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The Constant Color of Suffering

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Her face fills the space of my TV screen; she is old—close to seventy, her eyes are red and barefaced, her lips cracked, the old tie-head that crowns her unkempt graying strands is discolored by stale blood or red dirt; I cannot tell and it does not matter. Behind her is an unruly crowd shouting for justice; she faces the camera with angry resignation. “We want justice,” she echoes the cries of the crowd behind her. “We want justice.” Then she takes the stage all by herself. “We use to walk a night, now we can’t even go to church.” She is screaming now, her face broken into a million creases and indentations of anguish, desperation and yearnings of unfulfilled hope. “Me can’t cry no more, me can’t cry no more.” But I can tell she is crying, I can tell there are convulsions in her soul. “Me can’t cry no more,” she insists. “Me cry till me eye water done. Them kill me brother, them kill me two sons. Me can’t cry no more. Me no have no more eye water left.”

The camera holds her there momentarily; traps her still in its frame—her eyes are bare—her trembling face as old and black as history.

She is my mother.

She is crying, I can tell.

There are no tears.

The camera pans away.

Off to the side on the corner, my sister weeps. She struggles against two others who fight to hold her from falling, from exploding, from ripping her clothes off her in madness or distress, I do not know and it does not matter. They hold her though; one has two hands around her waist, the other hugs her shoulders. Their efforts to keep her still are in vain. She holds her belly—wraps her arms into herself as if trying to stem the flow of anguish from her lips, the flood of terror, sorrow and pain from her heart—she bends, bringing her torso to meet her knees like a massive hose being bent onto itself to stop whatever flows through it. But each time she bends she convulses. She is younger, she is stronger; she still has vast reservoirs of tears. She still has energy to shed these tears with force and abundance to wash down her face, dampen her dirty blouse, wet her slippers—the color of the ground; drop like pellets of rain onto the dirty street. “Him never trouble nobody,” she says, “him never trouble no body, them never have to kill him so. Why them never just take him in? Say them come for him, then. Say them did come for him then; nothing no wrong with that. But why him have to dead like dog, so?” She has taken the mantle of weeping from my mother—the baton of suffering has been passed to her; she now anchors the next leg of her race in this circuitous ritual of pain to nowhere.

She cries for justice.

The crowd behind her shouts; harsh and long their voices clinging to the heat of the day like insects to a paper trap; searing the air like razor.

We want justice.

We want justice.

We want justice.

The old man, almost fainting steadies himself by bracing his foot against the inside of a pothole. The day is so hot you can feel the sun lean against his face; you can see the sweat swell from his skin just by the effort of speaking. There is still no shade for him; there is no place for him to rest. But still he stands for he knows there is something in standing. Still he tries to shout for he knows there must be something in joining the voices of the crowd. And what else to do, for here, men have nothing to do but sit or die. At least now he gets a chance to stretch his legs. “We want justice; we want justice.” His voice is weak; he does not cry; not because he has no tears but because he is a man and for him tears need excavation.

So for now he grunts, shaping and expulsing the variations of convulsions and pain and anguish in his belly into a sort of instinctive response ... a grunt. For the man lying dead on the street is his son and the one who was murdered at his gate last night was his friend. He has grunts not long loud shouts—just grunts—a learnt response; one passed down to him from generation to generation like the secret recipe for making pimento wine. From his father to his father before him and generations of men who have seen generations of sons die before them lying in their blood on the streets; generations of friends mauled and laid to die like dogs, generations and generations of weeping and burying and shaking fists and crying for justice. Men who have seen death so often they formed a friendship with it. They have had so little of justice or help or pity or compassion they have fashioned and designed a special grunt and passed it down from son to son—like a hand-me-down garment—now a part of their instinct to be called forth on the occasion like a threadbare suit.

He shifts his weight as the sweat makes the placard slippery in his hands, he dries his palm against torn, dirty, jeans and braces his foot against the inside of the pothole, holds his sign high again, grunting as the crowd swells around him.

Justice.

Justice.

We want justice.

Grunts.

The camera pans away.

Somewhere out there is a child I know; but the camera does not show it. It must be there; sniveling and crying for want of attention. For its father lay dead on the streets; its mother bawls blood through the ducts in her face; her aunts are out there trying to restrain her mother. Her

grandparents are there weeping without tears, grunting by instinct. Yes somewhere out there must be a child; a brand new brain and brand new mind being fashioned and prepared by the harshness of this day; formatted and sectioned like a new hard drive; receiving with the speed of light the messages and the nuances and the sensations of this constant color of suffering. Somewhere a heart is being prepared; brand new; empty of emotions except for the instinct to cling and feed from those around it; believing; understanding now, accepting now, that all this that now emanates from those who love her—that this day of pain and sorrow is what life is about. The seal to its well of tears is hardly broken, its reservoir of suffering untapped; threshold for pain hardly touched. But it is there absorbing processing; feet being prepared for a road that will never be paved; eyes that will never find shade to bring real color to its gaze; senses welded to the stench and feel of the constant pain of its ancestors and to the color of tears mixing with blood as it curls its way along the gutter with its eternal green bilge, and the sun constant and bearing down on this perennial day.

Somewhere there is a child.

Somewhere ... Believing accepting that this is its destiny.

Somewhere.

But the camera pans away.

This place where my people stand to make their case is unpaved and the dust rises from the stomp of their feet as it did a hundred years before when my fathers fought for freedom from the white man; when there was no concept of asphalt to pave the streets. The stench from the green water in the gutter rises like thick pungent steam the way it did when there were no trucks to take the garbage away. And the sun still makes the day colorless and it beats down just the same way it did when the only shade from the heat and the only shadow was in the space beneath our eyes where the salt dried from constant unending streams of tears. And after five hundred years the cries are still the same as that which echoed through the cane fields from parched throats coarsened by the unrelenting heat of slavery or through the hills from lungs tired from running from the whips that carved the essence of suffering on their backs or from a rack where black blood spurted for fun or from trees where black bodies hung as extension of the limbs. We want justice. The same cry echoing down the ages like a chaffing melody on the wind ... We want justice; a constant echo, shaping the fabric of our very existence ... shading the color and texture of the very space around us.

We want justice.

And so everyday, every day, my people bleed, Every day, every day they weep and their tears mix with the blood still tracking the insipid curl of the gutter to God knows where. Every day my people bleed, every day they cry and the blood is on our hands; the blood is on their hands, it is at their feet, it colors the space between us and stick to us when we link our fingers in

the simplest of gestures. It pours from the wounds of my brother as he lies lifeless in the filth of the undulating dustbowl of a path we trod for streets.

It stains the faces of them who exhaust themselves.

And the blood that runs, is still black, and the tears that dry and fizzle on the streets, still black, and the color of the weeping still black against the colorless day; and the faces of the children still meld to the texture of the slinking shadows of the streets; and the grunts from the belly still the formless uttering of black men twisted by five hundred years of pain.

And the color of the pain, still black.

And the color of suffering ... still black.

So the camera pans away ...