

excerpts from
Bloodred Dragonfiles
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Deep South, 2022

The Way a Heart Ricochets

The call of a guinea fowl
in the late hours, a wheel

on an axle that needs oiling,
spun by the wind or a hand

that remains unseen.
Things you never touched

now seem near and distant
at the same time.

The Path of the Wind

for Margie

I have seen days when the wind
weighs so heavy on trees, they bend

close to breaking. A limb
with the greenest leaves

or weakened by age would have to give in.
The trunk may have to learn a new angle

sunward. Less apparent is the path
the wind must make. It has to unravel,

splitting itself into countless strands
to navigate between each leaf, each branch.

Lines Too Late to Utter

Look for me on the edges of shadows
at dusk, away from streetlights
and neons, beyond the urban sprawl
where people are boxed meals.

Listen to my whisper between
a dog's fading howl
and the snapping of a cat's claw
as it runs up a wall
with graffiti skin.

Forget what I wrote you years ago.
Those promises have found
their boundaries. Go, take flight,
my love.

How the Pineapple Came to Be

The mother sought to share the burden of chores.
The child preferred to twist and stretch
time in her little mind. The mother kept
asking her daughter to find a broom, a pot,
a ladle, or something else dictated
by domestic life. Her voice grew dry
as overcooked rice.

“I cannot find it, mother,” was Pina’s
repeated reply while snapping spiderwebs.
“Use your eyes, my child,
or may you have a thousand!”

Those were the last words she heard
from her mother. The curse
unleashed in half a breath,
struck Pina’s dreaming head.
Then there was silence
heavy as nightfall on an empty bed.

A mother’s grief, a village search
until dawn. With countless eyes
wide and unseeing, Pina stared
forever at her mother
doubled over at the bottom
of the wooden steps.

After the First Monsoon Rain

Doors along the narrow line of houses
empty out with children,
banana leaves bend to drop
the last beads of rain down their palms.

He is among them, this boy
with the breath of summer.
The scent of earth roused by rain
fills his lungs.

He runs in zigzags to his friends,
making sure to hit every puddle
with every leap. The louder
the splash, the better.

Decades After the War

You rub your eyes as if in waking. Yet they linger,
threads embedded in your iris. Outlines
of shadows, transparent shapes in a huddle
round the lone water tap. Dusk settles
on the roofs of the school buildings.

You are nine and it is time to go home.
The other kids don't see what makes you tremble,
what makes you feel like you have to pee.
They carry their bags on their shoulders and walk
right through those shapes, as in mist.

Their laughter fades and you are still there,
holding the bottle a teacher asked you to fill.
The uneven ground on the field begins to rise.
The wall of an abandoned fort appears,
calling to the thirsty soldiers.

The Crabs

I was a skinny child, squeamish
about cracking open the crab
my mother cooked. She flinched,
lifting the clumps strung together
from the market, their pincers
bound with bamboo strips.

Their protruding eyes swivelled about,
probing their changed world, their mouths
tiny flapping windows before a brewing
typhoon. Then a frantic banging
on the sides of the pot until
the bubbling drowned them out.

Citizens Military Training

Hand-me-down boots
deep jungle green
a size too big, reeking of memories
of someone else's feet.

Another Saturday morning wasted
pretending to stand at attention
while being spat on
by kitchen-ranked officers.

Suddenly felt something squirm
under my left foot, something under
the thick black sock I had
doubled over to make the boot fit.

This thing resisted the weight
of my toes, pierced through
my sock as if with needles,
made me jump out of line and curse.

Punishment: four hours in full sun.
At long last the stroke of noon,
the relief of loosening laces,
shaking free the boot.

Just then tumbled out, exoskeleton
popped open, a muffled hissing,
a sizzle, a twitch which grew still:
my tormentor, an American cockroach.

The Calendar

The state-issued calendar, smooth
and shiny at first, grew a skin
from my mother's cooking,
gathered daily dust and droppings
from geckos.

For years my sisters and I got used
to eating while being watched
by the cardboard eyes of the dictator
and his family, their opulent smiles
mocking the flowerless chalk vases,
the six-inch high bowling trophies,
the scant collection of books
locked behind sliding panels of glass.

Long after the regime was toppled,
my parents still kept the calendar.
They cut off the year and the months,
leaving the picture uneven and jagged.

One day, on coming back from school,
my eyes lingered at a rectangle
on the dining room wall. I saw
a lighter tinge of the same paint,
and holes where the nails had been.

Seeing in the Dark

it was a gift she never wanted
to use, unless you begged her
for some glimmer of a future

she said faith should be enough
but seeing the doubt in my eyes
she had to allow geometry
to lead me out of the dark

*you will leave your country
stare loneliness in the eye
bury the dead among the living
and resurrect them unwillingly
because your hands are your way
of seeing in the dark*

i laughed a bitter laughter
i had never heard before

Escape

The day I visited my nephew
at rehab, there were people
screaming. One of the patients
had bolted when he saw the gate
open. My sister told me to stay
in the vehicle until it was safe.

They caught the guy, beat him up
a bit. Solitary was definite.
My sister unwrapped the food
she packed for all to share,
as if nothing was more ordinary.
The trees gave some shade

that humid afternoon. My nephew said
he'd like to come home again.
All of us knew it wasn't time,
but spoke of days before everything
went dark. Strips of garbage bags
fluttered on the barbed wire.

Archipelago

From very young it was drummed
in our heads that my country
was an archipelago.

“Think of a man about to lift
a sack of rice,” one teacher said.

In high school I saw the shape
of Marcos the dictator and his loot.
Hunched, he boards a US Air Force
helicopter that bends the trees
around the palace grounds
before the mob at the gates break through.

These days it takes the shape of the new tyrant.
His throat, a howling wilderness.
He coughs out curses, splattering them
onto something leaning on his leg,
one more victim bundled up
with packaging tape.

One day I will visit
my homeland again,
as if from outer space,
behold a string of emeralds
on a tilted silver tray.

We Will Not Allow the Dead to be Silenced

The man who curses shall be cursed
to live forever in the stories we shall tell
our children. They will not fear him
or his twisted reincarnations.

Our children shall not be shaken
by his threats. His attack dogs
with teeth of bullets will not make us
turn away and flee.

Though the dead may be left
unclaimed in morgues
or dumped on the side of the road,
their faces bound with packaging tape,

they will never be silenced.
The veins on their exposed necks
and stiffened arms will turn to roots.
And we who fight to remember

the cruelty inflicted upon
those we can no longer hold
shall bear bitter fruit
to be shoved down the tyrant's throat.

Dragonflies

It isn't possible to find the old house
where you taught me how to take
my very first steps, Mother.
The government didn't just tear down
its foundations. They buried it
under twenty feet of soil.

Over that, they stretched tar
in the name of the dictator,
built a bridge that tore the shoulders
of the river. Then they carved out the hill
that was almost a mountain.

We shook our heads at your tombstone
stretched to the horizon.
The last of the fields
where running children
would freeze in their tracks
at the sight of bloodred dragonflies.

Chameleon Birth

Veins pulsing, she grips
the branch that holds her up.
Tongue bunched inside
her jaws, soundless. Her slit
of flesh finally blossoms,

a ball of slime drops but refuses
to plunge to rough ground.
Membrane clings to closest
branch. In a breath, a limb
breaks that soft sheet

and this thing, a minuscule version
of its mother, starts to climb. Born
with the same slumbering
acrobatic agility, it creeps upward,
seeks warmth for its fragile skin

while she gives birth to another
and another. Until, all life
nearly drained, she heads down.
Slow body gently presses
against each offspring,
a first and last caress.