

Those Ebola Burners Themⁱ

But there are no graves to clean. No place to put flowers for the unforgotten. No place but where the forgotten sit in a field of ash, burnt by cane juice.

They said: you must burn the bodies. They said: each burial keeps the disease in the soil, in the trees. Each burial keeps the disease alive.

Them said: we do not burn. We honour our dead, we praise the body, we dress the dead in their best suit to meet their maker and kiss each mouth in farewell. We lay the dead to rest in a bed of earth where we can caress each memory. We do not burn.

They said: you must burn. The eyes of the world are upon you.

A handful, two handfuls of men. The villagers hurled rocks and yelled, 'Ebola burner them, oh!' Them were paid more than any farmer or soldier. Them wore gloves and put the bodies in the incinerator. In the morning the bones of the dead cried out from the machine and had to be burnt again and again.

The government came with suits. Them dressed like ghosts, head to toe in white with a small window to watch them actions. Them built pyres in the field.

Them picked up each man, woman, child with the tag on the toe: aunty, teacher, friend. Them sprayed the body bag with palm oil and placed it on the pyre. More kindling on top, strips of coconut leaf, dry sugar cane, anything found on the road. The bodies sat up in the fire, bags with no face, accusing – how could you? Where will my flowers be laid and my memory remembered? Clouds rolled in from the Atlantic, slave-trader clouds, blue-helmet thunder. Palm trees shivered in the lack of rain. Them had no answer for the fire-faces. So the bodies lay down, all the bodies lay down. Them burnt.

They said: you will be heroes. The eyes of the world are upon you.

The bodies came and came. Not people, just work for them. Not people, just rotten logs, sunken houses. Them made the pyres higher. Them placed the stinking logs in the fire two, three at a time. Them burnt through the night. Slapped at the flies that fed on the bags. At the mosquitoes that fed on them. Often the body bags exploded, the fire too hungry, the bags too many. Burst of flame into the starlit night, a soul enraged. The villagers screamed and yelled then but the bodies came and soldiers lined the road so the villagers could not throw rocks at them. The bodies came and the rains came and turned the road to mud, the ash to sticky black. Them watched the fire, as each body sat up out of its log-state to turn wildly to them through the flames.

No click-click of a swamp frog, no chatter of a black-collared lovebird. No swoop of the red-neck nightjar. Only the butterflies, drunk on the smell, fire-coloured clouds there were so many. The smell so seduced the butterflies that the cloud flew right into the fire. A little snap, a little fizz, was the end of each butterfly life. A cloud died with a buzz in the head.

In the morning there was ash. Piles of ash like the war. Meaty ash, rotting ash, the smell in every fibre of the ghost suits, through every fibre and into them hair, them pores. The smell on the wind. Them choked on it and learnt that every mouthful would taste of the dead. Them combed the ash with rakes. In the ghost suits, them combed out the piles and stoked the fires.

They said: you will be heroes.

At the beginning, some of them took the ash home for their gardens. Whatever had been planted – banana, cassava, plum – under the ash a wild blood red rose would grow. Them left the ash in the field.

Them fought. It was a war against the devil and them couldn't stop. No one rested. Not even the dead, trucked from home to hospice to field, the dead who reached for heaven as each soul struggled out of the fire. Them were the ghosts of the living who made ghosts of the dead. Them stoked the fires, fingers freckled with burns. Them piled the bodies higher and watched the dead jerk up from the flames.

Them could not find sleep. Them lost themselves in a sheet on a board in a hut at the edge of the field. Them got lost with cane juice and found themselves in the morning in the same place but far from home, in the same clothes but a stranger stared from the mirror.

No frog click-click, no lovebird chatter. Only the butterflies joined them.

Them could not sleep so the government came with more cane juice.

They said: you have no choice. Besides, you will be heroes.

The smell. Like roasted meat but not right. Like the war, with the bullet casings in the road and the bullets in the men in the roadside grass. Like the war, with the women still by the pot before the men came, then the pot boiled to nothing and the woman writhing with flies. The smell. Like coconuts soft with rot, like old bones in a house after weeks of rain, furry green and alive.

No, nothing like that. Them had no words for the smell, them just watched the butterflies, living flame.

Then there were fewer trucks and each truck was half empty and full of the promise of the end. Them could burn the bodies one at a time again. There was time for prayer again, rejoice! But them could not remember the prayer words. Them only stared as the dead rose up, arms pushed against the body bag on the pyre. The space for prayer was filled with cane juice. Them could not go home until all the work was done. There were fewer trucks and then still fewer. The rains stopped and the winds came, swirled ash up into the air and flung it at faces and hands. Them waited and the days of cane juice were longer and longer as the trucks didn't come. Them waited.

Finally, one man came. A ghost, a blue-eyed ghost from the UN-place with his blue hat and clipboard.

He said: it is over. It is done. You are the heroes of the world.

Hero. He left and took the word with him.

Them stripped off the ghost skins and watched the fires burn to nothing. Some of them raced home. Others of them knew not to. One by one them who left returned, head filled with fire and ash and family words – ‘You burnt body? Then I’nt want see you no more around me.’ A heart of seared flesh. Them were the ghosts, them saw that now, unwelcomed by family and unremembered along with all the Ebola stolen. Them took off the ghost suits but the suits stuck, the suits clung, the ghost suits were now skin.

Today is Decoration Day. Them people decorate the graves of the remembered, the honoured, the praised. Flowers cover the ground in patterns of pink and yellow, red and white. Songs are sung in praise as each headstone is scrubbed clean and each blade of grass clipped with tiny golden scissors, so precious and old. Under the sun them sit in the field and decorate the ash with cane juice. Them sit in the field and decorate themselves, a wild blood red rose in them mouth.

ⁱ “Villagers protested near the site, hurling abuse and epithets at the men they called “those Ebola burners them”.” From the article, ‘The ‘burners’ who struggle to live with themselves’ by Helene Cooper, New York Times, published Sydney Morning Herald December 12-13 2015. The burners are the Liberian men who cremated those dead from Ebola.