

### The River Under Kwai Bridge

*Heap up the mound there and implant on it  
the oar I pulled in life with my companions.*

— Elpenor to Odysseus

#### prologue

Not the bridge: it's been recast to suit  
the sunsets, stubborn blood sanded away  
from shivering grains by a new troupe  
of grateful coolies, deafened to the litany  
of water below, who still whistle marches  
for movie cameras. Before Charon's current  
could be crossed, his toll exacted seven  
Burmese and Laotian skulls for every  
precious Imperialist who gurgled *adieu*  
to his king. Where are *their* plaques?

#### the river's aria

*when aching bones cluttered my banks  
i gave the doomed a bed to cleanse  
their blackened skin for watery sleep*

*every lung surrendered its air  
to whirlpools of trancing relief  
above my silt and patient fish*

*no stones beneath to prick their sack  
the veins decayed so quietly  
like leaves dissolved by tiny jaws*

#### a pilgrim's canon

'Death Railway' means nothing to a fresh  
plank: no initials are scratched on these  
spikes to console those who seek the raspy  
throats still crying out for proper burial.  
On the span you dodge the stray hooks  
of Thai fishermen scudding on Japanese  
motorbikes, their flapping cuffs, legs apart  
for balance, your shoes sticky with creosote  
(these timbres *were* dedicated to tyres)  
glazed on the beams to glimmer under  
December fireworks of lusty commemoration,

and then the thin girls in wedding dresses  
so white, but going blue as the sky clicks  
down to darkness in a liturgy of Nikons.

**the river's refrain**

*why seek ashes and baptism from the sky  
when heaven's girders always come to rust?  
better to bathe below in sympathy with mud*

**war cemetery canticles**

Knees on the damp sod, a dedicated army  
of gardeners clips grass away from marble,  
tidies discreet trenches edging each grave,  
rakes the river gravel smooth along the paths.  
Every marker is flanked by native shrubbery  
trimmed back neatly as uniforms saluting  
a final sacrifice, as though heroism in chorus  
weren't hushed by the clarity of a single voice.

Only steps away, the Chinese dead in crypts  
of granite left to dust and weeds. Snapshot  
ovals smile out from the stone, as though still  
sniffing the dewy flowers of faithful tribute.  
No picnics or parasols brouse this requiem  
of coughing neglect. Will Buddha provide?

**the river hums back in aphorisms**

*no channel or flesh is sacred in flood*

*without compassion, no war  
without war, no compassion*

*when levees break, it's every treaty  
for himself—sand's better than slime,  
clay better than sand, branches better  
than clay, rocks better than branches,  
a steady hand better than rocks*

*trust nothing more than your final breath*

**epilogue**

above the murmuring river ghosts  
the bridge wears its darkness well