

The Language of Butchers



KERRIE DROBAN

THE LANGUAGE OF BUTCHERS

(Excerpts of award-winning published poetry)

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THE SIGN OF THE LION

"I see you as I have seen you at least once
every year of my life, spin across the wilds of the sky
like a tiny, African god..."

-James Tate

Dancing With Lions

I

True, I can't take him back
to road-stitched hills, bulls' throats
slit on the ridge in Ngong
where Muranis dipped their fingers into blood,
& painted violence on my body:
 heads,
 spears,
 hands.

Though he's never seen them, he is there.
In the copper light. In the sisal.
In those fields, he holds my hands --
the young, calloused lines, dotting with flies.

II

I'll tell you about my days in Kenya:

inevitably, flying termites litter the porch
with wings in the season of heavy rain.
Males struggle naked on the stones,
their female mates already gone.
Umbula, the cook, fries them in chocolate.

I cannot describe the taste

or his quietly strange gaze
as if he'd stepped into a dream
where we are dancing with lions.

His black eyes barely visible
beneath a head strap of teeth
(I am not afraid of invention)

I build him piece by piece
in red sunsets, a "salt eater,"
who flies without wings,

who hides in the edges of forest,
picking mushrooms near the bone trees,
almost human in this wood --

*They're edible. We'll take them home.
Trust me, he says.*

But in sleep, he speaks a different language.
Walking miles toward open glass,
he leans his head into wind,
& lets the chill blow his hair into bands
of dark, while I dream the silences.

His life, raw like lightning flashed over a field.

I've wanted to write him a poem without violence
or circumstance. Simple. Uncluttered.
A love without terror.

III

I am hidden in the shadow of an African Cow mask
hung with its jaw flopped open and think of calling
him up to wish his voice on the phone, a hollow cave
in Mombassa where I once fell in love with dark spaces,
warm water, the smell of wet rock.

"Who is this man?" you ask.
"A voice I use when I'm lonely."

He hovers over my life like a thought
he's never expressed --

*I saw a gorgeous woman once: white marzipan
in a windowless room. From the back,
perfection. Long brown hair hugging her neck
like woodsmoke. Arms & legs, the fleshed
out straw of fertility dolls. I wanted to name her,
to touch her, to watch her delicate form
dance to no music. I saw her body turn & turn
in the room, hair blowing around her head
like a light, and the light crackling with poison.*

"Who is this woman?" you ask.
"Dream of the self dreaming a self."

Falling Awake

"Your wings have sunk into the earth
and cannot be seen anymore..."

-Ana Blandiana

We smell of wet leaves.
Lying here in this forest,
only our fingers touch.

And we will never move again.
We are our outlines -
the smell of time seeps into us.

Don't be afraid,

soon you will remember only my hair,
white like the African monkey's
hung from an Imbondiero branch.

This light shakes you open.
I can see inside your lovely face,
a village I will always leave.

Shadowed by winter -- flock of wings
in the eye of the sun -- heat
clings like pollen

where I've dreamed you before
barefoot and pale, in Asnan,
walking into the moon.

Black ghost. You flutter.

Bannana straw snaps from your roof.
Dust on your lashes. This is how close
we've become.

In The Town of Asnan
-to Mazelow's Group

You left me near
the Ethiopian border
with two cans of sardines
and a jar of peanut oil

just in case

Shifta bounded down
Lololokwe cliffs
and made waste of your body
like they did the white priest's

in Asnan hanging from the cane
pole.

I would be safe

in the desert, offered up
like a weed while you, stripped
to a loin swatch, tracked
a path through cacti back

to Asnan & the radio

where days before we'd sipped
Fanta in the Pasha Pub,
the only whites in a town
of well-water & two shacks.

New Year's Eve brought us there,
our old army truck Roo broken down --
cracked axle, nervous joking, glass
toasts -- stranded until night

sounds of cricket legs rubbed dust
with gun powder.

We lit no fire
bombs to celebrate the New Year.
Shifta would mistake it for bullet
spray. So we huddled our faces

around smoking coals
& told stories of snow
& winter & America
and how we would find one

another again once the fires burned
too low.

Like tracking that leopard
in your father's Land Rover,
difficult to spot its sleek back
against black stone where it slept,

eyes blinking yellow into headlights
before closing.

I've imagined how it happened

at the water hole in Asnan,
letting its ripples push
the Shifta's face into your gourd
before catching his black eyes

resting calmly in the gun barrel.

How easily he must have killed you.

Burying your head into water
so I could never question why
except to know that you were
white & young & beautiful,

that you could have been me.

Sometimes In Dreams I See The Word *Pig*

Part I.

I have told him of past rapes,
of faces clouding through a window

in Marana and the dreams still come:
pig for city of phalluses;

for the careless scrawl on a bathroom
mirror in a house I once lived in.

In the morning, in the tub,
I soap him off with a sponge,

follow the cream line of his groin
and imagine it opening wide to an alley

pitched with bottles. Under water, we are
neutral, ageing together without past.

This is how we love, imagining.
We belong to each other

in separate cities: Marana, Nairobi.
The distance is closeness.

I break under him like a scar.
Sometimes I am afraid to dream alone,

to see the babies' heads again
twisted in dark glass on Kenyatta's runway.

Their hair moving like fingers over officers'
boots the way mine brushes softly his hands

in the first dark before love.

I whisper these dreams and he listens
with his body, breathing in my hair

it's past, it's past.

I wash the white ache, and turn

my face towards the light,
so I will not see.

I am a hundred years old in his city.

Sometimes In Dreams I See The Word *Pig*

Part II

Sometimes I worry that I won't remember
their faces, that I'll find them in the dark

and they'll reflect mirrors I walk into; or
at the window, their heads smoked over

in bald, wet light will hang empty in my space
until even their silence, is frightening.

No memories are silent. Sometimes I see them
as they must have once looked -- whole and brown

in the Tala markets, running barefoot over dust,
pushing metal spokes with sticks, not rotting now

like fruit, their vaginas plugged with glass.
Sometimes in dreams I see the word, *pig*

smearred in red on my bathroom mirror,
by a man dressed in boots and a gun.

I know him by name. He comes to my room,
calls me *baby* and smothers my lips with his darkness.

Sonata in Silence

*

Find images for the silence he says
over dinner in Dragon Light restaurant.

My father's face across the table
hides a violence I grew up in.

Crackle of grenades on dust roads,
allons y, allons y

black bodies in fatigues --

the souls of flies. His face among them
hard light I've forgotten to switch off.

Allons y hustling ourselves
into cargo planes -- *special escorts* --

midnight in Zaire. Breath, like air
through rubber tubes. I am walking

with three limbs -- a soldier's Uzi in my side,
his grope, my breasts go numb.

Images for silence

*

Nairobi, 1982. We are shot like melons
on a market stand. A woman's head rolls

her grin across my plate in the Norfolk Hotel,
Christmas. Soldiers stack the dead like trees.

My father's hands across the table,
are cold rubber in my own.

Six o'clock curfew & the sky is burgundy.
Soldiers move through silence as if it were alive,

their rifle butts swishing in the coffee
outside my window - two weeks after the raid,

their faces are blank.

*

Warsaw. My Polish friend speaks to me
through iron gates. Her mouth is wrapped

in wool. I am safe on Embassy ground.
In the old town square, we pass each other

on the stones. Strangers in this city.
Soldiers lining up like guns on Marszelkowska.

Night falls at noon here. My father's head,
a winter in the bus depot.

In Chopin's Garden, music is a language
we come to understand.

Cut roses in the statue's hand
are growing cold in hoarfrost.

My father's face through a window, large & dark.
Between his lashes, the beginning of tears.

This is what we won't remember.

The Bird

Light stains through glass in this dome
where we climb through shafts of broken moon
patterned on the walls inside us.

Your figure cups in a dark swallow
on this condemned floor
where stuffed effigies lean naked

inside costume closets.

After shows, we'd come here, dance across
the wooden planks twirling bald bodies
until feathers blew from their armpits

and fluttered into the light. I see you
restuff the severed arms, waving to me
with phantom limbs. I see your figure

at the window, chin held like a prop
in your hands - and then the bird beating its head
against skylights, trapped inside this dome

stunning itself with each hit. Your hands
wave to me at the top of the stairs. Unable to move,
unwilling to feel, I watch the bird's head snap

and your hands descend like a dark shadow
to hold it, put its head back,
make it live again.

On Borrowing Details

I.

She tells her friend over breakfast one morning,
how for two weeks she drank nothing but blood
with Maasai's in Loita,

& wonders how much he believes.
She slept under meat nets; hyena heads wrapped
in banana leaves; cow bladders puffed up & dripping.

The old Mzee with red eyes, who sucked mites off her skin.

She brings white ash home in gourds, says
she's witnessed a burning -- a horse with no horn,
a witch in red ochre, whole worlds in the back.

A closet of woods.

He thinks she borrows her details from books:

Rooms, chilled and full without definition;
backdrops of countries in place of experience;

pockets of memory she limits to couplets --
walk-in closets -- a childhood -- of lions

& witches & wardrobes where she imagines
African queens pounding foo foo.

II.

But this is too easy -- substitution for memory.
The voice is too empty. It must be familiar:

a vacuum's hum in suburbia Reston, comfortable,
as sandals on hot winter Mondays, in Kenya,
where mornings begin clubbing Mambas off couches
with dull butcher knives

& panga thieves brighten the darkness
with blades, searching for money -- American bills.
Sheets are slashed. Mirrors broken.

Shapes of black bodies hover over like ghosts.
The things she remembers.

III.

Details, small and precise:
landscapes in wet, empty fields before nightfall.
Dust on a road in Ngong, where they move,
against the red hills, as a rhythm of voices --

lovers she slept with in bomas,
lovers she kissed in the river,
lovers she fondled half-way in the dark

to understand touch.

But things in the dark are left unexplained.

There are nights she watches the moon chip off,
like a hundred smiles breaking together --
& the old Mzee who squeezes her hand, is energy
she can believe in, as others believe in God.

IV.

She tells her friend over breakfast one morning,
how for two weeks, she lay down in blood leaves
& listened to fire shot up in the hills --

& listened to men and listened to guns.

She tells of nights when the dancing grew violent:
warriors smacked up against bodies
like flame -- movements of courtship, gorgeous
& frightening.

She tells him she loved this.

Moments in the future will remind her of Kenya -
when in a dank room, in another country,

she wakes to the warmth of a lover, the gentle touch
of his hands when he cups her face:

take me into those woods.

She will tell him she loves this.

And in a quiet moment, she will step out of the shower
as a woman steps out of a dream & look at herself
in the glass --
her eyes, the color of ashes.

THE STRANGER

"where the sun enters the sign of the Lion and
the stranger has laid his finger on the mouth
of the dead."

-Saint-Jean Perse

The Stranger

"And all this time I have lived as if you
were like me..."

-Mona Van Duyn

I

We picnic in the lion fields under baobab shade
dripping papaya juice down our faces

How beautiful we are
How beautifully lonely in this landscape--

little girl and a mother in banana-leaved hats
sharing colored bubbles from an elegant glass

"We'll be British today" she tells her daughter,
"properly gauche."

II

Our house shines through the monkey trees,
tea plantations, even the wind is green here.
A shadow traces myself over small orchid heads

as mother calls from the road,
her auburn hair an umbrella of light,
eyes I fall into strangely.

Our laughter litters the ground
like leaves.

"Chai memsab?" I drink milky tea
remembering the elephant head axed in the fields,
clusters of bone chips,

& the young Maasai
who swears it's true, all of it: the disease
and cassava lipped women

who shiver in the doorway, their backs to us,
as the day eclipses

and the boy writes his name
in the dust with his stick:

"Wellington".

III

Wind through the tea moves like water
where I find you,
a young woman sculpting bodies on a beach.

Papayas and gulls' eggs form the bellies
and eyes, "imperfectly oval like sadness
and boredom."

Like evenings you hosted Big Men
in political suits: General X
and his gorilla-hand ashtrays;

diplomats crunching fish heads;
wives who watch from opposite rooms.
You shiver in the doorway.

Batique rose patterns your dress.
Behind you, the lion fields
where later we share gossip & leftovers,
our hair blowing like black grass.

Mud Angel

We stand alone against the surf, and watch
kelp fold into itself like a small fist closing.
As a child, I found the turns

in your hands so beautiful in their singleness -
no two lines the same. And when you threw me into waves
higher than the coconut palms, I washed up on shore a mud angel:

arms outstretched, head buried, laughter
resounding like tin in my ears now
as I stand alone in the old beach house -

you see you always come back.

It still totters on splintered stilts
as if it wanted to stumble away, join those we saw in Benin:

Little stick huts shimmering in water eight feet deep.

This is where I will live

I told you the day we fished there on bamboo rafts,
your hands clasping mine so I wouldn't fall
into that picture:

an eroded beach shelf,
two women holding hands with their shadows.

Marrakesh Medina

Sand crumbles under our feet in this village medina
where little dark mouths gape catching flies
in their spit. You haggle with one for a blown goat's
head while I spread like a fan in this heat
and move toward the mask: face of a woman, beauty
I can't recognize. *You want? You want?* an Arab chants
thrusting black wood in my hands. It holds my face
like a pocket. I turn to watch you still buying
the empty head, hands waving copper. You funnel this heat
like a desert plant blowing away from me
toward a human mirage. As I smile woodenly, you laugh
surprised to find me hidden.

THE SPACE BETWEEN

"The poet said: I'm a beautiful memory."
-Nina Cassian

Poland's Ghosts

*

Tonight, she thinks of Poland and the roses
in Chopin's garden. How they bloom in frost,

spotting snow like droplets of blood.
Across the water -- a young Russian soldier
catches her face rippling, & turns away.

*

Last Christmas she, a Jew, knelt
in a Catholic Church. Poles shifted around her.

Cold filled the congregation & her father's hand
in hers as if suddenly she'd become a little girl
again afraid, of strangeness & energy she could not see.
Winter light funnelled through like a gash in the roof.

*

Last summer on the train to Gdansk --
her brother's wild eyes searching hers

when militzia harrassed her for her papers.
Destination: Baltic Sea. Count: three Germans

one Russian. She's mixed up the time.
5 a.m. instead of 5 p.m. She cannot speak Polish.

But she smiles, pretends that she could know them
in a different country, even learn to understand

why they handle her like rubber, why they call her *pig*.

*

Chopin's garden: The pianist's fingers, still.
She is looking at the young Russian

whose eyes remind her of her father's.
They don't smile. What's sad is not knowing

the endings. She has shared her most intimate self
with him -- listening to Chopin -- two strangers

unwilling to love such strangeness.