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UN General Debate

Assembled in bespoke garb, grandees
ostensibly exercising a modicum of decorum
take turns at the marble-backdropped rostrum
to flaunt identity and allegiance, saber-rattling
and rodomontading, touting stances
and espousing views for which they aim to gain
purchase and traction if not approbation,
a parade of grandstanders challenging
the patience of their captive audience
of professional seat-fillers.

Here where First and Third worlds rendezvous
heads of state have their say,
lavishing kudos or spewing mordant critiques
regardless of their capacity for rapacity,
nonchalantly blathering platitudes
despite incriminating enormities and excesses.

None is stunned when little is proposed
in the way of solutions generable and operant
to address global plights; ultimately some
succumb to the stifling atmosphere and faint,
a time-honored excuse to be excused.

Once all is said and said, delegates swarm
corridors to wheedle and wangle,
threaten nemeses with démarches
worded "in the strongest possible terms"
(or else thermonuclear war),
and elbow for priority in bathroom queues.

Ambassadors of nations routinely sidelined
then silenced shoot dirty looks at counterparts
along the urinals, comparing length and girth,
mumbling epithets in no need of translation
before fleeing the zoo in chauffeured sedans
en route to fine dining and a musical.
Thus ends another marathon speech-fest
in a tower tragically and ironically ivory.

Damascene Rose

Settled in his haven by the West's eastern edge,
a mustached refugee crushes pistachios
as he confects bonbons by the dozen,
molten goop overflowing trays whose molds
now include maple leafs and syrup in addition
to the traditional roses, pyramids, and hearts,
a heartfelt gesture toward a promising land
wherein his familial fortunes have revived.

Aromas of cocoa, honey, hazelnuts, and almonds
permeate the factory, arousing memories
of his grandmother's saccharine kitchen,
blaring speakers calling believers to prayer,
the strum of the oud, bubbling hookah pipes,
the scent of jasmine in the Old City,
warm desert winds in the afternoon,
and the stark aftermath of missiles.

The recipes, gourmet and carefully guarded,
once the envy of Syrian rivals, have adjusted:
newly detectable in sectile sheets of milk and dark
chocolate is a bittersweet soupçon, the flavor
of nostalgia for a homeland damned
by sinister twins, terrorism and tyranny,
though this taste is balanced by another note,
full and rich, the secret ingredient of gratitude.

Sorrowing World

Zealous to consummate credal demands,
the wolves of evening sod in blood a globe
of suspecting yet effete civilians,
torpid fodder awaiting their fate,
unsure of their means, wavering in their resolve.

Apologists sated with a surfeit of massacres
turn reticent and no longer default to excuses,
refraining from the quondam claim
that our murderers are depraved because deprived,
merely seeking redress for valid grievances.

The whirlwind's reapers sowed no wind;
innocents slain were unstained to the end
that met them abruptly on a whim,
at the pleasure of hellions who connive
to unnerve, terrify, slaughter.

We have become benumbed and inured to the scourge,
idle bystanders to our own piecemeal demise,
resigned to a grim regimen convulsing the civilized
with wretched regularity, impoverished by loss
while still at a loss as to how to stanch the hemorrhage.

Though we weary of chilling eyewitness accounts,
horror's array will unrelentingly hold sway
until budding homicides discern
that none are ever sanitized by bloodbaths,
not even those ideologically inspired.

Ar-Raqqa

The fighting is heavy, intense, chaotic,
territory at times swapped like liras; yelling for Allah,
die-hard holdouts holed up in hideouts
delay the inevitable with suicide bombers
advancing on coalition soldiers as mujahideen
retreat into hidden tunnel networks
or disguise themselves as noncombatants
to catch kafirs off guard.

Exurbs, suburbs, districts, and neighborhoods
fall after overnight airstrikes and fierce clashes
by day, desperate fanatics offering stiff resistance
to Syrian Kurds, Arab militiamen, and US special forces
who manage to cut off all escape routes
from the occasionally caliphal capital.

But now the four-year caliphate is being rolled back,
rolled up, a tattered prayer mat.

In this final phase of pangs and throes
the order of the day is surrender or die;
only the deluded or dehydrated
fail to recognize this fateful hour
as the last stand of the damned.

Half the Abbasid city is rubble, its streets strewn
with civilian cadavers, madness' mute witnesses.

Among those internally displaced, intrinsically traumatized,
tentative selves emerge, emancipated
from oppression and burqas
involuntarily donned and rapidly doffed,
imprisonment's humid metonym.

Black flags topple from minarets,
though tomorrow remains uncertain,
victory's eve uncannily mundane: as ever,
night clothes the heavens with darkness...
...and the Euphrates caches her secrets.

Outcry

Legal remedies await their own enactment,
an inevitability inexcusably overdue
and far too tardy for the departed,
their lives taken abruptly and arbitrarily
by actants callous, unhinged, frenzied,
eager to go out with a bang-bang-bang,
not a whimper, indifferent to the carnage
left in their wake in the streets and squares,
in the hearts of loved ones lorn
and bereft of cherished treasures.

At such hours customary bromides—
"our thoughts and prayers go out to the victims and their families",
"everything happens for a reason", "life goes on"—
are exposed as less than worthless, availing none,
not even their well-meaning, mechanical espousers.

The insane, often responsible, ever remain
unaccountable; patently unpalatable is
the fact that those invested with authority
pretend helplessness as horror recurs
and the same, tiresome questions arise,
the same solutions suggest themselves
with unrealistic hopes of being implemented.

Only an outcry piercing the heavens, rattling the skulls
of sluggish legislators dozing in power's corridors
will suffice to disrupt the pattern;
shriek with me, then, on behalf of the needlessly deceased,
for the sake of injured survivors;
wail by day and howl by night for the waste of life,
the animating impulse, the original surprise present;
shriek in righteous indignation, at the top of your lungs...
...or brace yourselves for the foreseeable.