

# WATCHFUL AND OTHER POEMS

Mark Angeles

## Watchful

Let me speak of my body. It is  
female.

It is  
the oldest symbol of art:  
that is to say,

*Earth*

—her body, adoring and selfless, always open  
for plowing—a constant *gravida*—  
her womb of grain always golden.

Let me speak of my body  
as a Congolese woman. It is  
a target.

Malice enfolds it  
in concentric circles.

Through this body, semen  
and spit pass. Through this body,  
sticks pass and knives pass.  
Bayonets and razors, petrol and fire  
pass through this body. It is

no stranger to brutality,  
no stranger to bloodshed.

It is, as my forefathers had damned  
or cursed, a chattel  
in custody of my father and uncles,  
along with the men in my village.

Let me speak of my body as my sisters' bodies  
in Congo, in the village of Bunangiri,  
where no less than a hundred are in hiding;  
their sex maimed by Hutu militia.

Do not bend, fold, spin my body.  
It is not a caged animal. It is not afraid.  
Do not hack it. Do not rape, strangle,  
mark it with a Cheshire grin.  
It is not war's ransom. It is watchful.  
It rejects what it does not desire  
to hold. It does not sheathe.

Let me speak of my body. It is  
political. Now listen.

*My body is  
speaking.*

## Into Jasenovac

When the midnight hour enters the barracks,  
the jailbirds retreat to every corner, waiting  
to be fed with rationed soup.

They hang around not to lose time.

There is no time for them to kill.

Time is not in their hands now.

Time knelt outside the stranglehold  
the moment they were put away.

Time has long perished.

There is only the possibility of death.

They are waiting for it to come out,  
to come near them, in the guise of hunger.

The reason to be saved or to fight  
is thinning like the shadows they cast  
beneath the camp lights—foggy,  
threadbare as scarecrows.

They arrive there by the thousands  
—captives held by the cult of knife.

Men, women, children.

Serbs, Jews, Roma, Red Croatians  
stripped of their possessions:  
clothes, jewelry, watches,  
gold crowns pulled straight  
from their mouths.

Later, even their thoughts will waste away.

Look at how the brute of Jasenovac encircle  
even this poem. It has marked us, like the earth,  
with the bloodstained blade of its *srbosjek*.

Out there in the banks of River Sava,  
corpses drift and begin to give birth  
to maggots. Each body starts to eat  
itself, thus allowing itself to be eaten.  
The jailbirds, fetching their drinking water  
nearby, are given a glimpse of their looming  
end; speak to them in body parts—  
gouged eyes, slashed throats, torn hearts.  
The river takes what it desires.

Jasenovac swells as it devours.  
Its brick walls grow cold and thick.  
Barbed wires slither into the woods.  
The sound of the wind is marred  
with lament. In winter, even the snowfall  
is awed by the splendor of falling ashes  
from brick factories turned into crematoria,  
burning the living together with the dead.

Those who were spared have no choice,  
but to carry on with their task of the day.  
They raise more camps for more prisoners.  
They dig cesspits that become mass graves.  
They forge shackles to chain themselves  
and knives to slit their own throats.

They are doctors and pharmacists,  
shoemakers and goldsmiths,  
lumberjacks and electricians.  
Their skills are called upon  
to build the necropolis.  
Limbs and bones, they sleepwalk  
round the camp, waiting for death's pity.

They carry dirt in wheelbarrows.  
They carry their dead.  
They carry their moribund.  
They carry their memories  
of Jasenovac on slips of paper  
and plant them in their shoes  
so their words will live  
to tell us their tales of bereavement.

## Nighttime in Gaza

At night, the rugged seas near Gaza  
sparkle like glints breaking the surface  
when you rub a knife against a stone,

except that they are shafts of light—  
searchlights slapping the dark water  
pulled off by their neighbor's *Tzahal*.

A warm wind sweeps across the border,  
carrying a hum back to the shore,  
so familiar, it sounds like hissing snakes

—or so the villagers suppose.  
In a flash, they are all engulfed  
in a cloud of white phosphorus.

There is no time for writhing;  
their skin melts in their clothes.  
How hard they pray for sand

as they are rendered motionless,  
leaving only the fetid fumes  
of charred flesh, fabric, and debris.

That part of the map that swells  
with smoke is reduced to residue,  
purged from *mujahideen* and *subhada*.

Even the towering minarets melt with  
the howling of dislodged Palestinians.  
What is to die for, then, for tourists?

The streets are filled with refugees:  
children playing with junk piles  
for making Molotov bombs;

women nursing their flower beds;  
men pushing boulders  
restoring their houses of mud

felled by attacks. A private museum  
elsewhere—erected out of vestiges  
of cobblestones from old houses,

old railway sleepers, and old marble  
unearthed by fisherfolk  
and construction workers—

opens its doors to admirers  
of archeology, bidding Bethlehem,  
Hebron, and Jericho. And beyond

the bulldozed habitation, waves  
dwindle at the sound of sirens;  
sewage and pits are perfumed.

Nightwatch at the seafront...  
one can't help but be quixotic,  
except when you are in Gaza,

where the undersea is laden  
with daisy-chain booby traps;  
the open skies are fenced with tripwires

A geography of house arrests!  
From without, it is hard to break in.  
From within, it is hard to break out.



## Slaying of Holofernes

“foiled them by the hand of a woman”  
Judith 16:5

Every man, inebriated

with wine and might,

tumbles

at the hands of seduction—

Holofernes, for example,

drunk and dead

to the world,

unwinding in his tent, surrounded

by his army.

Without warning, a woman appears...

*Judith,*

vixen, solid, weighted

God's virtuoso

black widow: assassin.

The fall of treachery

at her hands

The fall of an empire

Blade of her that slew

the horrified Holofernes

Blade of her that salvaged

the ravaged city of Bethulia

Blade of her that smashed

the metal of the Assyrians

The Turtan dead: his body

aware of the moment

his head was detached,

hoisted from the ground's

rising tarn of blood

his gouged eyes peeking

through disheveled hair,

losing sight, losing

the (in)glorious

idea of war

by Judith, God's slayer,

at whose hands

more heads

will roll.

## Bhopal

BHOPAL WAS ASLEEP WHEN THE GAS STRUCK—  
the headlines bled the next day.

The heart of India  
belongs to the dead now;

the city of lakes weighed down  
by shanties, its faithful

with their dreams of fish;  
the stranglehold of nine thousand

who lived on the breadline,  
who believed they would die

by bullet or snag's knife,  
by hunger or bodily harm.

Early December, the hours  
of darkness arrived like a bride

in a black veil. They saw her  
combing the streets—it was nothing

out of the ordinary. They had seen  
far too many sicken and fall down.

That evening, they went straight  
to bed, too dead

-tired to even say a prayer;  
eyelids shut and will never open

again. In their dreams,  
they were flying

over graves and dead trees,  
only to be awakened

with their lungs bursting  
into flames—

lampblack lungs in the light  
of day. Lifeless bodies dragged

flat to the ground. Lying next  
to each other—with their kith and kin

and neighbors—they had never been  
so close before.

The ground was soft that morning.  
It was soft and lethal

with the wrath of Union Carbide  
ravaging the capital;

its unseen doom  
going after the rest of them

for the kill,  
as Bhopal grieved.

They crawled from under the rocks  
with their teeth,

aboveground, where the soil  
still creeps with mercury;

aboveground, as the spoil  
still clots in memory.