

KHALED MATTAWA

After 42 Years

Five years old when the dictator took over in a coup—
Curfew shut our city down.
Bloodless coup, they said,
The many who thought this could be good.
The dictator, a young man, a shy recluse, assumed the helm, bent in piety,
The dead sun of megalomania hidden in his eyes.
Could not go to the store to buy bread or newspaper,
Could not leave home, visit friends,
The radio thundering hatred, retching blood-curdling song—
Signs that went unread.
Factories built and filched, houses stolen, newspapers shut down,
Decades of people killed, 42 years.

But that's all over now—
How can you say over when it took 42 years—
I was five when the dictator took my brother away.
Over now, 42 years, must look ahead.
His face half blood-covered, half smirking
Like Batman's Joker,
Hands raised, fingers pressed together upward,
Saying wait, calm down, wait.
Wait 42 years—five years old when my father was killed
Standing in front of a hotel.
Bloodless coup, the country like a teenage girl
Forced into marriage, hoping her groom will be kind.

In between there was blankness
That burned like a million suns into our eyes,
Death like air, everywhere.

What was it like to be held by his men?
Fingers pulled out, testicles fried,
To be hung from a clothesline rope,
The dictator's mistress pulling at my legs.
How many killed by his men over the decades,
The cracked skulls, the mass graves, the uncounted dead?

What and who taught you, O sons of my country, to be so fearless cruel?
Him, they say, for 42 years, 42 years of him.
Who taught you to be reckless heroic?
The no-life we had to live under him, the lives we were asked to live as dead.

Alive we want him alive, many kept shouting.
So that they could give him tastes of his own medicine?
Alive, alive!
And many others disbelieving they'd caught him,
Their shrill Allahu Akbars exclamations of astonishment—
What have I done, O Lord, to deserve the honor of capturing the rat?

The nightmare—GAME OVER—the night game of breaking
Into houses, arresting sons, the day game of civility.
We'll bring him in a few hours.
We'll bring him back in 42 years.
Could it be so easy—GAME OVER—the capturing of a rat?
A clown in a rat-colored outfit, a wild mop of hair, a wig, high-heeled boots,
Holding a golden pistol like a child playing hero—
Is that what our history amounted to?

Somewhere, there were suns that would never light.
Somewhere, there were holes in the air that was full of death.
We managed to hold our breath and live our lives.

Could it be so simple, O Lord, to end an epoch—
killing kidnapping murder massacre slit throats vaginal tests
for women he wished to sex vaginal rapes anal rapes of dissidents
humiliation denigration outsourced whippings money changed on
oil tankers boiling water poured on the heads of maids hot iron
pressed on servant flesh broken ribs feet whipped until swollen
like cantaloupes bodies left hanging in public squares—

I was five when my brother disappeared.
I was thirteen, I was twenty, I was seventy-six,
I was never allowed to reach birth.

One minute and all that history is found hiding
Like a rat, history like a rat,
Hiding in a sewer drain.
History too hot to hold.
The magic in seeing it come to an end—
The pain too dark to bear, too light, too cold,
The astonishment unbearable—would kill you if it lasted too long.

He died of his wounds.
No, no, they just shot him dead.

Perhaps he was a magnet and drew evil out of men's chests,
A magnet siphoning cruelty to itself.
His hands, his hands saying wait, wait,
Reached into their lungs and knotted their raw souls.

No, no, they just shot him dead.
But I heard he died of his wounds.

Somewhere, an earthly sun is shining on us, with us, within us again.
There is air in the air again.

What will our aftermath be then?

We wash our hands,
Put on spotless clothes.
There is no *after* until we pray for all the dead.