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A Love Poem

Karl Thomas Rees

I

What's in your head,
she said,
in your head.

When the music stops,
I will send a rose, a photograph,
and this poem
to the woman I love.

But now, the chorus buries me.
I am thinking of Ireland
when I should be dreaming of her.
It is too much.
Where am I in the chorus?
I have been awake for thirty-six straight
hours. I am trying to be serious,
Mr. Ginsberg. I am trying to write poetry. Only hours are slipping on the sands of a disintegrated Jane Austen novel; slipping into the persistent waste sad time, stretching before and after, makes of a botched memory; slipping into the afternoon shadows of a corner office with a window-blind view, where an invisible man folding his arms across the mahogany dares to tell me, “There are more important things than a woman’s love.”

“Like poetry,” I offer, after a few hours of disagreeing silence. “No. Like the course of your memory. Like the ruins in your soul. Like remembering who you are.”

II

In 1994 I listened to the Cranberries while *Time* magazine showed me a photo by Kevin Carter. Smack-dab in the center lay a blur, a black form, a half-formed shape, forming, forming into a malnourished child. He was hugging, worshipping an anonymous African desert. You could say he was dying for it. It was the most sadistic thing I’d ever seen win a Pulitzer. I turned the page.
Then it became the most exquisite memory
and I couldn't leave it alone.
I returned to the photo
and saw the vulture.

What was there to say?
In Carter's great photo the child, the vulture,
they dance and they dance,
but they don't.
The vulture is anchored in time and place
by the haunt of Darwin's justice.
The child has never heard of dancing,
ever heard of language,
ever heard my question,
“What is more important than a woman's love?”

III

The invisible man on the other side
of the lemon-oiled mahogany
extracts 1994 from me
like a bee draining the nectar
of a forty-acre rose garden.
I say, “Is that what you wanted?
Is that all there is?”
Without even asking about my mother,
he hypnotizes me with a rose
on a fishing line. And all I can think of
is the saying I once heard, that
with the lights out, it's less dangerous . . .

IV

Inside me there are 7,000 shouting voices,
and one that whispers
truth like the taste of next year's wine.
I can tell you what it means to say—
I am a child of Africa,
a stoic vulture eye,
born and dead in the same Kodak moment.
I am beyond the waste sad Sigmund,
in his infinite wisdom and invisibility,
made of a corner office with a view.

In one hundred words or less, it says
I am not in this poem.

V

When I arise and go back down into
time, when I am finally alone enough
to be serious about poetry,
memory will fail me.
Yes, I will have written a poem, but at what cost?
Of the rose, the photograph, and the poem,
all that will remain is Africa, trapped
in the perpetual intellect of *Time* magazine—
nothing more than the essence of an unanswered question,
“What more is there, if not a woman’s love?”

VI

In time,
where I am dying Mr. Kurtz
and reincarnating as a French café,
like the checkerboard tablecloth of . . .
no, like the violin . . .
like the collective love song . . .
like the Sunday afternoon
of oblivion—
In time,
I meant to write a love poem.