

The Shelter of Memories

The dust-coloured trucks unroll a
thousand loops of razor barbed-wire
and the men in uniform strut
gun at the hip visored cap hiding eyes behind
wraparound mirrored sunglasses

The warriors return bleeding, legs and hands
lacerated by jagged edges of sharpnesses onto
which slivers of flesh cling like skewered choice
bits of meat
But they embrace, having survived another day of
battle
to return tired and unknown to their lairs where they
sleep
and kept watch
and a silent vigil over one of theirs who has been
fatally
punctured

The children ask about the meaning of embraces
and are told that these embraces have nothing to do
with the warmth of bodies issuing through the thin
fabric of cloth
These are gestures warring men and women perform
at the end or beginning of a momentous ritual
This is a greeting to what they are going to do
if they live
and what they hope their compatriots would do in
remembrance
if they die

The embraces mean remembering the land
the forests and the foliage that hinders and shelters
and gives rise to a yawning loneliness of the caves
and a storage point for arms wrapped in oilcloth
for the sepia earth no different on the surface from
the depths of a groaning grave
the harrowing heat and the haze on the horizonless
stretch
where unknown people pass anonymously
unmourned until that day when all shall be
unearthed

The embrace means coming to terms
with the deaths that are golden days
and the earth is silent because screamers are hoarse

no child whimpers as fire consumes dwellings
and heads are splintered with axes
and young limbs are clutched and brains and gristle
and gore become the graffiti on our everyday walls
and a nation is inured to the knowledge of firing
squad
and graves like mushrooms without headstones
The embrace means a shuddering at night
women ululating in the darkness
spooking the paid assassins manning roadblocks
it means the ageless song of people
that keens and rises and drops from an unimaginable
height
and tramples on the statutes and undermines
the state of emergency and enters the pores of
bloated
red-veined faces of impotent unloved and unlovable
men
wielding temporary power
and steals the guns of policemen and frightens their
children
and explodes on May 20 and kills their dreams
and poisons their streams and galvanises everyone
into action
and organises workers and causes the rand to fall
and stops the trains from running and floods the
mines
and causes speech to stutter and radios to crackle
with static
and jails to fill up and coffins to be cheaper
and the face of Nelson Mandela to be everywhere
and the words of Oliver Tambo to reverberate in
every household
and white policemen to be transported
in body bags back to Bloemfontein

The embrace means the children singing about
tomorrow
singing and singing and singing
and singing and chanting and chanting and chanting
and embracing the idea that we are a people
fighting to be free!

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