

NOWHERE ON THE MAP

We're driving through
the plains of an untold story,
heading west into a country that is ours
and not ours, into a rural sense
of lost spirit. We pass cautionary signs
authorizing: "USE OF DEADLY FORCE,"
where in the distance, a chain-link fence
marks an underground silo not shown
on the map. We continue to follow
this road, looking ahead into the daylight
glaring back at us and the landscape,
our eyes excavating the bones
of one lone farm. We see the barn
stranded in the middle of nowhere
in the arms of a broken-down fence;
a one-time plow; contaminated well water;
and the old homestead, stripped bare,
and bending down in the dirt.
Every now and then the sun's rays
will strike like a match; each one
a tiny bomb of flame bursting
in the wind and chill of lost promise;
a desire less visible, but scrolling
on either side of us through the archives
of faded color. We see the relics
of a ruined renaissance,
the machinations of the political
that were never put on record,
a ritual of too many mistakes
concealed in the evolving sorrow
of lost tribes. We are somewhere,
and nowhere in the heart
of sheer memorabilia lingering
on the corner of Main; the church
anointing the sick, the disabled;
the crumbling walls of the court house
and jail; and on the other side,
a school, no longer in use, but holding
within its walls the day's lessons.

THE SOURCE OF OUR POWER

Living with the havoc
of every generation:

annihilation

diffusing a blast of mushroom clouds,

unwanted testing grounds,
for years blitzed and salted with radiation,

the newsprint of the world tossed
on our front lawns, pages ripped out

by the gut, smeared on our hands, our shirts,

even our children

as they race through the past
flying airplanes and kites

with the earliest perception of power

stored in the genetic code.

Prior scenes had divulged—
as later scenes will—a race

to sharpen the implements of destruction.
In cool, white-washed laboratories,

stainless steel counters hold secrets
steaming in beakers, test tubes, crucibles—

these being the solutions

that defy the true source of our power.

WAR CASUALTIES

I

When it was reported
in the news that rebels had been killed
in an ambush, and that cargo planes

from the north had bombed
that part of the country not protected
by barbed wire or walls,

two million people had already been lost
in a fire ignited by oil and water.
Many children had to crawl into a thorn forest.

Others were left under the scalding sun
of a war zone. A map of that country
had revealed nothing of its past but borders.

Cities had been founded and lost
where even the thorn bushes lay siege.
Below that wilderness, there exists another,

of dark and pastel greens to be burned
again and again until the day
it surrenders itself to the desert.

II

It's been proven—to be proven again
that the clubs of outrage breaking windows,
ribs, the laws of continuity,
shall become the spades of history,
digging the ground to place us there—
and yes, we are still enslaved, chained,
overworked: a deck we stand on,
the rope we reel into the wind
like a clothesline to hang out our memories
of the white shirt our father wore,
ripped open and slashed with his blood,

the torn flesh in the overalls of childhood

that our mother wept over, clung to;
her blue dress whipped on the line with intensity,
still stained with sweat, blood, semen;
the dress in which she pleaded
on her knees; hid our faces in,
telling us to be still,
do not look back, do not...

III

Where it begins, it will end
with the torched house, the slaughtered cattle;
at the well, digesting the raw flesh of the children
in its subterranean gut; at the river
coughing up the mucus of toxic waste,
the garb of ethnic cleansing
scrubbed on its rocks.

It will end
at the cemetery in Dragodan;
in the village of a chosen language,
suffocating from smoke; in the fields
that have orphaned and killed our children—
it will end at the border of the imaginary line
drawn between the state and the shadow-state.

But what country is this
and what will it take?

Guns— (as in any country at war)
It will take guns...

BLOOD BATH, 1937: NANKING

As in any history book:
always the untold story, a truth
that has been put on the shelf
without a word. Forty years,
and then forty more will have passed
behind this wall without light,
without an epitaph of love
and salvation. We are the women
in mere memory, in a city
trembling in its own dark corner
just as the beast was about to be let out
of its cage. We had no faces then,
our voices gushed from our throats
like blood in the streets. With thousands
of shadows afloat on the water,
we were still among the living.
Lotus flowers were ripped out
of our hair. The grunts
of uniformed men, minds on plunder
and rape, hovered over us
to break down the flesh
of every woman like a bamboo reed
to be bent, broken; our wombs,
flushed with contaminants,
with sweat and fiber. How efficiently
can evil torture the body?

Squirming fetuses, cut out
of the stomachs of expectant mothers,
were left to float on a blood bath
of sliced breasts and bone
as though they were nothing more
than tiny goldfish. On the banks
of the river, the corpses of our fathers,
husbands and brothers,
were stockpiled like lumber,
their faces frozen in sunken relief.
Where there was a house, a bonfire,
leaping without boundaries,
without innocence. A mother
entombed in the rubble, her infant's body,
bayoneted and sliced in half,

toasted in a blanket of hot light.
Which side is now less than human?

Pits of dissected organs,
implements awash in venom: nails
and bamboo shoots, bats and blades,
every crime was to be buried
among the objects of daily life:
peach wood and plums, bell charms
and jade, and whatever images
were left of the Door Gods.
Tomorrow's forecast: more peonies
doused with poison and flame; the repetition
of sword after sword coming down;
our city, obliterated—and one day—
another: a vast cemetery
that will be swaddled in dust;
a stark reminder of what is eternal.