

The President Came to Boipatong

David Watson

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“Police shot at an angry crowd Saturday, killing three people just after the mob forced President Frederik W. de Klerk out of a black township where 39 died in a massacre last week...

“As soon as his motorcade arrived the crowd accused de Klerk of complicity in last Wednesday’s massacre of women and children by about 200 men. Some youths pounded on his car, shouting ‘Go away murderer’ and ‘Get the hell out of here.’

“When police pointed automatic rifles, the youths cried: Shoot, shoot!’ Officers did...”

—*Detroit News* wire services. 21 June 1992

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A frayed rope of road leads in and out of Boipatong.

Dusty road. Scorched, sinewed road,

tremulous

like the sweat beaded with the dust

the president’s car conjured.

.

The president came to Boipatong.

The president cowered in his limousine.

.

Fists pound the car.

Blood in the dust of Boipatong.

Fists pound the car.

Blood in the dust of Africa.

.

The president flinched behind tinted glass,
the fluid in his temples stammering a plan
as the fists of the widowed hammered the car.

Then waking from their mineral sleep,

guns raised snouts to snuff the wind.

The undaunted blood whirled in pain

and the young ones, beyond grief, cried yes, shoot,
shoot, why don’t you shoot?

.

And frightened renegades, grasping nothing,
fired blindly into the dark mass of the millennium,

threading their needles with the opulent ribbon,
staining there a faded dress, here a pauper's shirt
handed down from the dead.
Blood fell on the desiccated road, wasted road
rattling like the ancestors in their shallow graves.
Beetles would cover those dark clouds on the sand.
Sap from a tree hacked down at dawn.
Africa provides for her children.

.
The president was there only minutes,
less than a ripple in the spiral called time,
in the thirsty place called Boipatong, called
Africa, called the century.
The hands
that did the century's work, carried the century's
burdens, washed the century's dead,
the same hands pounded the fragile shell
of the president's armored BMW, his world.
Destiny's spines bristled, the blood howled
hoarsely, daring them to fire. Feverish, they
called out to their enemies, shoot, shoot!
Nothing now between them and the guns, nothing
between them and the car, nothing
between them and Johannesburg, nothing
to keep them from that scarred and dusty road,
the dead lying on it like matches. Not even fear
or courage could hold them back. And the people,
fettered by nothing, seeing nothing, cried, shoot,
shoot! This life and this death are drops
in the ocean of gall we learned to drink,
this bitter rain that watered your Canaan.
The earth is still thirsty. Let us drain the cup
together, then. These fists on the car
are our fists. This blood is our blood.
We are this dust. There are more of us than you.
This moment in time's maelstrom is
our moment. So shoot—why not
shoot? And the cops whipped them
with the metals mined by their own hands
from delirious mountains.

.
The president trembled as his limousine
sped away from the skeletal town
where nothing throws shadows but the blood.
He did not hear the bullets tumble against
the continent's bone. He stared grimly
at the cloudless sky. White curtains of heat
rippled the horizon as he glanced at his watch.
Strangely, he would remember, it had stopped.
He did not see the blood leavened with the dust.

He did not see the guns slash the crowd, the blood
summoning patient weapons to its obscure hands.

.
And when those other guns are raised by the blood,
surely the cops will not taunt them. The president
will not bare his breast, daring them to shoot.
The directors of BMW, now spectral and remote
in their offices of glass, will not urge those hands
worn down dragging the century to clutch vengeance
and open fire. Instead they cling to their sliver of vortex,
that storm now sucking whole worlds into its vanishing
eye, pulling life by the hair, lashing the blood, the
ravaged ground they stand on, the rivers changing
course. Ripping the very wind to shreds. Nothing
can hold it back, not courage or even fear. They will
not defy the approaching storm. They will appeal
to those shadows now gathering in the tomorrow
of the eroded mountains,
in the name of mercy, not to shoot.

.
But the people will come bearing memory's scroll.
The storm will come.
And the blood will cry out. Always the blood!
Boipatong will cry out.
And they will shoot anyway.

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