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Taxi

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DERICK BURLESON

TAXI

Rwanda, 1993

Doorman slams the sliding door, yells go
hurryhurryhurry, cursing the ancient
battered Toyota minibus, cursing God,
the gravel in the gearbox, Driver,
the soldiers at the next checkpoint,
the choking six-cylinder, the president,
the bald tires, the dangerous curves,
the sun that rose not too long ago: StopStopStopStop
he screams and Driver does his best to cram
the brake pedal through what's left of the floorboards.
Doorman slams open the door and smiles
and swings his arm wide in welcome.

So we climb aboard and take the last places
in the back on a leopard-print Naugahyde seat
we have to ourselves. Good Morning,
a man smiles. *Mwaramutseho* I answer.
Imana bless us, Driver says,
Truly the world's coming to an end.
My brother speaks their language
and the *umuzungu* speaks ours.
Doorman yells *TugendeTugende*
and we go, Bob Marley on the radio jammin
I need a hamma, a hamma, a hamma to hamma them
down.

And even the soldiers smile and wave

us through the barricade as we head out
of town, Driver hunched over the wheel,
begging the engine for speed, racing
all the other taxis north to the capital,
gaining altitude, the carburetor wheezing
like an asthmatic cow. We open the window
for a little air and the woman in front
of us shuts it. We open it. She shuts it.
The wind gives you malaria, she says.
Mosquitoes give you malaria, we say
but this time the window stays shut.

Driver pulls us onto the shoulder
and Doorman grates open the door
for a family traveling to a wedding,
the mothers wearing their hair bound
up under strips of bamboo, their three
brightest cloths wrapped tight.
Then we're wedged together,
brothers and sisters and children
all sharing rivers of sweat.

The bridesmaid hands us a basket
finely woven of turquoise and purple and magenta,
to save it from being crushed.
We pass on hills, pass on curves,
pass more battered taxis, trucks hauling
green bananas and sacks of beans,
women with hoes over their shoulders,
men walking to visit their neighbors
carrying gourds of banana beer,
platoons of soldiers marching to the border,
a bicycle so strung with live chickens
the rider seems to be pedaling
a newly discovered species of flightless bird.

Driver skids us around another blind corner
and now the taxi's a sauna,
with every breath we breathe human,
smiling, trading handshakes,
even though we all know
that when they demand our identity cards
at the next checkpoint
the soldiers' Kalichniokavs will be loaded,
that the basket I'm holding may have a grenade inside,
that wired beneath the 100-franc bill six schoolchildren
cluster around in the playground just across the road,
there is almost certainly a land mine.