

This Is How We Disappear



poems by Titilope Sonuga



Write Bloody North

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THIS IS HOW WE DISAPPEAR

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MISSING

*[They] were ordinary girls, young enough to be my daughters,
who had been raised to almost mythic status
by their extraordinary experience.*

—Helon Habila, *The Chibok Girls*

THEY ARE STILL LAUGHING

In the dream,
I close my eyes and count backward from 276.
The girls crawl feet first from their hiding places,
some from behind the curtains where their hands
stuck out, others from under the bed,
untangling a mess of limbs.

A slit in the silence bursts
and their voices fall out.
They call each other's names,
unlearning memory,
bones melting back to whole.

The ones who do not make it into hiding,
shake their bodies loose
from where they stood suspended in time.

They brush past me as they go,
peeling back the skin of a thousand blackened days,
calling up the blood to dance
beneath their former faces, the ones still soft enough
for their mothers to recognize.

This time when a girl walks into a forest,
real or imagined,
when her body kisses the earth
like a felled tree,
everybody hears it.

We go deaf with the hearing,
even if she never makes a sound.

THE HISTORY BOOKS WILL REMEMBER

Girls the size of a small tribe vanished
like a twisted kind of hide and seek.

We began our counting too late.
Imagined them giggling in their hiding places

like the games we played
when we were just small girls,
sure someone would find us

no matter how far we went,
no matter how dark the night.

MISSING

*As much as I wish to, the president said,
I cannot promise that we can find them.*

*They converted to Islam,
married off to the fighters, Abubakar Shekau said.*

*They were taken
across the border into Cameroon, witnesses said.*

*A negotiator told us, At least three died
in the early days, from a snake bite,
malaria and dysentery.*

*I'm outraged and heartbroken, Michelle Obama
posted a picture of herself holding a sign.*

*Please know this, Malala Yousafzai wrote,
we will never forget you.*

Years passed without a whisper from the girls.

★

My father's gun
in the upstairs closet will shoot
its first and only shot
when I am ten and the armed robbers come
rattling our gate like rabid dogs.
My three sisters and I huddled in our nightgowns
on his bedroom floor.

*We have to leave this country, he whispers
to my mother, his finger trembling
on the trigger.*

That night my father will almost kill a man
to protect our childhood.
He will never say the words *I love you*
but in the chamber of his heart
is one loaded bullet.

★

Midnight at the water's edge.

Blessing and 3,000 refugees waded in,
silent and barefoot.

They fall into the sea.
Soon, most will wash back ashore
with no name to call
but the numbers scribbled on their clothes.

For weeks, the smuggler's telephones
on the other side, silent.

No one to answer for the girls,
with skin like rich palm oil
bloodying the water.

★

They built fences in Morocco,
paid the nations on the coastline
to keep the teeming bodies back.

*Tomorrow, Europe might no longer
be European, said Qaddafi.*

We will use human beings as weapons,
cram the black bodies into fishing trawlers,
launch them from Libya into the sea.
The ungovernable,
the slaves,
the concubines and prostitutes,
burn it to the ground.

★

Swift flowing river
snakes its way through the heart of Edmonton
to lay still
in the winter of our arrival.

Our hands turn white,
the air like shards of glass to our faces.

That night, our family shares
a pizza in our basement apartment.
Then we fall asleep, three on the bed,
three on the floor,
our bellies bloated with hope.

We tread water for twenty winters
between our yesterdays
and the tomorrow we were promised.

★

Everything here is borrowed
or stolen:
the language, the land.

My own body,
far flung.

I lose my old English,
my tongue twice colonized.

★

All the women I know are running
toward, or away,
and everything I know of disappearance
begins with water.

The girls,
their thirsty mouths open skyward,
rainwater muddying the forest floor.

The six-month ocean crossing
that pulls the salt from our skin.

The dam
breaking inside my mother.

The first blood sacrifice
that pulled me from one world into the next
began inside a woman,
sliced down the middle,
so another woman could emerge whole.

All I know of magic making and survival
I learnt at birth.

★

I want to defend my country.

Which one?

I mythologize my grandmother, write stories
about warrior women
with thunder between their thighs.

Then the girls disappear, and no one goes looking.
I ask my mother
the Yoruba word for shame.

Do you know they only drank water when it rained?

*What kind of country does nothing
when two hundred girls
disappear?*

A thousand Indigenous women
stop in their tracks
to crane their necks back in unison.

Tears flood the highway
till even the rivers overflow.

★

The girls had disappeared for three weeks
before we knew their names.

Then we spoke them: two hundred
and seventy-six in Chibok,

but thousands more, missing and murdered
across the country, answered.

★

It is customary to wait seven days
to name a child.

Touch her lips
with water and palm oil,
honey and salt,
kola,
give her a taste of the bitter
and the sweet,
the joy and the pain.

Pray for her a spirit
with the resilience of water.

All of this just to say:
Stay.