

Two Poems

Steve Nolan

Bucha (Ukraine)

Stop insisting the images remain distant
for personal comfort, for the body, for
the mind to relax, to bring slumber,
for our children not to feel guilt
about impotence, for the alibi
of absence from the scene of the crime.

Bucha should be the name of every blue
bicycle a child gets to ride to the park
without negotiating smoldering tanks;
the name of nail polish used for that perfect
manicure on the one hand, of the one body,
of the one woman shot riding her bike
home from work -- the decision she made
(like the founding of the United Nations),
to paint one nail with a tiny heart.

"Bucha" -- say it -- don't armor your heart.
Let it be a prayer—one more bead
on a rosary of sorrowful mysteries.

Where Two Waters Come Together

(for Jaddah, "Our adopted grandmother")

Today, in Loring Park, Minnesota, you must ask a real estate agent about property value on land that is sacred to the Dakota people. The Minnesota River joins the Mississippi at a place called Bdote – the English translation is simply, "*Where two waters come together.*" United States land seizures created eleven reservations that deny access to lands that shape a people's identity and spirituality.

You can find BBQ, steak fries, chicken fingers, fried fish, soft drinks, cheap motels, honky-tonk bars, as well as gated communities, institutions of higher learning, and life-saving emergency rooms in a slew of hospitals spread upon settled land—settled by treaties, governed by laws, some as old as Moses, some as new as the tears of a woman who just miscarried her first child.

You can purchase a road Atlas to see how the land is mapped into separate states. You can drive to Wounded Knee or Little Big Horn—there were massacres at both tourist locations. Wounded Knee and Little Big Horn are actually names for a creek and a river, that run through Red (or Blue) states—the new cartography of thought and belief imposed upon this land.

This land still produces children for wars far away, distant disputes over real estate, scums over scarce resources; greed of the few bleeding the needs of the many. One man, for instance, is responsible for five million people fleeing their homeland in Syria and another five million from Ukraine. He was praised as a genius by the White Father in Washington, who sees savages everywhere. The Ojibwe, the Lakota, the Creek, the Cheyenne, the Syrian, the Mexican, the Guatemalan, the Ukrainian mothers cry, "Why?"

Before she died, a grandmother in a Syrian refugee camp sent a message to America facing the coronavirus threat. She lost all of her children and grandchildren in the nine-year war. She wrote, "*There will be some days when you don't feel strong. And this is okay. Crying is not weakness. Every tear is it's own kind of prayer. When you are done remind yourself who you are and refocus. But don't you dare give up. Please feel so much love from our home to your home. You are in our hearts always.*"

The value of pain is that it humbles you. If the urgent needs of children in border camps, the selfless service of doctors and chefs without borders, your sacred offering to the four winds sweeping the barren land of the reservation, force you to shirk the seduction of revenge triggered by blood on soil; if you find yourself looking at rain clouds asking for their mercy, if your prayer for rain and the quenched thirst of the flowers you planted in the garden invite you to forgive those who know not what they do, you just might take away the sins of the world.

Steve Nolan spent 30 years in the military and 25 years as a mental health professional. He has published in numerous journals and his poetry was featured on National Public Radio, Morning Edition, upon his return from Afghanistan in 2007. He is the author of *Go Deep, Base Camp, American Carnage, An Officer's Duty to Warn, and A Palace of Ruins*. His work reflects his commitment to social justice.