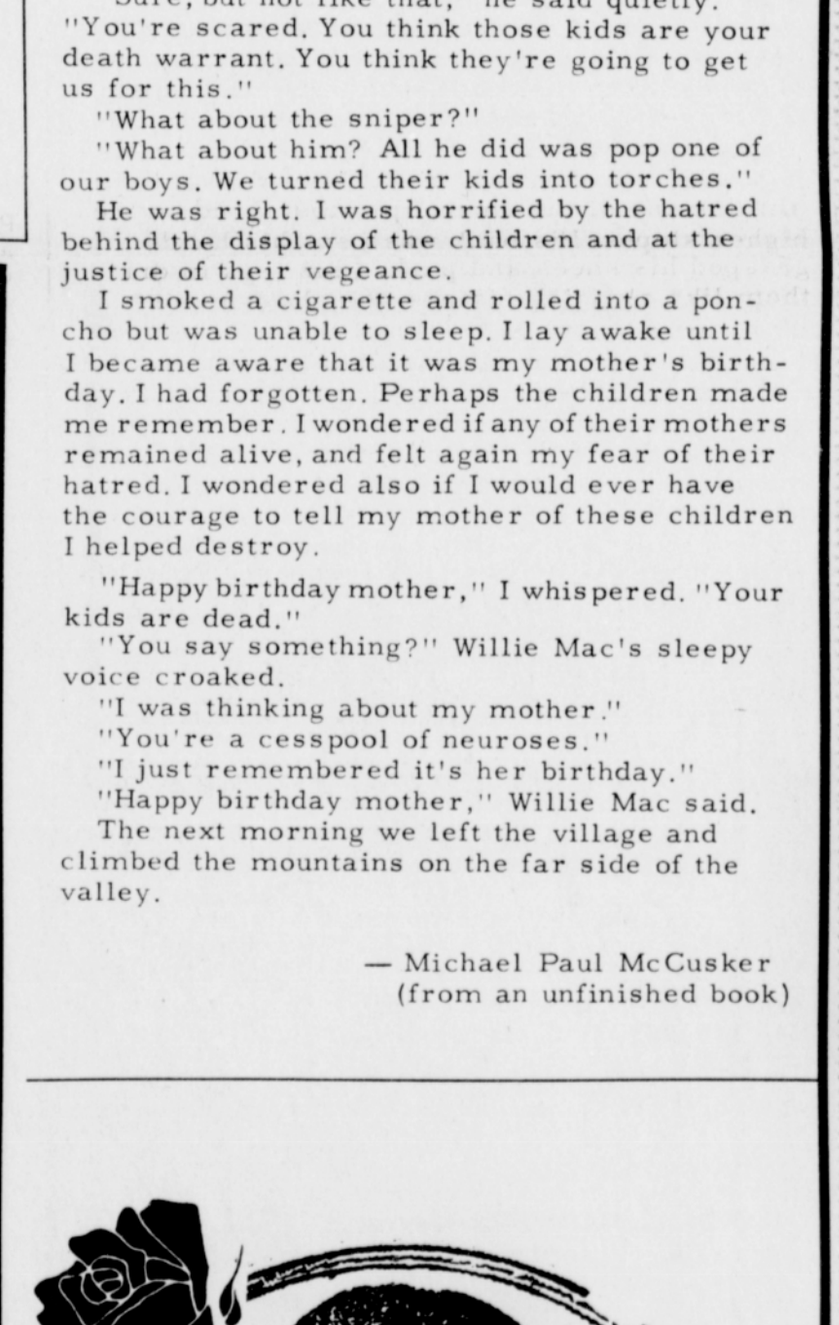

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