The Strangers Arrive

The strangers came from other shores and huddled in forts that stood high above the postal roads. He thought of boys who ambushed mailmen in alleyways and forced them to confess the strange sources of their stamps.

He thought of public notaries and scribes who sat on wooden platforms, sending their minions to the markets to catch farmers and nomads who had lost their way to the circles of justice and relief.

He thought of bureaucrats complaining under ceiling fans. They sat and spun on swivel chairs, as servants plied them with glittering sugar and ginger ale. In their folders dams collapsed and villages were abandoned as thoughtful tax collectors gazed.

He thought of thieves wearing canvas shoes who robbed camps abandoned by soldiers who left them to subdue rebels who disturbed the outlying districts of a land ruled by a king who was once caught spying on women stripping hair from their legs with lumps of caramelized sugar.

He thought of a prince who survived a massacre of his aides. When he woke he saw a caravan urging a frightened boy to sing and the boy told them the tale of a night of concubines and mirrors that gleamed with shining swords.

He thought of a friend who was murdered on a side street by thugs who wanted to prove that the morning paper can deny a man’s death and that a mother’s tears in a distant city are an invention that need not be heeded.
He thought of a day scented with mint on which a parade
of blind snails slugged toward their demise at the edge of a jungle.
Women there spread their aprons on sofas and fed their children
gruel that neighbors cooked. They held a feast for pilgrims just returned
from performing mysterious rituals in the motherland.

He thought of a general who leaned on his spear for forty years
facing foes who had turned to stone on the plain of his vision.
When they saw birds feeding on his head
his foes resumed their march on the villages.

He thought of a holy man and his companion.
They were soon joined by criminals who humiliated
a village and turned its people vile.
When they saw a boat that belonged to orphans they sank it.
And when his companion stared at him in disbelief,
the holy man answered,

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\begin{align*}
&\text{have I} \\
&\text{not} \\
&\text{told} \\
&\text{you} \\
&\text{that} \\
&\text{you} \\
&\text{are not} \\
&\text{steadfast} \\
&\text{enough} \\
&\text{to remain} \\
&\text{with} \\
&\text{me?}
\end{align*}
\]

The strangers who sewed day to night
have sprawled among torn curtains and food-stained plates.
They helped the natives prolong their insomnia
with archives,
machines,
and maps.
They wiped the morning milk staining their lips
and thought of people who smile
at them when they meet,
and who, as soon as they turn their faces,
begin to beat
and beat their animals
with sticks.

translated from the Arabic by Khaled Mattawa

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