

Salima Abbas

1

Peace cranes in morning light flooding the hole that still gapes
where two bombs fell, the first churning through
the reinforced concrete roof,
the second a beat behind and blowing
steel rods into wild spasms
of shock and wrath.

All the exits froze.

Mothers with children perished
in flames without mercy, in pain without end
on Ash Wednesday and the passing of Ramadan,
that night in February,
1991.

The men had given up their places
for love of families
as the sirens sounded and the planes approached
like hideous demons from distant dens.

"Go to the shelter!" Mrs. Abbas told her children.
"I have clothes that need cleaning. You will be safe there.

The Americans know we are only civilians."
The children believed their mother and walked

into the cold ovens of Amariyah.

2

Long strands of colorful peace cranes hang so perfectly.

In the shameless morning light, a peck of little birds
chirps and twitters, darting from perch to perch
in the space where a roof had been
so perfectly impregnable.

It is a shrine now, a hallowed place
for pilgrims to visit and survivors to mourn
the loss of their only treasures.

What remains are candles along the walls.
What remains are carefully arranged bouquets.
What remains are photos of the children and mothers
along with their names and the frozen flames
of their lives.

What remains is the inextinguishable voice of ash,
of charred concrete and steel singing to these living ears
of a peace no mind can grasp.

I saw the handprints on the ceiling,
the burned in handprints of children
lifted above the rest and pushing, pushing
against the impossible odds of concrete.

And I saw the image of a woman saving her infant
from the beast of the blast,
her love and humanity forever formed
as the sign of Christ on the shroud of Turin.

I saw the hair, the skin, the eyes
still clinging to subterranean walls
where vats of boiling water
exploded.

3

I walked through each room, I looked into the eyes of each face
remembered there, I touched the walls and I wept
for those who died and for those who ordered their death
and would have done it again, they said,
even as the dead were swept up like embers
from charcoal ruins.

And when I came into the light I met the woman
whose spirit burns with lamentation.
Guide and guardian of this dark inferno,
she pointed to photos on a wall then
slowly intoned the names
of every member of her family
who perished the night she left them here.

Tears soften her eyes as I hold her hand
and offer her a rose
quartz crystal I've carried from home.
She accepts it and there is silence between us.

I want to embrace her and let her feel my tears on her face
as I would feel hers on mine
and somehow we would both know together at the same time how
terrible a thing has happened and how the world must never be
allowed to forget.

But all I can do is hold her hand and tell her how sorry I feel.

"My name is Salima Abbas," she says. "This is my home now. I
cannot leave. This is where my family died and God willing, this is
where I too will die.

"Mr. George, tell your people what you have seen. Tell them
we are people too and only want to live and be happy.
Ask them not to turn away from our suffering."

I will, I say, and walk away.

My heart is heavy.

I hear the old women scrubbing the steps to the shelter
with brooms made of dried palm leaves.

I hear bird song filling
the hole in the roof.

I feel sunlight dripping on my face and hands.
I am in Baghdad on a beautiful spring morning.

Mrs. Abbas in black waves to me and then I am gone.
In our driver's car I look once more at my hands and see
how little I know of suffering.