Separate Spaces

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Final Words of Perry Smith

It’s a hell of a dirty thing to kill someone the way you’re about to kill me. With inmates’ photos I’ve replicated mummified relics in paint: six-year-old smiles, or baby blues before genetics and UV light make their scheduled appearances. I’ve had time to think, too, and I want to say that Dick and I don’t—not even Andrews—deserve such a death.

I watched each of you follow me up these steps with nothing but your eyes. Sickening. Real sickening. Full of bloodlust but your feet stationary, grounded, ready to cut out over the dirt floor of this dank prison warehouse, out into the rising sun. My father and sister had already left, back before the trial even started.

I’d like to tell someone, anyone, I’m sorry but no apology can soften fired clay and now you want to lock me in the kiln. See, you’re all tribal boys under your suits, burning for a warrior’s scalp—a war trophy, manly—to slip in peacock plumage. A head for four Clutter heads.

Thought I was too sour for Twelve Steps on a Peruvian lily-lined path? For its productive ethics, apologies, higher power? They’re not enough, you said. Ice it. So finally they sentenced me to the thirteen steps, to these gallows.

Someone has to pay for all the wrong done. But remember, Roman soldiers, when you drive your nails into me,
fixing me to the beams; when my feet,  
like bananas, dangle and bend,  
just beginning to yellow and sweeten  
before you yank them down,  
maybe—just maybe—  
I had something to offer.
In the Exam Room

Ten thousand or more came. They carried some of them on their backs. You’re a hibakusha, you already know. With all the blood and the burns, I shut down save for the swab, the daub, and the bind.

From glassless windows I saw them—ants dotting the streets, courtyard, driveway, growing larger, crowding the front steps, every staircase, every hall, swarming the rooms of the hospital, crawling all over me howling, “Doctor Sasaki!” “Sensei!” “Doctor!”

You and I will always remember that August day, the flash—burning incandescent white, momentarily blinding before showing us horrors that can never be unseen—the flash that pulled my shoes from beneath my standing feet, the same flash that decimated the Red Cross. Windows blew in, blood flew out, ceilings trapped patients under their doctors under beds, everything flung everywhere, the tetchy patient I was testing for syphilis suddenly dead. The coworker I left in the lab for a minute dead. Dead, the young morning nurse with her bright hair.

Swab, daub, bind. Swab, daub, bind.
Still, after all these years, that thoughtless mantra pushes my nimble fingers again to numbness over the skull-shaped keloid I find jutting out now in profile from your right shoulder blade.

But your wound is nothing new, as again I find my fingers in the exam room, shaking themselves of the memories rekindled
in their flesh. Is your familiar, rubbery
mass of firm red-brown my Rorschach test?

I say, Try to forget. No longer can we wage wars
on keloid scars. Before, I cut them down
only to watch their ghosts return, full-bodied,
lying on the level ground where they fell
like burial mounds. No longer
can we call for those who dropped the bomb
to hang. *Keloids usually shrink up if
you don’t retaliate,
if you find peace.*
It Isn’t about Skin

I want you to understand,
although most of our classmates
wouldn’t. Most people wouldn’t.
So, please, let me buy you a drink.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m
no racist. I mean, Omar? I love Omar,
or I loved Omar. Whatever happened to him
I don’t know. An Afghan Security Guard at our FOB,
he was good: he smoked and smiled,
posed with us men for photos.
At the end of the jig I taught him he would pirouette
but his eyes, the eyes of an ex-mujahideen, stared at you
like cold stones from the bottom of some lake,
a bottom hard to reach
even with your toes.

I miss him.
At home, though,
whenever one of
them comes at me, comes
out of nowhere—even
the girls, like those sisters
at school, masked
under ghostly burqas so I can’t
tell what’s hiding
underneath, can’t see
what’s in their eyes
while they look out, behind the cloth,
the sophisticated flies’ eyes
that don’t belong here—
they charge
into the classroom. I swear,
it’s a door-kicking mission, except
I’m the one
inside.
When these people don’t trickle in
softly as sand in an hourglass,
it always catches me off-guard. I’m blasted
by a sandstorm the very color of their skin.

But it isn’t about skin.
Once, I had just met my father at Catalina’s Tavern, down the road from my place, you know, over on Rt. 2, and in walked this black guy, just some black guy. I didn’t care about that. We kept playing cards. The black guy came up to me, a cigarette like dusty chalk dangling between his lips, asking me for a light the way no American ever has or ever will—his fingers mimicking a match strike and suddenly I saw the Arabic tattooed between his thumb and pointer finger—and knew he didn’t belong here, and we were both in the desert where the slightest thing out of place made my heart race, like the rocks in the roads for steering traffic or, sometimes, just for directing our Humvees over IEDs, leaving everything broken in the streets.

My throat ran dry. I swallowed sand, drowning in a lake, sinking to the bottom, where I glowered up at this black man in the bar through cold stone eyes while I dropped lower and lower. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t even open my mouth to cry out. I just had to leave. Ever since then, I’ve been trying— I’ve been trying to come back home.