

Three Poems

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The Things They Carried (Eastern Nigeria, 1968)

in her brain's left pocket, she stuffs
the image of a pregnant woman's belly
split open on the side of Aba Road, a bloodied
cord dangling without a human anchor. she
will try not to speak of this when she is asked
what she remembered about that time. instead
she will wrap these secrets in banana leaves
and boil them until they congeal something
hard & visible, to throw away or eat. the warning
that once formed in her mouth to protect her
children from danger now hangs in the back of her throat
like a mischievous child that can't gag its way
out of the jungle gym. she remembers who
showed the enemy their hiding place.
she places her dreams of love & yams
in her right brain next to a portrait of home.
her head tilts to the left as if the question
she is about to answer is too heavy to balance.
If you see my people, she tells him, tell them

yesterday was too heavy to carry. Tell them
not to eat what has not been wrapped & boiled
for consumption. Tell them only that some of us
had to relieve ourselves on the side of the road –
our futures too heavy to hold. & gently let mama know
what her children have done to her children.

After Silence (Eastern Nigeria, Fall, 1969)

—after Aldous Huxley & Jimi Hendrix

there's a rhythm to the bomb drops, he tells me.
like a morning waltz between air & metal:
drop, two three, dead, two three. stop.
Switch
partners
then repeat.

at evening, bombs pluck
bodies held taut like guitar strings.
distorted wails.

we are all ants
with rifle drums for heart beats
scatter-dancing about our trampled anthills
to capriccio music
in the air.

this is the national anthem we cull in our tongues
& learn to sing to the drone of warplanes.
when the silence descends, he confides
we become death holding our breath
waiting for a defibrillated resurrection
back into the terror we thought we had escaped.

his eyes count three beats then close. silence
is the empty seat
in the dark theater of the mind
waiting to be filled
with impatient thoughts
clamoring to bear curses to God
in metal chorus. other times, it is the boogeyman

cloaked in brass-colored fear
that sits in the shadows refusing
to engage in salvation's call & response.
we are instruments
without sound
white-noising the brain's command to flee.

in the silence
we are nymphs in chrysalises
pried open too soon
unable to crawl
with no wings to fly —
waiting for the next beat.

“Selection Ground” (Imo State, Nigeria, 1967)

tell an adolescent boy that the stifling still
of home is more stimulating than the frenzy of war
and he will itch those words from behind his ears
until they bleed. he will chew his tongue
and slide out from under his father’s gaze
and skip towards the congregation of men
dressed in the defiant bravado of war.
anything to move / to elude apathy / to push
the hands of a clock down to a future
that a fidgeting brain might find useful. to play
a game of cat & mouse and chase the mouse
it into the bush or onto a lorry heading to Okigwe—
where dancing with bullets will be mere child’s play.

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