Rubble:

Three stories for Jorge

I

One time, a researcher asked medical students what they felt when they dissected a brain, a heart. Did they believe in souls? The thing their scalpels sliced through, did that contain the soul? Would the bright touch of the blade release an exhalation so brief, so fragile, from the cells that they would not know the soul had escaped? Some believed; many had to steady their hands as they approached the walnut lobes of the brain, to suppress their own questions: what if, what if.

But no one has found a soul yet.

This is why I feel sorry for serial killers, and pedophiles, and invading nations.

How closely they look at the thing that they wish to destroy. The killer, the abuser, the invader, they know their victim’s habits, and they know the frightened, beating heart, the trembling, damp skin, of what they touch and push past. No one looks more closely at the heart of a human being than the person who has torn it from the cavity of the chest. This is intimacy, they think. I know you well enough to tear you apart.

But the scalpel cannot feel the soul.

The invader watches the victim so closely, and misses everything true about the one they pursue. How you smile when you hear birdsong in a crowded city street. How a country’s rolling mountains welcome all, and how even the bones of the ancient rocks are so friendly that they will grow forests, like flowers. If I cut deeply enough, the invader thinks, it will all be mine. The blade slices in, the penis thrusts, the armies march. They make of flesh a cave of blood, of countries a field of blood, and blood obscures all the quietness and the beauty, the raging powerful tides of life, the idle moments and stray loves that make up the ordinary, the beautiful, the necessary, all the things the invader so badly wants and can never have.

II.

She brings him the smell of teargas and perfume. The city’s streets are exploding in rage, as a thousand throats call for a long-withheld justice. But in here, in this holy place they’ve made, the sheets are tangled, only the birds cry out in the dazzling blue beyond his bedroom window. They have made peace-offerings; his home and his bedroom offer peace. She has brought him only the grim gifts of their era, tales of autopsies and rapes and bodies mutilated beyond description
and pain. He reciprocates in measure, and in between lovemaking, he offers coffee, and crime rates and the photographs of the dead, and those about to die. In between lovemaking, they talk of bruises and broken bones and the ethics of torture.

This is the only quiet place in all of the damaged world. Here, they put aside tales of battered bodies, and make the flesh sacred again.

They make ferocious love, tender love, voracious love, it is fleeting, none of this will last, there will be partings and there will be others, but here they build a temporary shrine to kindness, like those roadside shrines made of paper and sticks. When they finish, slicked in the sweat of peace, the ceiling explodes in rubble, and the dust of everything that they have so carelessly bombed and destroyed pours down on either side of the big bed, all the people they’ve hurt, been hurt by. But the bed is calm, the sheets are cool and comforting and like two children, not lovers, not brothers and sisters, just two children left alone together for a moment, they hold on to each other’s shoulders and sleep.

III.

Every year the invaders take more of my friend Tenzin’s country. Every year the stockades around those left in the old place grow higher and more forbidding. As their homeland dies, they set fires, with themselves as torches. Brief blazing flames, sending up signals from living bodies to those who want to kill them: we will not kill you back, but we die to show you that we can live like warriors.

Tenzin writes his poetry and brings it down to the plains, carrying incense made from the herbs of the high hills with him, and between his lines, there blows the clean free air of the mountains. In his voice, I hear freedom, and love for all the things of the world. Tenzin, whose homeland is being slowly strangled to death, wears his home around him in a cape of black, a bright clasp of gold reminding him to hold always to the truth. Every year he loses his homeland, over and over again. His war is waged in high places; he scales buildings in protest, and unfurls flags that cover the lies and the untruths that kill his people, takes their land, makes them permanent temporary guests in another nation not their own.

He climbed the side of a building the way he would climb a mountain, rising from one ledge to another, letting his feet settle into the gaps between the stone; he leaned into the air and let it cushion him, as it had done a thousand times before. The charge against him is suicide; but no one will sit down at the police station to file a charge of homicide against those who took his homeland.

Tenzin loves his life and takes the bus from the mountains down, far down, to the dusty plains. He looks the witnesses in the eye when they parrot the charges of suicide and his laughter sucks the ink out of the words on the lying papers.
Suspended from the side of that building, trusting the air to cradle him, Tenzin the climber, Tenzin, the son of the mountains. The invaders will destroy his homeland, but in which cell can they imprison his memory? Shall history be charged with the crime of committing suicide?

Across the mountains, the torches burn, the humans burn, memory burns; and in the high hills, laughter lives, history lives, memory is reborn, squalling and plump. Some day the free winds of the mountains will blow in such gusts that they will blow gales of freedom and peace through the minds and hearts of the invaders, and then what will become of them, when they are infected by what they wanted to destroy?

Tenzin’s incense, those thick, woody sticks, carry the hills with them and whisper stories of the old days, the old country, the way things were and will be. Their perfume rises. It is a thin faint wisp, and yet it carries further than the burning of the homeland, further even than the black smoke from the torches of the flaming humans, yes, that breath of incense perfumes the whole world.

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