

SPOTLESS MIND

(throwing up on the side of a road in Mosul)*

and the sun rocks heavily in the liquid sky indecisive to roll towards, away,
or stay put as we roll through the thick jelly of air, sand and dust
— vigilant teeth and claws — in the torn flesh of the humvee, through
a faithless street, faceless crowd, apathetic sleep deprivation of being. until full stop.

limbs heavy with heat, gear, numb fear of going home in multiple pieces
– unsolvable puzzle. pockets heavy with sand, sweat, change, candy, tampons,
a dear-john letter, a fraternity ring, more sand, an ultrasound photo
of what looks like a broad bean, half a cookie, more sand, a yo-yo. heads just heavy.

light at the full stop – crystalline, fertile, torrid white – soaked and bleached in gunpowder,
treason, and ammonium nitrate, like in dog piss. peppered in khaki, crimson, yellow,
eyes, hands, mouths, incompatible strangers colliding in sanctioned kinships.
the light beads up on our brow as we walk towards the still crowd.

the trabant is dead. lidless sockets of windscreen and windows shed no glass upon impact.
clear shots. the assembly – numb, as we sift through elbows, and shoulders,
and backpacks, and smouldering cigarette butts grasping at straw-dry lips, and static breaths.
the passenger in the back – asleep. his brain, intact, next to him on the seat.

his skin – unwritten parchment, or foil. deep patina of middle age, and hard work.
or, rather, of strobing cacophonous nights, and apprehension. and fear.
two deep sharp rubies on each temple – too rich for his rags, oozing slow irreversible colour
of confident triumph over the living. his brain, intact, spotless, on the backseat cushion.

his brain. intact. whole. uncompromised. on the backseat. an inch to the left from his
ongoing wristwatch, the captain, who had abandoned his ship first, before hope, before fright,
without doubt, without fight or hesitation, abiding the laws of physics and warfare –
a spotless mind on the spotted holey upholstery. Holy shit, we each repeat in a chant.

the boy comes from nowhere. barefoot, topless, tiny – your usual candy-beggar –
eyes a century older than frame. his hands steady and sure as he scoops the luminous brain
off the seat through the toothless window into a bag, and walks away. they cannot bury
a body lacking. the uncles shall pick up the body later. the old plastic bag says ‘thank you’ on it.

as the boy walks away, becomes blur, we awake with a gag. one by one, twisted
on the side of the road throwing up. unable to stop until thoroughly empty of food,
coffee, orange and gastric juices, doubts, regrets, unsolicited life decisions, swallowed sand.
one by one we walk back to humvees in silence – empty stomachs and clear minds.

voices... ruptured beads of muezzin call in the distance. night was quiet of noise and sleep.
we smoked through the birdless dawn. spotless sun takes over horizon as more bodies
are being washed, dressed in cotton, placed under casket lids. and a boy is holding a fistful
of dirt – trapped in comfortless shoes of this father stuffed with plastic ‘thank yous’ to fit.

** based on true events*