

'Some of Us are More Suited'

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I

What I remember is the air. Sharpening in my nostrils, like the lemon I sliced with the butcher's blade. The juice found the wound I'd created with my teeth, and I swore at the pain.

The leaves were somersaulting along the street, head over heels over broken bricks and shattered tiles and curls of damaged cable.

I try not to remember but I cannot forget my brother tumbling towards the guinea pigs and our neighbour pegging plastic bags to the washing line. We laughed at her, that bull of a woman, for scrubbing those flimsy bags clean and feeding fish through chicken wire to keep out the herons. How her rasping breaths filled us with fear. We never heard her spoken word. Not once in all those years.

And the starlings! Even when they are startled, they fly in mathematical formation. I watched them oscillating across the sky, back and forth like iron filings chasing a magnet. The old man with the hawk told me they come for the hatching crane flies. I remember my surprise: Crane flies hatch? Well, I was hatched, he said, never born!

That was the day I noticed a thin silver plait threaded through his beard.

Why do these details hold my memory? The dog running, its tail tucked tight between its legs. I had never seen it so quick on its feet – and still not starved to death.

And then I felt a spasm. Somewhere in my neck. Or was it a vision behind my eyes? And the wind caught my hair and whipped my mouth and teased my tongue. I should have shaved the lot off. Cleared my head, cleaned it out long ago. That was the plan – save the water needed to wash it – but he had begged me to keep it, to leave it untouched.

I must not look back, but I always look back. I hear everything and I know less. The months are gathering into years and still I can smell the air and see clearly what was there but is no more. My heart does not always hurt.

And where was that woman going?

I could hear myself panting. Then the knot of bodies standing so tight. The man in the brown robe, the one I used to see on the market. All those plastic kettles! Why was he still here? And why did he bring his wife? Her cotton dress worn to dust.

It was beside the basketball courts. The kids don't go there anymore. Who wants to be near those holes, the holes that bring back the dead? And there are no balls left. Not a single one.

And I kept wondering, what are they all doing here? Huddled together when so few of us are left.

And there I was, walking towards them, and then their coats and skirts were parting, and their

feet shuffling for space on the broken tarmac. And there I was, stepping among them, and their arms joining across my back and around my shoulders. I felt a hand upon my head. Then their voices were on my cheeks, pushing into the cracks of my lips, sliding inside my mouth on to my tongue, their cries racing down to my hungry stomach.

And there he was. Sitting on a plastic chair. His brains blown out through the back of his head. My love.

His rifle was resting between his thighs. His arms hanging heavy from his shoulders. His blackened hands empty and still. Chin thrown back. Staring at the sky.

And I looked at the blood beneath his chair. I felt, more than anything else, astonished by the colour. The bright red gloss. It was splattered on the wall too.

I could see his brain. Was I to gather it up? Where would I put it? Would I take a piece for my pocket? The pieces of his mind I knew so well.

I stepped closer and I looked into his face – the same face that was before me that morning, on the pillow when the light caught the curtain and I could not sleep. And I had gazed at him and touched his cheek, and I ran my smallest finger along his curled eyebrow.

I had no tears left within me.

My whole body was leaking.

And I cannot say it was a beautiful morning, but I know that it was. And I know that the sky was clear and blue, but I was too afraid to raise my head, to look away from my love.

And I could hear the starlings flying high above. They knew nothing of the misery down below.

II

I had told him, when it all began, that if we were to survive, we must banish talk of tender things, that we must not dwell on memories of tender moments.

Like that Saturday.

We were leaving town to visit his brother and wife. Their first child had been born. It should have been a day of celebration, but my sweet love persuaded me that we should give a ride to his old friend, Pak. He needed help getting north and we were going some of the way and since the road was bad and the buses weren't safe, we should take him as far as we could. I had not seen Pak since our wedding day when I had found him going through my drawers – and noticed, later, that a piece of my underwear was missing. I didn't want to end their friendship, but I wasn't prepared to let him back in our home. I said he could ride with us on condition that I did the driving, so I could concentrate on the road.

It was Pak who did most of the talking. You two worry too much, he said, pushing out a laugh. But everything will be OK, you'll see.

I was watching him in the mirror. When he spoke, his black fringe flopped about his face and

his tongue spun saliva. I noticed the white in his side-burns and wondered why he dyed his hair. I thought about him touching my knickers and I was probably driving too fast and suddenly something ran into the road.

It felt like we'd hit a boulder, the way the vehicle juddered.

I managed to pull over and we all got out. Behind us, flat on the tarmac, a beautiful black cat. We stood around it and I heard myself saying: How sleek it is, how perfect and smooth in its state of death.

And then it started to have these convulsions, like it was taking its last breaths from life.

I knew what to do. I had done it before with frogs and birds. You must be decisive: don't hesitate or you will make more pain. I began searching for a rock at the side of the road. But my dear sweetest heart, he wouldn't hear of it. He shouted at me, told me to stay back, and he carefully lifted the animal into his arms. Cradling it against his jumper, he spoke the softest words. And it began to groan horribly, a sound that seemed to expand inside its stomach.

It's dying, I said. But my love insisted we find someone who could treat it. And I remember looking at Pak – standing there, sweating and breathless.

We got back in the car and my love wrapped the cat inside the red blanket, the one we had been sent from the priest in Nairobi. I told him again that the cat was dying, that it was cruel to keep it alive. But he simply glared at me.

So I turned the car around and we drove back towards town.

Pak stared out the window, alone and lost. My love carried on talking to the cat while instructing me to avoid the pot-holes because the bumps were causing the animal pain. When we arrived outside the pet clinic on the edge of our neighbourhood, he told Pak and I to wait in the car. The two of us sat in silence. After half an hour or so, he reappeared. He said the nurse had taken her, that they would examine her and call us in the morning.

Well I could hardly believe it. The cat made a full recovery.

I will never forget how he looked at me when he put down the phone. You wanted to kill her! he said. And the tears flooded his eyes.

III

When we no longer knew what was happening to our country, my soft-hearted husband wouldn't even kill the cockroaches in our bedroom. He tried to keep everything alive, even the flies that sat on our food. He filled our tiny verandah with plants in ceramic pots that he had painted. He would wake early to tend them and – my head still on the pillow, my eyes still closed – I would listen to him whispering sweetly whilst he watered and pruned them, one by one.

And whenever we had a disagreement, he would look at me, his face heavy with grief, and remind me of the cat.

He named her after his mother.

And I still worry. Even now. What does this say about me? That I am so ready to end a life.

This is what I have learned. That some of us are more suited than others to the endless experience of death.

IV

Of course he wanted to die!

They had captured this village somewhere in the east, close to the border. I can't remember when – maybe the beginning of last year? I hadn't seen him for months. And then he was home, waking in a sweat, sitting on the edge of the bed, crumbling shoulders, crying until it sounded like his heart had cracked.

Eventually he told me.

They heard a woman calling her son: Tomas! Tomas! When the child appeared – he was only three or four – the colonel picked him up by his ankles and swung him, like a sledgehammer, at the wall.

V

Some days I try to remember how old I was when I became aware of war. I try to remember when it was that I first learned that people kill their next-door neighbours, and their brothers, and their childhood friends' mothers. How old was I when I understood that you could get a job as a soldier with a gun and be paid to kill other people?

And I try to remember which was the first war I forgot, and which was the first one I got bored of hearing about?

None of us can pay attention to them all. And why should we?

I remember hugging my grandmother when I was a younger woman than I am now. And she pulled me down and she whispered to my ear: Time doesn't matter, time doesn't matter. It doesn't matter, my dear.

And you look at me and you wonder why I take the time to put in my earrings and paint my nails.

And I look at you and I wonder, why am I telling you this? What have you come to hear?

Have you noticed the silence? I remember that morning. He came in from the verandah, the sun was behind him, and he asked me that question. He stood before me, one hand in the air, gesturing above.

The skies, which used to be full of passenger planes, are empty. Thousands of miles above us, pilots are making sharp manoeuvres to avoid flying over us. The people on board simply put a

hand to their tray of food to stop it slipping any further.

We have been erased from the map. Our whole country has become a lost piece of a jigsaw puzzle.

VI

The last time tears ran down my cheeks was the night one of our neighbours disappeared with a dozen men.

The dogs would not stop barking. We thought a wild animal must have set them off. They would not shut up. I looked out the window, but could see no one. My love called me back to bed – he told me to calm myself. But I wouldn't move. I waited and waited and then I heard their footsteps, in unison, like an army approaching. A line of them, in helmets, holding guns the size of guitars, moving with certainty up our street. When one of them saw me at the window, he signalled to close the curtains and stay back. Then the sound of something smashing and, a minute or two later, the whole family on the street. Houman, the father, still naked. Then they were all being marched away at gun-point. I opened the window, to shout to them, to let them know I was awake and a witness. And immediately one of the guns was pointing at me, and behind me, my love, pulling me back, slamming the window shut.

We waited and waited. Finally, Ela and the children reappeared, escorted by three men in suits, wearing gloves the colour of my mother's turquoise ring.

The following day, I knocked at their door. They had no idea where Houman had been taken.

This is how it started.

On our street, people stopped talking to that family. The eldest child walked to school alone.

It became quieter and quieter.

We began listening to what waiters said in cafés and we whispered in public. We started talking in twos because we knew a third could denounce us. We avoided eye contact with strangers and we came to recognise the secret police. A local theatre group became a faith group to divert attention from the content of their plays. We started talking about “them” and we developed codes to refer to political groups and people with power. We avoided shopping centres and only the foolish stayed on social media. We took money out of the bank and hid the cash in the ceiling and under the floor, inside packets of flour, and sewn into bras and shoes and a quilted bag of cotton wool and my aunt's handmade tea-cosy. We hoarded boxes of candles and kept a hammer beneath the bed. When we could, we drank alcohol, and I began to pray. We filled the dustbins with water and we padlocked the lids. The price of fruit and vegetables shot up because we couldn't reach the land where we'd always grown our own. Imports were flown in. Cargo planes were shot down. Protesters were rounded up and our dreams were rounded down. We ate less and brushed our teeth once a day. We stole toilet paper from the Grand Hotel. When we had it, we rolled tobacco in pages torn from old dictionaries and cheap novels printed on thin paper. Because of the black-outs, we couldn't use the air-conditioner so when it got hotter, we didn't have sex. We lay, bodies apart, beneath nets doused in deet that we hid from visitors. We struggled to sleep. We were always tired. Our dreams changed.

I was lying on the bed, a five-week-old dead baby beside me. I was unmoved by its death but decided to breast-feed it to bring it back to life. I was forty-three. I had never produced milk. But I pulled the tiny limp body towards my left breast and it began to suckle. I became aroused and as I reached orgasm, the baby became a cat and the cat began to purr. I woke up.

Shall I keep going?

VII

He loved to draw pictures on my back. I'd lie on the bed and he'd run his fingers over my skin, making shapes and telling me to guess, What is it? What is it? He'd give me hints. It's a famous painting! A type of animal! And he would roll about in delight whenever I got it right. A kangaroo! That's it, that's it!

He loved to make me laugh.

VIII

That morning, a young man with a soft moustache beneath his nose, threw a thick blanket over my dead husband. It was covered in images of smiling fish – with long black eye-lashes and thick red lips.

IX

When some of the street names changed, we became afraid. Public buildings, too. Before the real fighting broke out, new statues went up and others came down. As part of the curriculum, children were taught how to load an automatic rifle. Our postman boasted about his daughter. She won a Galil, her very own Galil, he said. She was the only girl in her class who could fire it without falling over. She was eleven. I asked him if his daughter knew how to bake a cake. Or write an essay. Make dirty water clean. Could she speak a third language? Or cultivate potatoes? Could she distinguish the north from the south, and point to Jupiter in the sky? Did she know how to insert a tampon? Or help a woman give birth?

People started leaving. Whole apartment blocks emptied overnight. Cars vanished from the streets. Shops closed down and rubbish piled up. We started building fires and the plastic burned our throats. We stopped bicycling because the roads became ruins. We learned to read the sound of mortar fire so we knew where it was coming from and where it was likely to land. There was so much gunfire, we learned to distinguish the weapons. We became faster runners, dashing down the side of a street in the shadows to avoid snipers, and running from helicopter gunships and tanks the size of our home. Some children became so accustomed to violence, they stopped running away and continued playing their ball games and their kiss-chase. The first child to be tortured had his finger nails pulled out and his testicles twisted with wires. They made him wear a hood. We adapted. We became more resilient. We organised a Miss Beauty competition to raise our spirits. We searched our city for flowers. We adjusted and readjusted. We performed the normal and called the government the regime. In our silence, we became complicit.

X

I've read that what is remembered is remembered well by the body.

I've read that the courage to refuse is as great as the courage to fight.

I've read that to have pain is to have certainty, but to witness pain is to have doubt.

XI

He was always the first to join a protest. The first to go on a march. He loved to make banners from boxes and bits of wood. He had so much hope. And I had so much anger.

The first time we rejoiced at someone's death, it was before he'd joined up. We looked at each other with so much love.

She was a gardener in our neighbourhood. She worked for one of our finest poets. In his garden. Tending his plants. He wanted to carry on as if we still had time to cry. For years, he'd clipped his own hedge – with shears and secateurs and, for the more complicated features, a pair of nail scissors. He used to say that to shape a bush, you must lend it your imagination. For years, it was a peacock – like the one that had patrolled the grounds of the estate where he grew up in the 1940s. But he became too frail to maintain it, so the gardener took over.

When the soldiers turned up, they said it was a cockerel, the symbol of the militia. They shot her in both breasts.

I remember running from our home, up the hill, and we hugged and we laughed and I spat on her hair. I could smell the clematis and the honeysuckle. And I could hear someone playing the piano.

One of the soldiers was eating an apple and holding his gun and when we finally stopped to catch our breaths, he put the whole core inside his mouth.

Why do you look at me like that?

What I have seen, you might imagine, but you do not know what it would do to you.

XII

One day, we watched an old man, from our top window, rolling down the street. His arms pinned to his sides, his hands close to his neck. His whole body rolling, rolling, rolling. He was holding his breath. We were holding our breath.

Before she died, my grandmother pulled me down and whispered, Be careful what you say my dear, be careful with your thoughts.

When we were children, we'd go to the park and we'd play roly-poly down the hill and we'd laugh.

The man who was rolling had been shot in the knee.

We watched from our window. A wood pigeon landed on the sill.

The man didn't make it.

XIII

I thought I would be brave!

When he joined up, he said he was defending us.

But we didn't know what revenge was then. We still didn't understand fear.

You can think all you like about your better nature, but it evaporates the moment you believe you are going to be killed.

We thought we understood. We knew about fighter jets and tanks and guns and refugees, starving children and landmines and cluster bombs and rape, peace talks and ceasefires and humanitarian gestures and sociopathic politicians and the power of the army.

But it was the small things...

We didn't know we'd boil the same coffee grains for days in a row. We didn't know we'd yearn for soap. We didn't know we'd walk past a cat, alive with half its face blown off, and not even stop to touch it for comfort. We didn't know that the drip of the leaking tap would disguise itself as the gunfire that killed the boy who ran to his mother's body – and that we would be shaking with fear every time we heard it. It never occurred to us we'd be afraid of the rain. Or that we'd risk our lives to pull a dead body to safety. Or that we'd become so accustomed to the clicks on the phone that we'd learn the art of banality and talk about the weather.

We never imagined that a stranger standing over our beloved's body would gently tell us: Forget him, forget him.

We never thought we'd forget how to cry, that we'd lie to get food, or that we'd run towards a single daffodil still standing in the rubble. We never imagined we'd dread these days of silence, waiting for the guns and the planes and the end.

We never imagined that we'd get bored in war. That we'd become prisoners in our own neighbourhood, often in our own street. For days on end. That the songs we sang while we waited at checkpoints would send us into such a spiral of misery, we'd struggle to stand. We didn't know that the boys who held the RPGs would rather we kiss their feet than wish their mother well. We never imagined that the skin on the tips of our fingers would become so familiar with the feeling of warm blood. That our periods would cease because our ovaries understood more of war than our brains.

We didn't know that we'd be so afraid, we'd try to forget peace. We had no clue that we'd cut toe-nails from the dead, and locks of hair, and pull out teeth, and cut fingers to remove rings. That we'd do anything to have something to hold. We didn't know that the young could go grey

and that the world would turn away. We never imagined the humiliation of being forgotten. Or the pride felt showing a soldier our breast.

We never thought that the mornings would be more beautiful because of war.