The River Under Kwai Bridge

Heap up the mound there and implant on it
the oar I pulled in life with my companions.

— Elpenor to Odysseus

prologue

Not the bridge: it’s been recast to suit
the sunsets, stubborn blood sanded away
from shivering grains by a new troupe
of grateful coolies, deafened to the litany
of water below, who still whistle marches
for movie cameras. Before Charon’s current
could be crossed, his toll exacted seven
Burmese and Laotian skulls for every
precious Imperialist who gurgled adieu
to his king. Where are their plaques?

the river’s aria

when aching bones cluttered my banks
i gave the doomed a bed to cleanse
their blackened skin for watery sleep

every lung surrendered its air
to whirlpools of trancing relief
above my silt and patient fish

no stones beneath to prick their sack
the veins decayed so quietly
like leaves dissolved by tiny jaws

a pilgrim’s canon

‘Death Railway’ means nothing to a fresh
plank: no initials are scratched on these
spikes to console those who seek the raspy
throats still crying out for proper burial.
On the span you dodge the stray hooks
of Thai fishermen scudding on Japanese
motorbikes, their flapping cuffs, legs apart
for balance, your shoes sticky with creosote
(these timbres were dedicated to tyres)
glazed on the beams to glimmer under
December fireworks of lusty commemoration,
and then the thin girls in wedding dresses
so white, but going blue as the sky clicks
down to darkness in a liturgy of Nikons.

the river's refrain

why seek ashes and baptism from the sky
when heaven's girders always come to rust?
better to bathe below in sympathy with mud

war cemetery canticles

Knees on the damp sod, a dedicated army
of gardeners clips grass away from marble,
tidies discreet trenches edging each grave,
rakes the river gravel smooth along the paths.
Every marker is flanked by native shrubbery
trimmed back neatly as uniforms saluting
a final sacrifice, as though heroism in chorus
weren’t hushed by the clarity of a single voice.

Only steps away, the Chinese dead in crypts
of granite left to dust and weeds. Snapshot
ovals smile out from the stone, as though still
sniffing the dewy flowers of faithful tribute.
No picnics or parasols brouse this requiem
of coughing neglect. Will Buddha provide?

the river hums back in aphorisms

no channel or flesh is sacred in flood

without compassion, no war
without war, no compassion

when levees break, it’s every treaty
for himself—sand’s better than slime,
clay better than sand, branches better
than clay, rocks better than branches,
a steady hand better than rocks

trust nothing more than your final breath

epilogue

above the murmuring river ghosts
the bridge wears its darkness well

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