

Body of Crime

MARK ANGELES

Body of crime

I stand before a wall of fire ...

(throwing at it a look

as rigid as the eyes of an assassin,
as hollow as a thousand-yard stare)

the fire swelling, boughing
licks of flame

 spreading

on the TV screen—

the news of circling violence
happening at another part of the world
 has held me
 enthralled at

this scene (theatrical): foot soldiers
in full battle gear
flanked before the wild conflagration.

What is the scene?

Where is the flame?

At this side of the wall, I am not harmed.

But here comes a poem that stands
furiously, set to take the bull by the horns
 with words

(to) Speak of Kampala, Kurdistan, Gaza,
Guantanamo, Bazar-Kurgan, Srebrenica,
Darfur, Baghdad, Ampatuan ...

Abidjan

The story of how they had taken their name is a story shared by all our villages. In this version, the white man is a traveller from Europe. Always, as in all versions, the native is approached and asked, *Where?*

What a strange voice, the native says to himself. It is broad and predatory. He turns around, seeking its source, and finding it, flees.

In the first version, the native screams, *M'bi min djan!* ("I've just been cutting leaves!"). In the second, *Min-chan m'bidjan!* ("I just cut the leaves!").

Both stories tell us he carries a load of tree limbs. Where he came from or where he is heading is curbed somewhere in the narrative. Somewhere in the narrative panic starts to catch him but is sidelined just the same.

All we know is that the land is green as in all folk stories. That natives have already relished the inland's cornucopia long before the traveller arrives and begins

to call the shots—in the grand charge of naming, taking names and altering names of each twig and stone.

Hundreds of years since, Abidjan
stands there, afforest with concrete.
The streets around it overflows
with dead bodies.

The fighting is coming closer and closer.
Bend on your knees and hear:
the ground is trembling
mad with footsteps of mercenaries.

What does Abidjan carry
but leaves? twigs for kindling
fish? boughs to repair its roofs?

How will it answer
the gunshots?

Addressed to the saffron-clad warrior

Somewhere in the streets of Burma, I see you
saffron-robed, clean-shaven, cleaving to a begging bowl
like banyan roots anchored to this world. Then I see you
lining up barefoot in a march against a paper tiger.
At one point our shadows will touch each other.
At another, they will become one. I am filling the leaves
of my prison diary at the same hour you are writing
about how the army had forced you to disrobe
behind bars. *I have witnessed*, you etch with burning claws,
the day the soldiers ripped through the crowd
with G-3 rifles. How many begging bowls tumbled
onto the febrile pavement next to the *pongyis*
wringing with gunshot wounds? How many ran away
from screaming bullets? How many disappeared
from plain sight?

Son of Buddha,
your grasp of suffering has guided you
outside the timid stone walls of monasteries
to the streets where starving mouths blossom
like a lotus pond. A begging bowl overturned
is enough to ire the junta but you go on
by the thousands. I write to you: *Kindle your memory*
of Burma when pongyis trampled the mad elephant.
I write to you in the same vein of *dhamma*,
in the same mud. In the same prison
a pongyi flared a hunger strike and died.
The faithful kneel where you tread, but they bow
backward so their throats could be slit. You see that.
It is your kind of heart that lights the darkest bend
of this prison—the heart of Thích Quảng Đức.

An incident of car bombs

When they got there, they only saw the wreck:
the car, already the color of char, with its glass windows
fallen apart, the front door hanging from its hinges.
Later, they will learn that it is one of two car bombs
blown up for the cause of a country's independence.

Not far from where they are, the second car
was found—or what was left of it, which is pure
scrap metal bent to distortion.

Earlier, smoke flew to the sky, also debris,
and sirens of ambulances rushing
to save what was left
of the dead. Round the corner,
over a thousand schoolchildren were performing
their amusing display of calisthenics—their depiction
of *danse macabre*—a staging of dominion
bestowed upon them by their aggressor
exactly fifty years ago, bestowed upon them
like a curse scalding deep beneath
the skin of their history.

Nigeria, bleeding with peoples and oil.
Eight of their natives each lured like fish
on a trawl—which was the second car—the eyeless,
cold-blooded conduit of carnage—
as a boy stood

in the corner, safe with his uncut hair, straight-faced
by the misgivings of the day. I imagine
the engineers of this atrocity
wearing gas masks and already stanch,
hushing to each other in two-way radio transceivers
how busy and beautiful the day was
a few seconds before the blast.

Still life with virgin and onions

Sacks of onion come apart. And loads of virgins discarded like rotting plums. A woman is enough to unravel the message—the canvas is smothered with bloodbath; it is enough intimidation for the vigilant.

Woman at the heart of the scene instead of a poppy; it has the impression of a mural. She changes into carcass in the eyes of her butcher. No longer human but best for primal cut. Her ripe breasts whimper at the blade of the bayonet as it sings

Sanko Sakusen. What does it mean to the villagers except *rape*? It has only one sound, the sound of ripping

flesh. Vagina taking the shape of a grave as one sees beyond the onions the wreckage of waged war—Nanjing—its many hands folded and hamstrung— pressing for blood.

Strange fruit

Nightfall looms from beyond the grove
and elsewhere—choking in dust—

hamlet leather shoes
scuttle toward the slithering shade

to disappear. *It is finished.* The bodies
are already dangling from the limbs of southern trees:

strange fruits bearing grim faces—
their teeth rustling in the wind

with the leaves. Black hands
unwrap like dark purple blossoms

to be shed soon enough to the soil.
Such peaceful pairs of eyes

shut as though lost in thought, dreaming
of careful departure.

The bodies still hang there, limp as fabric,
but firm

with doggedness so they could reclaim
the savanna and fauna of their homeland;

retrace the trail of their ancestors
who walked barefoot and were moored

to the galleons that dragged them
to the New World

where they were bred
like livestock in stowages and chattels.

Look how the bodies are held
from their neck with the hooks

of their bone white masters.
Night falls on their shoulders

like a murder of crows—their plumage
resemble singe, thrashed
from a source: crosses in flames.
What kind of trees are these
whose limbs lift the burden
of scarecrows?
Bending toward the ground,
slave shoes
yearn to touch the grass,
to rot there and be eaten by flies
denying their butchers
the pleasure of harm.
This time of the year, the South
boasts its bounty
of slaves stocked up in cabins
like coffee, sugar and cotton,
sold in markets
as only Judas had known.
Some of them were left
wilting on trees like poisonous fruits.
Look, their torsos flail and only
revenge, luscious and red, can give them rest.

The room of glass

(for Juma Muhammad Al-Dossari)

I found myself trudging in the threshold
of an orange grove, its leaves jubilant,
catching daylight in its palms. Flowering
shrubs received insects like paying guests.
And my soles felt the grit of the earth.
Laughter ruptured in the distance.
I caught sight of children playing
hide and seek, children buried
in between the leaves of the Qur'an.

I had taken pleasure of this infinite joy,
for a while, like a ghostly mirror of my heart.
And when it was time to wake up,
I found my head under a soldier's boot,
receiving the snout with my mouth,
my face caking with blood and mud,
as I was laid plainly on my stomach.

The soldier raised my head by my hair
and when he started trouncing my eye,
I caught sight of the man dangling
by his necklace—that man
they had slaughtered by faith.

We were moved to another tent
where a soldier came mocking
with his chainsaw. It roared
as it chewed the mottled shackles
attached to us in Pakistan,
breaking us free for a moment,
then shackled us back again
now with an American brand.

Then we were moved once more
to a room full of glass.
Slivers of glass strewed. Hissing
licks of ice, sinking their teeth
on my frayed skin. Barefooted,
I was forced to dance on them.
Then someone knocked me
from behind so I lost my footing.
The next minute, I was staring
at my own face in fragments
of broken mirrors—my face
broken and framed in fragments
of mirror image.

That room of glass blinded many,
imprisoned many terrified eyes.

We were sent later to another prison
on another island; sometimes blindfolded,
at times hooded with soiled bags
like hangmen except the verdict
was handed down on us.

I can still hear laughter
that seemed nearby, ghostly laughter
of soldiers mocking us,
also the laughter of children,
the kind that is warm and moving,
giving us the blessing of waking up
past this spell of torture,
this blood-curdling act
so unforgiving
that it should never be forgiven.