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[Apocalypse Now] translated by Thoraya El-Raayes

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HISHAM BUSTANI

Translated by Thoraya El-Rayyes

[APOCALYPSE NOW]

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1

Because you are
alone,
and because life is a building seventy stories high,
you couldn't but embrace the air,
you couldn't but leave your memories scattered on the pavement in a pool
of red,
and so...
you jumped.

2

The boat that crossed the river did not find a happy ending.

The trees casting shadows over the water were adorned with rotting corpses.
The leaves drowned in the smell of everpresent death. Through them protruded faces, camouflaged.

"Don't any of you play chess?" yelled the commander. But the row of pawns had just been met with the gush of machine guns fired fast, and vaporized into the sky.

No knights here, and the castles are ruins with broken windows, and as soon as the commander went down to inspect the site, he was blown up by a landmine.

The boat that crossed the river did not find a happy ending.

At the moment it arrived at the end of its long journey, it turned round and went back, with no passengers.

3

Apes do not wage wars.
Apes do not invent instruments of torture.
Apes do not puncture the ozone with fossil fuels.
“Humans are descended from apes?”
Who says the apes would approve?

When Man climbed the tree to meet his ancestors, all the leaves fell and species vanished. No colour but washed-out grey, and no sound but the breaking of branches in his clumsy hands. Before a full white moon, he sat on one of the branches and began to cry.

4

The bull that just got a cleaver to the neck,
filled his jowls with laughter,
and strode vainly between the soldiers.

“We have trained young men to drop bombs on people, but their commanders won’t allow them to write fuck on their airplanes because it is obscene...”

The bull does not know the word fuck,
nor does he know how to drop bombs on anyone.
That is why he walked, and laughed, in the midst of the fire.

5

The peasant, whose petrol-soaked clothes caught a spark, dissolved immediately into the soil in a flare of celebration.

Part of him became flowers, part of him became migrating birds. Only his heart went on pulsing within the earth, leaving behind seisms and volcanoes.

6

The murderer walking down the street was followed by his victims.

He swats them away but they do not go. He runs far from them, only making them stick closer.

Only when a bullet came to him from the top of a derelict building did he sleep in peace, then wake up and join their protest that ends at the horizon.

7

The orange man walks, trudging
guzzling with his broom, thousands of people's vomit,
at night after he sleeps –
he is visited by a single dream/nightmare:

The broom grows and grows and grows,
its bristles strike like hurricanes and send flying the city of exhaust fumes
and polystyrene boxes.

And when he is awoken by a mouse moving in his stomach,
he runs to the bathroom,
out of his guts emerge gas stations, opposition parties, fast-food restaurants,
newspapers, shopping malls and neighbourhoods stagnant with featureless
inhabitants.

And before the water current that sweeps it all away stops, he throws him-
self in so that he might die.

But he finds himself -again and again- in the street,
walking, trudging,
guzzling with his broom, thousands of people's vomit.

8

Winter:

nature's flagellant.

She wears grey and cries over her choices.

She lightning whips herself and screams thunder and tears amass.

Winter: nature's lament at losing her first deep, she tries to flood and is not able. For he who emerged from her water once upon a chance has built dams, diverted rivers and dug gigantic reservoirs underground.

Nature tries to flood and is not able.

Tears of joy? She will cry tears of joy when we part one day, but we survive and she withers.

Cry, cry, said Man. I will bottle your sorrow and sell it.

9

Behold the flowers sprawled out over the fields:

white, red, yellow, lavender.

How naïve,

they do not know the concrete is coming.

10

He sees them darting through the streets as if bitten by a serpent.
Addicted to devastation, their bodies object, so what do they do?

The molar objects: they extract it.
The gallbladder objects: they excise it.

They congregate like the dead at the gates of eternity. Above the gate, a sign:
Brains Excised Here.

11

The White God cruises across the river of bare-assed savages with opera music.
From the long chimney emerge Verde, Caruso, Rossini and Wagner.

The White God wants to cross the mountain on his floating phonograph, so he opened a gaming hall for them:

They drank whiskey, played poker and their drool flowed onto the strippers' podium.

The White God taught them his intoxicating miracles, so they carried the floating phonograph to where trees patiently await their killer. They were slaughtered by slanted lines across their trunks that meet in the center, then their blood was gathered to be sent to the Old World and return as radiant junk.

As for the opera, it still warbles out of the speakers of bomber airplanes and the tears of the trees.

12

"Kill a man and you're a murderer
Kill many and you're a conqueror
Kill them all, you're a God."

So said Dave Mustaine in his sharp voice and walked off.

Mr. Anderson decided to be a God, and so he flooded Bopal with a present in the form of a poisonous cloud of pesticide and enclosed a personally signed card: "Courtesy of Union Carbide."

The deaths—unfortunately for Mr. Anderson—only numbered fifteen thousand.

"Don't leave loose ends" he used to yell at them. But they did not perfect their task: they forgot to fix a bullet in the forehead of every corpse and some of the dead continued to live. For this, his assistants were sentenced to jail for two years and fined 2,500 dollars.

As for him, he returned like the conquerors wreathed in bay leaves, to his birthplace in Bridgehampton-Long Island, where he takes his Chihuahua on a daily walk to breathe in the clean air of what was once the lands of the Shinnecock, listening to the echo of fishermen choking to death—those killed by Mr. Anderson Senior with a poisonous cloud of smallpox.

"Ten thousand... Fifteen thousand... How many generations will it take for Mr. Anderson to become a God? We've had no luck this millennium" he thought, as his grandson Mr. Anderson Junior played with an aircraft carrier in the swimming pool.

"Eureka" yelled the grandson jumping out of the water, and immediately sent them bottles swaying like women filled with his intoxicating liquid. And as they greedily gulp it down, fantasies of a new world fizz up into their brains so they die at once and are resurrected as slaves in front of a throne veiled by a screen of liquid crystal.

"Kill them all, you're a God!" chuckled Mr. Anderson, "What does it make me then, if I resurrect them as slaves?"

Dave Mustaine could not find an answer to this question. So, he breaks his electric guitar onstage every day and raises his middle finger in the audience's face.

13

The naī-playing dervish who emerged from the pen of Nâzim Hekmat and played a world of clouds, beautiful women and defeated villains could not endure the rebounding echo of his melodies, for he was barricaded between rivers of tar and concrete dams.

The cypress he sat under groaned, and so he came to break his naī into small wooden pieces and scatter them into the air so that they would not be music after today.

14

The handsome whale, Tilikum.
They stole him from his ocean and crammed him into a fish tank.
And when he drowned his trainer in protest,
he was at once transformed into material for news broadcasts.
Chewed between newscasters' teeth and swallowed,
to provide their daily allowance
of Omega-3.

15

Birds of a feather fall together.

Birds of a feather.
Fall together.

Birds.
Of.
A.
Feather.
Fall.
Together.

He finished reciting his favorite song.
Folded his hunting rifle over his arm, and turned to head back.
Behind him small corpses were trembling over the wide plain,
then fell still, to be consumed by the sun and flies.

16

The whispers of the dead.
He stood, listening.

“A kerosene heater and seven of us in a small room. The cold strangled us with our breath.”

“Two speeding lights, then cold metal ripped me off the face of the earth and put me inside it.”

“I lived in a house that floated on the water, then it decided to dive.”

“I am seven years old. A smart bomb found its way into our neighbourhood.”

“I am three months old. A rubber bullet found its way into my head.”

“I was still swimming in warm fluid when my mother got a baton to her swollen stomach.”

When the voices went quiet – despite the sun beating above his head and people passing before him quickly in their cars – he realized that he was in a hole, and began to whisper.

17

To Sayyed Banat (Abul Fida)

No, a full moon did not mark the day of your birth.
No, a cloud did not cast you in shadow wherever you placed your feet.
No, you were not the Seal of the Prophets nor did you bring forth a Book.

All there is to it is that a city belching smoke and clatter kidnapped you
from between your mother's thighs and force-fed you her sour milk- that
you vomited time after time- then carried your gauntness and cast it on her
sidewalk:

loose cigarettes, sleight of hand tricks, books on the torment of the grave
and toothpicks.

At night, you dance like a traffic light possessed by madness until you col-
lapse from delusion.

And when you awake after much sweat:

The city is laughing and laughing, rolling left and right on her back and
over on her stomach.

"Is it you who denounces me?" she says, releasing her mice and her odors
like the slashes of a whipmaster on your back.

But you are stubborn: you get skinnier, and the city grows paunchier along
with its liars.

On the bed of the poor hospital, he crumbled without a single person to his
side and disappeared into forgetting.

18

Suddenly, while some slept in business class seats like children in their mothers' bosoms, it opened its mouth and screamed.

It was not a regular scream, an enormous cloud of dust emerged with it.

Airlines were paralyzed, and the business class passengers were enraged to have their colored lollipops snatched away.

"This is a catastrophe..." they yelled, then held a meeting in the top floor of a skyscraper and found the solution.

After they fastened the gigantic stopper and pushed it firmly into the hole, champagne corks went flying and out gushed –strangely enough– a fiery red liquid, in spite of the ice. The liquid was called: lava. It's temperature: 700-1200 degrees Celsius. After cooling, it turns into a type of basalt suitable for determining the age of the earth.

As for the passengers in business class, they dissolved completely. In billions of years, other beings- smarter than we are- will not find their fossils.

19

When he places his hand on the big button and the glass light moves horizontally, the forest groans.

Here is the tree's finger pulled along plastic wheels through tight corridors to come out through the side opening. Aah... a photocopying mistake, he throws it in the trash can.

Let's try again. The tree's foot this time. Her head. Her hips. Her trunk. He throws it all away angrily: "It's one of those days." And the photocopying machine gets jammed with every push of the button.

Months ago, she was magnificent, spreading green in the air, seducing the birds. Today, her body parts lay dismembered/ pulverized/ bleached in the trash can.

Endnotes

2

The *boat* travels down the river in Francis Ford Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now*, a reinterpretation of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

4

The slain *bull* and the *quote* from Francis Ford Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now* a reinterpretation of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

5

In memory of the Korean *peasant*, Lee Kyoung Hae, who died in protest against the World Trade Organization summit in Mexico in 2003.

11

Fitzcarraldo was not an *opera* lover, he was a rubber baron with an army of 5,000 men who carved out a piece of land in South America the size of Belgium for himself. But the German director Werner Herzog did not see a story in that! The baron dismantled a ship and transported it over a mountain, and the Europeans built an opera house in the Amazon. Now that's a story! Thus, the lying white movie with a mongrel plot came to be.

The *crying tree*: The meaning of the word "cahuchu" which is an indigenous South American name for the rubber tree.

12

Dave Mustaine: A singer/songwriter and founder of the American rock band Megadeth. The opening quote is taken from the lyrics of the song Captive Honour which is in fact a quote from the French biologist and philosopher Jean Rostand (1894 – 1977).

Mr. Anderson: Warren Anderson is a former Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of the American company Union Carbide whose pesticide factory in Bopal, India leaked poisonous gas on December 3rd 1984- killing 15,000 people as well as injuring and disfiguring tens of thousands of others.

The Shinnecock: An indigenous American tribe from Long Island, New York. The men of the tribe were skilled fishermen and sailors, and many were exterminated by viruses brought by the white man from Europe.

13

Nâzım Hekmat (1902 – 1963): The well-known Turkish writer and poet. He spent twenty six years (between 1925 and 1951) in and out of jail because of his communist activism and spent the rest of his life in exile. He wrote about the dervish in a story called "The Loving Cloud", published for the first time in 1962.

18

On Sunday 21st April 2010, a volcano which had been dormant for two hundred years erupted in south Iceland, creating a one kilometer long fissure in a glacial ice sheet and emitting a cloud of dust that halted air travel in Europe for days, costing airlines billions of dollars in losses.

Translator's note: This translation was carried out in collaboration with the author. Several minor edits from the original Arabic text were made in order to preserve the musicality of the original text, these have been approved by the author.