

POETRY | SPRING 2021

The Veteran

By Zainab Mabizari

The veteran

in the hospital tucking his face into white sheets says
military men do not weep in front of women.
Concealed tears forward march into
an oasis among deserted emotions pooling on his pillow case.

Military men fight wars in foreign countries,
trek soil with guns taught to be tools of liberation.
They return with medals and missing limbs,
lament whether they left seeds or burial sites.
Memories remain trapped on top of arid dunes, desert storms
doctors prescribe medications to repress.

Men fight wars in foreign countries but I watch them
wave flags when cells betray their bodies and multiply
forts on organs. We find base command:
advanced surveillance, sharp eagle eyes,
magnetic beams shooting through a body
in solitary confinement.

On his chart, metastasis is another word
for colonization, or metastasis is another word
for counterinsurgency, or metastasis is another word
for operation freedom, consult surgery,
operation remove the tumor, operations discover
tumor has spread too far, retreat scalpel and suture wound,
this is an enemy with power, it cannot be defeated.

On his chart, chemotherapy is another word
for drones, or chemotherapy is another word
for bombs, or chemotherapy is a command to
destroy entire generations, erase cell lines
as collateral damage, a violence begetting violence
strategically ordered to advance the front line.

I explain, cancer is like a civil war
that uses the body as a battlefield.

Tears march down pillow cases
for a body that has learned from actions,
takes muscle memory of military tactics and
mutates genetic code into uncontrollable replication —

He responds, I left the battleground long ago,
and now it has followed me,

He responds, is this how they felt?
Is there a definition of freedom
that means to be forcibly removed from your body?

He responds, I am not ready for the scythe
to take my soul, can you find it tucked in between
the heart beating under your stethoscope?

He weeps, is this atonement?
I have spent years repenting
to the ground with scattered seeds
that never blossomed into flowers,
those medications never killed the weeds,
never brought me home from the arid dunes,
never quelled the storm that has been brewing within
since I saw the burial sites left beneath my boots.

He weeps, what of this body will be left
in this battlefield? When a flag dresses my casket,
what land will I be buried in?

Is it a land that knows a freedom
I believed in?

Zainab Mabizari is a writer, poet and physician of Algerian descent. She received an MS in Narrative Medicine at Columbia University and is completing a social-justice focused internal medicine residency in New York City. She has been serving as a Doximity Op-Med Fellow and will be serving as the 2021 AMWA Artist-in-Residence. Pandemic permitting, you can find her reading in a coffeeshop or performing poetry at a local open mic.

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