

Langour

after a line by Carolyn Forché

Note: Peonies traditionally symbolize shame and anger; but also healing and, especially in the Orient, feminine loveliness.

1.

The langour of peonies? A universal image:
flowers drooping over the dead of Khe Sanh
and the mass interments near the Citadel at Hue.
The red sun, like a peony, hangs in the skies
of Dak To and Ban Me Thuot lighting
endless bodies marching west
into the *plaines des jarres* through
fields of white ginger and jungle orchids.
Pushing through elephant grass like sharks
they cut through dry water. Grassy waves carry
the dead in their wake. The moon leans down
to kiss their rifles, finds nothing to reflect.

2.

Young women in *ao dais*, prim, proper, walk
slowly down Le Loi Street, faces fixed on distant points,
eyes focused straight ahead, neither left nor right.
I do not bother them, though I smile and nod,
whisper, "*Chao co. Manh gioi khong?*" And when
they pass me by I mumble, "*Choi oi!*
Dep lam." How beautiful! But not for me,
not even for themselves, a part of the scenery,
plastic props, exotic extras to decorate the city:
Barbies in an Oriental incarnation. And I am Ken.

I stare as they pass me by, their lips just so, frozen
smiles, some fantasy of childhood dressed in silk,
but hair long and black, special extra wigs
keeping things cool in the hot, red streets.

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Hospital Visit

For the survivors

I give her a puppet—an armadillo,
fuzzy and warm, to slip over her hand
in the dark when there is no one near
only time to think and a dark marble of fear
that awakens, pulses deep down in a silent

spot that no one knows but she. Her
husband died somehow in Viet Nam
and she has kept the pain in that same place
for all these years, has hardly talked
of those deep jungles where his body lay.

The doctor comes and speaks of this and that,
cool and calm, detached: of the mastectomy
to be deferred for chemo, the bone scan positive,
biopsy positive, metastasis into the bone.
Sterile words, remote from the throbbing space
that whispers in her blood.

"Yes, it's raining," I say.
"Yes, your sons are here."

She feels the lump in her breast, a pressure, a weight.
She says, "I don't need it anyway. My sons are grown."
She says, "My husband died so long ago. I don't need
to talk about the war." She strokes the puppet. "I want

quiet, rest and peace." A steady stream of visitors troops
into her room, brings sweet flowers with perfume
that palls and mingles somehow with the silent
drip of an IV in her hand. A slow anointing,
laying on of hands: fingers trace a cross with water,
touch her head, but it is not the sacrament of the dead,

only a rite for healing, something to contend with that
central core where dark shapes gather. How hard
it is to be polite, to kiss, to hug, to shake each hand.
"I'm fine," she says. "I only need a little sleep."
She smiles. I take her hand, slip the puppet on.

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