IN THE SHADOWS OF THE SUN

by Alexander Parsons

"The illusion of land ownership creates a cheap workforce in the fields: people who often pay more than they are paid to work, as we say, like slaves. But, oh, they are rich in illusions of independence, and they are also very proud, which is not an illusion."

-James Galvin, *The Meadow*

I don't believe that we will be lifted up

and transfixed by radiance.

One incandescent dusky world is all there is.

-Edward Hirsch, "Incandescence at Dusk"

1

Beneath a sky burned vaporous white the men marched as they had the day before and would the day after and the day after that. The dust from those who had passed before imbued the humid air with a granularity and phantom mass-a resistance-as manifest as the weight of exhausted muscle.

They marched along a gradual incline where the dust stirred in thick currents at their feet and they marched along a straightaway where the dust glowed in a white nimbus. Then the loose-columned group bunched to a stop where the road passed through a field of dry cogon grass.

Jack stumbled into the man ahead of him but he did not look up from the sun-impacted road. The faint staccato of the Japanese officer at the front of the ranks came to him from a great remove. He stared across the road. A blackened sedan jutted from a swale of burnt grass. One tire still smoked. Something dark was smeared on the crazed windshield. At the bottom of the swale shone the brackish mud of a carabao wallow. A dead Filipino lay there. His uniform was stretched tight as sausage casing over his body. His pant pockets were turned out. The smell of water and rot was unbearable.

A guard waved a fixed bayonet. Jack saw he'd stepped from his column toward the wallow. He felt a tug on his belt as Conrad pulled him deeper into the ranks. They were ordered to sit. Conrad steadied him as he kneeled. The dust was powdery and white. It settled like a particulate of the heat. Jack breathed shallowly. An ache sharpened

with each expansion of his ribs. His breast pocket held a deck of cards with a divot prised free where shrapnel had struck.

A light breeze threshed through the high grass. The men stilled. Not far from the wallow two Japanese guards squatted with their tin mess kits. They ate their lugao with the same famished intensity that the American and Filipino POWs fixed on them. Near two hundred eyes tracked the boiled rice paste from kit to mouth, took in the glint of water trickling from canteen to tongue. This went on for what seemed a long time. The guards wore woolen field caps with a gold star sewn to the front and cloth panels that protected their necks from the sun. The barrels of their Model 38s jutted above their shoulders, the bayonets burnished silver. They were always careful to clean them, Jack thought.

As the guards finished, an American second lieutenant rose and stepped from the ranks. Light glanced from the lenses of his spectacles and the gold bar insignia on the shoulder of his uniform. He gestured with his canteen toward the wallow. The guards looked at each other. One closed his kit and stood and walked toward the front of the column. The other stared after him. He said

something and when the lieutenant did not respond he said it again and yanked the canteen from the lieutenant's hand. He turned to the wallow and filled the canteen. When he turned back toward the men he paused. A murmur swept through the line. Several men stood. Then they sat back down.

The guard looked up the road. His officer strode toward him. He was solidly built and moved mechanically, as if on parade. He held one hand to the hilt of his saber to keep the scabbard's tip from dragging in the dust, the effect terrifyingly comic. The men he passed hushed and stilled, ducking their heads as their eyes marked his progress.

He stepped between the American lieutenant and the guard. He knocked the canteen from the guard's hand and clouted him. Jack watched the water stain the ground. When the guard fell the officer waited for him to stand and resumed striking him as if he had not been interrupted. He did this twice with a furious indifference. Then he turned to the lieutenant. He reached out and removed his glasses and snapped the frames and dropped them in the dirt.

The lieutenant's face was white with dust. He stared out at the frayed sweep of cogon grass as if to memorize the sight.

The officer spoke to the guard without looking at him. The guard set off at an unsteady run. Blood dripped from his chin. The officer surveyed the Americans and Filipinos. He circled the lieutenant and ripped the man's insignia from his uniform and dropped these by the glasses and crushed them all with his bootheel. The lieutenant swayed as if the ground were unsteady.

The heat was unbelievable. Jack wanted to retreat deep into his body, to shelter in the dark recesses of his skull until evening's fall. One of several New Mexicans from the scattered 200th Coast Artillery, he had been fighting in gradual retreat for nearly three months, first abandoning Clark Air Field to Japanese air raids, then leaving Manila for the more defensible Bataan Peninsula. Fighting as provisional infantry on the southwest side of the Bataan Peninsula, he and Conrad and the others of the 200th had joined the general surrender the previous day, fatigued, malarial, starving, abandoned by General MacArthur months prior, and by American war strategy even before that.

The guard trotted back with two narrow-bladed entrenching tools that clattered dully. The chest of his olive uniform was smeared a brighter white where dust had thickened over the bloodstains from his split lip.

The Japanese guard and the American lieutenant fell to digging by the wallow.

From where he kneeled, Jack closed his eyes. It was almost possible to imagine away everything but the heat and the tickling of the flies at the corners of his mouth. His eardrums had been damaged by the shell that ruined his cards and for the moment the partial deafness was a gift. He licked his lips, tasting the salt from his sweat as a malarial chill ran through him. His body seemed to gain and shed weight, as if he were floating in a swell or as if what tethered him to the ground had grown elastic. He remembered swimming in the ranch cistern at sunset just a year before. The warm water had held him suspended like some lighter medium, like air made fluid. He floated with his face upturned as the light faded and the planets and stars flecked the sky, the constellations wavering slightly behind the warp of summer air. A coyote yipped and Frank barked from the house. The lowing of cattle came faintly

beneath the rising shrill of crickets. He heard the almost inaudible sound of his breathing, the creak of the windmill's face and sidevane as it pumped up cool, alkaline water. He smelled the flowering yucca, knew that somewhere a cow was pulling on a ripe flowerstalk with its tongue, eating the massy, cream-colored blooms like apples. There wasn't an unfamiliar sound or scent, not a plant or living creature he couldn't name, all of it as fixed and ordered as the stars above. A door clapped against its frame and he remembered his father watching him from the porch as he climbed in the truck to report at Fort Bliss. Ross had stood with his hands in his pockets and his hair damp with sweat, a pale line visible on his forehead where his hat normally rested. He pivoted before the truck's engine turned over, Jack's last view of him his back, the screen door banging shut as he disappeared into the shadows of the house.

Shots sounded. The Buzzard Squad, Japanese soldiers executing those who had collapsed on the road, was catching up. Jack looked at his hands. Metallic green flies clustered around a suppurating burn on his palm.

The Japanese officer gestured for the men to stop digging. The guard climbed from the hole. The

lieutenant looked up at the Japanese officer and sank the shovel blade again into the boggy earth. The guard took up his rifle from where it rested against his pack and tentatively jabbed the lieutenant with his bayonet. The lieutenant dropped the shovel and stood holding his hand to his bicep, his khaki sleeve darkening.

The officer spoke again to the guard, whose face was inclined and hidden by the shadow of his cap's shallow bill.

"Conrad," Jack said. His voice sounded thick and unfamiliar, his tongue a wad of gauze.

Conrad touched his right leg and Jack turned to him, reassured by his and Miguel's presence. Miguel held a finger to his lips. "Cálmate," he murmured. His thick beard was plastered with the dust. He reminded Jack of the Conquistadors from his high school history books, his dark eyes and drawn face searching for something just out of view.

You weren't supposed to look; you didn't want to. But you did. You were compelled. Every corpse you saw in a ditch or the weeds or tangled in a tree's branches, as if a message resided there that would save you if you could just decipher it.

A shot.

The lieutenant's body collapsed into the grave as if a string had been cut. The Japanese guard lowered his rifle and looked to the side, at the wrecked sedan. The smoke from the car's burning tire hung as if painted on the air.

The officer spoke. In a moment the guard shouldered his rifle and bowed.

"You son of a bitch," Jack said. The mid-day glare blurred in his eyes.

2

They marched over a pitted section of road hemmed by cloven palm trunks. Several shattered 155 artillery pieces, downed trees, an old command car, and other less identifiable objects had been bulldozed into a pile some twenty feet high. The air above it writhed from the heat of the sun on the metal. Furious clouds of flies clotted air gone syrupy with putrefaction. The men coughed and spat out the swarming insects. Jack saw a pale swatch of flesh and something blackly wet in the wreckage. Even when he was well past it the rot coated his throat.

There were fewer men in the column now. Miguel leaned into him. He took Miguel's arm until his pace evened. Miguel's pants were crusted with filth from dysentery. He spoke earnestly, even though Jack understood little of the delirious Spanish. Miguel was from Peñasco; he and Jack shared the same rural backgrounds, though Miguel's family ran sheep, not cattle. They had been bunkmates at Clark Field and there in the barracks Miguel had sometimes spoken to him in whispered Spanish as the others slept, a soothing liturgy to mask the strange noise of the tropics. He was always telling stories: The story of how a bear ripped through his tent and, frightened by Sancho's barking, retreated with only his shoe in its jaws. A year later, he'd found Sancho chewing on the same shoe by his campfire, miles from where he'd encountered the bear. Then the story of how La Llorona howled through the arroyos: he'd seen her one night with her dark hair twisted over her face like a writhing mask, weeping for her drowned children. And once, the story of how he had stolen the glass eye of his priest. It was the only tale Jack had fully believed, maybe because he'd heard it just the once. He'd told Miguel as much and Miguel had only shrugged, placid before the skepticism. "Esta para bién saber que si es

mentira, está urdida, y si es verdad, para allá va." If the tale is not true, it is already woven, and if it is true it will go forward.

He said that Padre Villaseñor wore a brown-lensed eye to match his true one, but when he taught the catechism he wore a gray-lensed one that fascinated and frightened the children; it was impossible not to stare at the mismatched iris and because of this it seemed always to be watching no matter the focus of the Padre's other eye. "I dreamed about it, sabes? It would be in the sky like the moon, judging, glaring. And everyone in the dream had the same eye. I couldn't sleep. I made up sins for confession with the Padre and paid penance for these and still it watched me in my dreams. I confessed los sueños to the Padre. He said they held the truth, that God was always watching and it was no good trying to deny this. And the next catechism class still he wore it. I hated him for this and I confessed even this and still he wore it." Then he had stolen the ball of German glass from the rectory where it rested in a lined box like a prize jewel. "If I was to feel guilty I would *be* guilty," he said. "At least there was truth in that." He had wanted to crush it with a rock but this would have rendered the transgression permanent and so he had

hidden it. "He knew," he said of Padre Villaseñor as the geckos chirped from the barrack walls and the breathing of their fellow New Mexicans stirred around them. "He had to know but he never said nada. Made me hate him more."

"You still dream about it?" Jack murmured.

"No," Miguel said. "With sin came relief. Like when we lay with the putas."

He had been surprised at this and surprised by Miguel's curse; he hadn't called them that before and the word was like a wedge between them; Miguel was aging faster and differently. For both the Sapangbato brothel's women had been their first and only, and Jack had yet to sort it out: It was more than butterflies in the stomach and the brief, ecstatic orgasm, more than the wet warmth of the Filipina and her red, betel-stained smile. A necessary lesson. Not a sin, though perhaps as instructive as one. Surely there was more pleasure in sin, more certainty.

The sun felt too close, swollen and sagging from its zenith, the dust that hovered at head level a heat-charged haze. Miguel stumbled and Jack lurched with him, ambushed by this sudden unbalance. Conrad grunted as he steadied them both. "Keep moving," he said.

"How far?" Jack asked.

"Not far," Conrad said. The guards told them this again and again and though it was always a lie, a means of keeping them in motion, it was a lie in which resided the shadow of hope and was therefore welcome and repeated amongst themselves.

"Tengo sed," Miguel said.

Conrad had two canteens on his belt, one empty, one a quarter full. "Wait," he said. They couldn't risk drinking it in daylight. The canteen would be wrested from him before Miguel tasted a drop. Conrad rationed their water at night while those around them slept. They drank furtively, guarding one another from their own.

"Míralo." Miguel pointed. To the east a clearing in the trees allowed a glimpse of Manila Bay. The surface was a brilliant, polished silver, a plate of beaten metal reflecting the dazzling glare of the sun. "All that water," he said longingly.

Conrad pushed him forward. "It ain't far now. Move your feet."

Ahead, the men parted for something on the road. As they stumbled past Jack realized it was a uniform embedded in the pitted macadam. Even the

boots had been crushed flat by passing tanks. Above the shoulders, where a head might have rested, a hank of matted, brassy hair caught the light.

They were silent a long time.

"El ojo, Jack. The eye. ¿Recuerdas? It's hid in the roof of my room," Miguel said. "In the corner where the latillas meet a viga. Don't forget." He slowed and Conrad pushed him.

Jack's hearing was improving as the march wore on, sharpening to offset his washed-out vision that caused the world to look as if it had been overexposed. "You can give it back to him yourself," he said.

"Don't forget."

"It ain't far," Conrad said, his voice cracking. "Keep moving."

"No me olvida," Miguel said. "Ni el ojo."

Conrad swatted them like a man urging on a team of failing mules.

A mile north, Miguel fell. He did not lift his arms to break the impact. The column moved on, splitting around them. Conrad took Miguel's arm and tried to raise him. He was panting. He kicked

Miguel. The boy's eyes didn't open. A Japanese soldier on a bicycle at the rear of the column wobbled toward them, trying to keep the butt of the rifle slung around his shoulder from knocking against his thigh as he pedaled. When he dismounted the rifle's strap came loose and the rifle fell in the dust. He yelled at them, the words loud and sharp and recognizable as a command in any language. Jack took one of Miguel's arms and Conrad the other but they were too weak to drag him more than a few yards.

Conrad slapped Jack's cheek and pulled him up the road. "Don't look back," he said.

3

They marched out of a sugar cane field and up a gradual incline. Some of the men most distant from the guards had stripped lengths of the cane free and now gnawed on these. The view narrowed to a shaded tunnel, the foliage the translucent green of bottle glass beneath the sun. Ahead, the column of POWs vanished into bright space where the trees fell away. When Jack emerged from the overarching branches he was confronted by a vista of open flatlands backed to the north by the distant mountains of the Cordillera Central. The line of men disappeared entirely in the distance. The scale gave the marchers the appearance of immobility. A panoramic still life of surrender. Jack couldn't imagine traversing such a distance. It was utterly demoralizing. He wondered if Miguel had felt anything, if the end was simply an end of light and sound and touch with no comprehension or awareness of the blade or bullet.

His head fell back toward his chest. The macadam was tacky underfoot and threatened to strip the soles from his feet. Already the heel of one boot had pulled free miles earlier and now a pain in his hip pierced his exhaustion to the rhythm of his marching.

"-darkness," Conrad said. "No earth. No sky. No moon. No sun. Darkness everywhere." With each word a step, Conrad's story sounding like the efforts of a man learning to speak. "Then a thin disc. Like a coin. A yellow side. A white side. In this sits the Creator." He lapsed into Mescalero Apache. He had spoken steadily all day, and the dry whisper had come to irritate Jack, like the ceaseless chafing of a rough cloth. His own throat was so dry it hurt to speak. They had finished their water the night before, Conrad giving him the last of it. He remembered months earlier, when Conrad had taken his dogtags. They had just shot and killed a Japanese sniper. The man dangled from the branch of the broadly fanned tamarind he'd roped himself to. Conrad ejected the cartridges from the soldier's bolt-action rifle. Gripping the barrel, he swung the Arisaka against the tree until part of the stock split free of the action. A clear sap welled from the scarred trunk.

"We ought to cut him down. Maybe bury him," Jack said, refusing to look up.

Conrad ran a thumb over the receiver of the mangled rifle, where a chrysanthemum was stamped into the metal. His hands and forearms were corded with muscle. He'd been a blacksmith. "Why?"

"I don't know," Jack said. "Seems moral, is all." He felt self-conscious saying this and maybe he would not have suggested it had the sniper managed to hit any of them. It was early in the conflict: he had not yet seen men strung up by their thumbs, their guts spilled out, genitals stuffed in their mouths. He was only just learning how the killing and the death degraded a man.

Conrad stared at him. The hunger that had wasted Jack seemed only to have hardened the Indian like leather left in the sun. He dropped the rifle. "That right?"

Jack nodded. He felt that this might be the case, but in truth it was the image of the man forgotten there, withering to bones that would clack like chimes until the rope frayed, that made him say this. He didn't want to shoulder the memory, nor the thought it elicited: that a similar fate might await him.

Conrad reached out pulled Jack's dogtags from beneath his shirt and tugged sharply, freeing them as Jack did nothing to stop him. He had fallen unhappily into the habit of deferring to Conrad, a man who exhibited a predatory protectiveness over their immediate group. He was a decade older than Jack and often sullen. Jack didn't like him, but

like and dislike had lost much of their relevance since the fighting began.

Conrad looked at the notched plates. "You and me got the same blood type," he said, "but I ain't Protestant." He weighed the plates in his palm without looking away from Jack. "We got a church at the Rez. St. Joseph's. The priest's Father Braun."

Jack had heard the name. He was now the Army Chaplain for the 200th.

"I don't believe a word he says," Conrad said.

"About what?"

"Anything," he said. "You know what 'Apache' means?"

Jack shook his head.

"'Fighting-men.' It's what the Yuma call us. Zuni call us 'enemy.' You don't know about them. Think we're all the same: Indians. Redskins. Niggers."

"I never paid it no mind."

"N'de." Conrad said.

"What?"

"N'de," he repeated. "What we call ourselves. The People." He wrapped the thin chain around the

dogtags. "You read these and think it tells you who you are." He lobbed the knot of metal into the tree, where it caught in the foliage. "Things," he said. He gestured with a slight lift of his jaw to include the dead soldier. "There ain't no answer in them no more than in what any priest says." He spit. "And there ain't no morality. There's just what you do."

"I don't understand," Jack said. He was determined to hide his panic over the loss of the tags though he felt exposed without them. He wouldn't give Conrad the satisfaction.

"All you got to understand is you don't know a damn thing about a damn thing." Conrad had then whistled for the others, signaling that all was clear, that the lesson was at an end.

4

They marched through a small village where several nipa huts burned or smoked, the others looking like kindling awaiting a match. "He looks into the darkness," Conrad said. "Light grows above. He looks down. Light spreads like a sea. East. Yellow streaks of dawn stretch to him. West. Colors bloom like flowers." Jack realized he'd heard the story, that Conrad was repeating it, switching back and forth from his Apache dialect to English, each recounting a recombination of what Jack understood and what was lost through his incomprehension of Conrad's native tongue.

The villagers watched the road. A small boy covertly extended his fingers in the victory sign. A woman called a name again and again, looking rapidly from face to face, her black beaded rosary twined through her hands. A church bell rang, the deep reverberations baffled by distance, haze, exhaustion. "He created Wind, Lightning-Maker. Clouds for Lightning-Rumbler," Conrad continued. "'Let us make earth,' he said. He sang, 'I am thinking of earth. Earth. Earth. I am thinking of the earth.'"

"You said there wasn't no truth to priests," Jack said, his tongue sticky on the roof of his mouth. "Christian or Indian."

"That ain't the point."

"What is the goddamn point?"

Conrad guided him back into the column, as he had wobbled toward the road's center. "To say it. Don't matter if you believe it. Sing your damn psalms for all I care. It's all the same."

"You don't make no more sense than all this." Jack was too tired to gesture around them.

"Just keep moving."

Jack was sure he'd never understand the Apache. It was like trying to read the history of a landscape through geology: there was an order to it of which he was ignorant. He looked up as a passing command car backfired, dust billowing behind it. Crows flapped from behind a nearby bush, their caws rising and dying.

They were ordered to the side of the road, the column slowly contracting as it stopped. Some of the men, only dimly aware that they were no longer marching, swayed slightly from side to side as if still imagining themselves to be in forward

motion. Dry rice paddies extended east and west. Jack smelled the hint of moisture and jasmine and turned his head. A well ringed with trampled sampagita bushes sat twenty yards behind them. Water lipped over the stone edge. Beyond this, two thatched huts stood amidst a few banana trees. A Filipino family stood before the dark rectangle of a doorway, the children clinging to their parents' legs, all of them motionless as the trees.

The POWs sat crosslegged with their hands on their knees. The sun bore down with the relentlessness of gravity. The Japanese officer was angry that they had twice broken formation in the cane fields and while they were too numerous to punish individually, punishing the group was easily done. Men craned their necks to stare at the well. The guards yelled at them to look straight ahead. One struck a man in his chest with his rifle butt.

Jack's hip ached distantly, anesthetized by the heat. He felt himself trembling. Conrad stared up the road. Jack realized the ground was vibrating. A line of medium tanks and troop transports approached. Sprays of bamboo adorned the tanks as if they'd taken root, their long, dagger-shaped fronds swaying above the riveted plating of the hulls and turrets. The Japanese in the open truck

beds massed to the side where the Americans and Filipinos waited. Many of the Japanese were smiling, shouting. Some waved. Through the rising dust one soldier leaned from a truck bed to strike a POW in the head with a stick. Then the dust was everywhere, thick with oily diesel fumes, impenetrable to everything but the whine of machinery.

Jack sensed the motion of bodies around him. He wondered if Conrad were trying to escape, unable to will even the energy to dwell on this. People yelled in English, Tagalog, Japanese. The final tank rolled by, all menacing bulk, its treads grinding into the road and the weight of it shivering through him. The roiling dust began settling just as another convoy approached from the north, this of tractor-drawn, heavy field artillery and teams of horses hauling snub-nosed 105mm howitzers. The horses were hard-used. Sway-backed, they leaned into their traces with the same fatigued resignation that had characterized Jack's every day on the march and the past month of fighting. Jack closed his eyes and the noise and dust settled on him and he grew heavy and inert, as if exhaustion had a physical weight, as if it had transmuted him into a rock sunk into the

road's edge, a milestone on a route to a future he could not have imagined.

A breeze kicked up and momentarily cleared the dust just as Conrad reentered the scattered line. He sat heavily, breathing hard, his uniform wet around the arms and chest. At the well a moil of POWs struggled to get to the water while two Japanese soldiers yelled. One fired his rifle in the mass and all but the man struck fled to the road. It grew quiet. The Japanese guards and their officer gathered in a circle at the head of the disorderly column. The man who had been shot floated half in the well, his torso moving slightly where the water supported it. When the Japanese officer finished speaking, the five guards began working down the line, pulling men forward to stand in the road. Conrad placed a canteen in Jack's lap. It was full and deliciously cool, like a stone dredged from a stream. Conrad gripped Jack's wrist until Jack's arm relaxed. He tucked the canteen into the pouch on Jack's belt and snapped this shut. The guards were close now. Conrad stood before they reached for him.

All the men standing, Jack realized, had wet uniforms.