Been Here Before

When visiting histories of the ravaged dead, why tow our bodies along?

Our pores gulp and bones hoard minerals. Our veins and intestines, ever ignorant to The Big Picture, clutch and release in constant, rote ritual.

Case and point: I’m engrossed in my Auschwitz tour, tearing over oceans of human hair, over christened suitcases and so many stolen shoes—O those furrowed, leather mouths!—and my blood sugar plummets. Suddenly, I can’t help envisioning room-temperature Snickers drooling peanuts galore, peanuts perfectly nougat-choked and coco-coated, sleek-peeking from packaging so iconic all present vanishes.

Embarrassed, sure, but fault seems too modern a concept in this postmodern ghost zoo. Because there’re ethics and then there’s chemistry; there’s physiology ever-sprouting its wild hypotheses while Pathos, that bastard runt, runs amok.

Then, yet again, it happens. I’m five steps from Genbaku Dome and wouldn’t you know it, personal combustion. An ambush of diarrhea chases me into a so-new Hiroshima. Sweat-stung eyes eating neon, head swiveling robotically as I lope for a future of relief, a single bowl in a solitary hold of such soft wiping paper. A future of release, of solitude and emptiness, but certainly not including 140,000 dead.

Over and over, my base biology triumphs: The Vietnam Wall, and here 59,000 obliterated and expertly etched are obliterated once more in the acoustics of my migraines. Ground Zero, El Mozote, what was once Joplin, misery. And so how to do it, I wonder? To memorialize with the brain and heart alone? Is it a failure of one’s humanity when a deluge catches you musing and stern amongst Dublin’s Potato Famine statues? A failure when, in one gust, your umbrella’s blown inside out and all that stark, unforgiving bronze is reduced to scrap? All you want is a steaming bread-bowl of Brunswick Stew…

Failure, yes, perhaps. Or perhaps, as the corporeal is older, we should let it lead? Let it take our hands and tell us commiseration is merely a mutated nerve of hunger? Perhaps epochs of evolution have imbedded a dementia in the brain cells, tiny pockets of blank pain where too much feeling collapses down the spine, into the gut. And here abide the souls of our predecessors; here they’re remembered as cell, not cognition, as fascia and sinew, as gland drip and churning bile, and they’ve got no patience, no—because they’ve been here before.
Around Esperanza

In rank jungle heat these doctors’ t-shirts cling and leak,
    though still clearly read: Not from the Right, Not from the Left,
but From the Spirit. So we stand beside them,
telling ourselves we can tell the difference between tourists
    and missionaries, pale puppets and suitcases of penicillin. Or
until this cinderblock school is darkened by afternoon
storms, until we have to train flashlights on latex, on fingers
    oily with pinching, with thick-stitching this kid’s skull, an operation
more private than delicate, like porn, we’re thinking,

like everything hidden will be brought to stale circles of light.
    The boy’s wet-ripped hair, his pink lips of scalp, and all the while
the father’s insisting it was a fan, a trip and fall.

Then the man goes to smoke and one doctor says, Not a chance,
    says, I know a machete cut like I know a Baltimore bullet wound.
But does he know we’re telling ourselves, even still,

there must be difference? Some divinely severed connection
    between a chicken scratching and its claw in our soup? Or, how,
when we squat and shit poorly, a hundred white, downy feathers
shuffle about our boot heels, but these still can’t distract
    from our bad aim, or these clay pipes, or the impossibility of sanitizing our nails
enough to return? And when we return, here’s the father
carrying his boy away though the head’s only half-cinched,
  the eyes rolled limp—Why? Is he angry, or just confusing anger with pride?
Must be pride, we tell ourselves, how it comes before the fall,

how it’s hard to hear what we think with these doctors
  always interrupting, doctors saying the boy might not infect, might not rot
and die if we take each other’s hands, bow our heads.

Where two or more are gathered, Lord, please... Please, so this single,
  brown boy doesn’t disappear back into our anonymity, Lord, give us the strength
to stop believing in disbelief, to isolate the American Scripture

from The American Joke, to learn to see clean water simply
  as water we pretend has never been used, then, well, Amen. That’s a wrap.
Our work here’s done. Time to jet, time to again insist

the pastor is not our pastor; he’s merely our driver, taking us home.
  But when the bus breaks down, we clamor out, as a team, and push. We shove
and cuss and tire, then retire in sick-dripping diesel shade. To wait.

To reflect on clogged sunshine behind rubber fires, on dirt floors
  and nematodes, on burning black circles around our eyes that mean we’re beat,
sure, but we’ve exhausted shame so it can never be guilt.

Never. Ask these vultures we’re certain are crows
  craning down in love.

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