Mountains of Blood
Alzo David-West

Blood poured from the mountains
Overlooking the village,
and a hundred thousand brown snakes
coiled around the mounds.
The sun in heaven grieved and became tired
and rested on the earth,
and there, heaving,
it opened its fire womb,
giving birth to a white tiger
with the body of a man.
And the tiger, which was aflame,
carried a sword from Palhae,
and from the sword grew a wind
that turned the hundred thousand snakes
into salt and ash.

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Major General Ishihara was preparing a report for the office in Manchukuo. It had been four years since the raid on the border village and four years of pursuit in the mountains and wilderness, but Zhuo Jingping, the Chinese Communist army commander who was leading the Korean guerrillas, was now dead and displayed, and the few surviving members of his independent division had fled into the Soviet hinterland.

They were a very small guerrilla group, three hundred at most, fewer than fifty men and some women in the end, mostly illiterates, poorly coordinated, hungry, short of everything, and not well trained. They were a nuisance, like fleas, appearing in the rear, attacking the trains for supplies, cutting the telegraph lines, threatening the peasants for recruits, money and food, kidnapping, stealing. It was only a matter of time. It was only a matter of time.

Cho Myonghee, a peasant woman, dead, an informer, her husband Kim Songnam, dead, was part of the tenant farmers’ movement that was giving the village headmen and landowners a headache. Her son Kim Myongnam and daughter Kim Songhee joined and retreated with the Communist army.

Ishihara looked at the wall clock. He massaged a knot in his right shoulder. The winter morning was cold, and the windowpane was beaded with droplets. He drank some tea and wrote a letter with a poem for his wife and ten-year-old daughter in Kagoshima.

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‘Private Yano!’
‘Sir!’

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The soldier removed his belt and pants and began to rape the girl who had been brought into the interrogation room, all in front of her mother, who was tied to a chair and bleeding from her face and forearms, which were raw from boiling water. Cho Myonghee cried deliriously at the sight of her daughter struggling and wailing on the floor.

‘Mori,’ Nakada, the lieutenant colonel, said to the interpreter, ‘will the woman talk now?’

‘Mother, say something, please.’

But all Cho Myonghee could do was gasp in convulsive, quivering sobs and ask why, why they were doing what they were doing, why they ever came to her village, why they killed her husband, why they were hurting her daughter.

She had become incoherent, Mori told the lieutenant colonel. She knew nothing.

Nakada, frustrated that the three hours of interrogation had gone nowhere, hit the woman’s head with the braided hilt of his sword and, as she fell unconscious, cursed her for staining the fine decoration.

Nakada thought for a moment and finally ordered Mori to get Otomaru to tend to the mother’s and girl’s wounds.

‘What should I tell the villagers, lieutenant colonel?’ the interpreter asked as Nakada was about to leave the room.

‘The Communists are the cause of it.’

* * *

Zhuo Jingping drew his pistol and shot one of the men who lost his hands and feet to frostbite, and the man’s body, shorn of its clothes, boots, and padded socks, was tossed into a ravine, where the forest animals would devour it.

‘We sacrifice ourselves for their party, and they throw us over mountainsides like garbage?’

There was growing discontent and frustration in the unit, but there was no time to bury the man, and he could not be cremated either, since Ishihara’s expeditionary force had been trailing them for weeks, watching for signs of their movement.

‘Our situation is impossible,’ someone muttered, as they made camp deep in the frigid forest.

‘We are already dead,’ remarked another.

Pak Chol, the Korean commander who ranked second to Zhuo, explained to the men that their circumstances were more difficult than anticipated, but nevertheless, they were inspiring the patriotic masses against Japanese imperialism and fascism.

‘We have been fighting for nine years, Chol!’ one of the older fighters exclaimed. ‘Nothing is happening. Where is the revolution the Chinese party promised? We are covered in lice and dirt, and we are emaciated and freezing! We are like bandits and homeless men! We go into the villages here and over the mountains, and all we get is a handful of peasants, and even some of them run away! We go into the towns, and the workers and middle strata call the police! Is this our inspiration?’

‘Don’t be so pompous!’ Zhuo shouted. While he understood the men’s moral fatigue, he could have no pessimism. ‘If you are a member of the party, there is no abandoning the party line.’ He intoned song like and ordered Pak to read the passage

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from the political notebook.

‘We Communists strive now to unite all anti-Japanese political parties and the whole people in the just and progressive resistance war, a protracted war for national liberation. Japan is a powerful imperialist country occupying and plundering our two countries, but we will have victory with widespread guerrilla warfare and the people’s anti-Japanese united front. We will harass the Japanese fascist forces. We will disintegrate their morale. We will make their soldiers homesick. We will stir antiwar sentiment and influence their ranks, and we will evoke the sympathy of the people of Japan, whose revolution is soon coming. Japanese imperialism and Japanese fascism will surely be defeated in the united-front war of resistance. These are the objective facts.’

Cold wind smelling of pine trees was cutting the men’s faces.

* * *

Summer in the village was stifling, and the gutters were filled with a fetid, shitty slime. Some old bearded men with top hats and donkeys were smoking long pipes and talking about Yang Heeseng, who was wandering around insensibly, looking in pickling pots.

Sanghee, Ayong, and Kyongmin were making their rounds by the barracks, as children in rags were running restively around the place.

The village, with its thatch-roofed mud houses, unpaved roads, storehouses, and dilapidated pharmacy, sat under the eyes of the mountain range, over which was Manchukuo. Peasants, ancient and young, were harvesting millet, soybeans, and cotton in the surrounding fields, while others were preparing compost.

Mornings came and went, and Kim Songnam visited the neighbouring villages under nightfall, showing the pass for grain deliveries at the checkpoints, holding meetings with peasant leaders about the rent system and how the landowners were claiming too much of the harvest and leaving the tenant farmers with the most unsalable portions.

‘We have been approached by the Communists, brother.’

‘No,’ Songnam said tersely.

‘But their policy of all land to the tiller—’

‘No,’ he said flatly. ‘Look at what happened to the village over the mountains. They set up a youth organisation there, and the whole village was burned down. And the mining village on the other side of the river … the women’s association that was established … they tortured, raped, and killed all of them. No. A man and his family only live once, not twice. Our way is better.’

‘If that is the case, our village group is in agreement that the proposal is too small. Our poverty won’t be alleviated. We say 70 percent for us and 30 percent for them.’

‘We must be more reasonable than this in our negotiations, brother, if we want them to listen.’

* * *

‘An apathetic, half-witted idiot.’

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Sakakibara and Yoshida, the enlisted fisherman and farmer from Hokkaido, were eating millet cakes at the small stall the old woman had set up near the barracks. They were talking about Yano, who had gone off somewhere.

‘Maybe to the stream at the foot of the mountain again?’ Yoshida thought aloud.

‘An idiot. An idiot,’ Sakakibara said.

Songhee found him. He was sitting in the shade amid some trees, staring into the rushing water, holding the rifle resting on his thin thighs.

He heard a branch break, turned around, and stood up with his expressionless, long, white face.

She stared into the blank, drooping eyes. He did not say anything, but suddenly, after a little while, looked down, almost as if he was shy.

Myongnam came up from behind and struck him over the head with a stone, and his face fell instantly into the stream.

Songhee ran on top of the body, hitting the mask-like face, whose thin eyes were still staring and mouth open. She removed the bayonet from the rifle and cut open the throat. Her brother took the cap and uniform. She cut off the ears and penis and shoved them into the gash … trembling, laughing, crying.

Myongnam embraced his sister, took her hands, and washed them in the stream, and after he told her everything was okay now, the two ran up into the mountains together.

‘An idiot,’ Sakakibara said again. ‘What? Does he expect us to shiver like our grandfathers, go on our hands and knees for him?!’

‘Hmn,’ Yoshida concurred.

* * *

Her eyes were moving to the left and to the right, blinking.

The clouds were slow moving, capped golden-orange like melon rind and spreading, turning dim blue to a deep dark purple that became black-red.

Below was the outline of the mountain range, cutting across the horizon, and the wall of trees, thick, somber, and dark … dancing, arcing, swaying, with blotches of brown and green, with clusters of naked branches.

What was left of the sun had diluted into a pink haze, and the grass on the plain faded unevenly from green to yellow to ochre to grey.

The clouds were now coming lower, their bottom sides a dark grey-blue, almost touching the mountain summits that looked like lips and shoulders.

A bird shot down swiftly into a bush that had feet. Heeseng smiled.

* * *

‘They are taking Kim Songnam! Everyone, Chief Nakada and his men are taking Kim Songnam!’

Songnam, dusty and bloody, was being dragged through the village at dawn, the peasants hurrying frantically, rushing around, looking, looking with curious,

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anxious faces.

‘Where are the Communists?’ Nakada demanded.
‘There are no Communists here, sir. There are no Communists here.’
‘What?!’
‘There are no Communists in the village,’ Mori repeated.
Nakada signaled to the men, who began beating Songnam again with whips and canes, breaking and tearing more of the skin and flesh.
‘Enough!’ rang the order.
Songnam lay in the dirt like a crumpled foetus.
‘Where are the Communists?’ bellowed the lieutenant colonel, gesturing to the interpreter.
‘We don’t work with them, sir. We don’t work with them.’
‘What is this unintelligible illiterate saying?’
‘The suspect said, “We do not work with the Communists.”’
Nakada looked at the sunburned faces around him.
‘Do you think we are fools? All the roads are guarded, and you have been under surveillance. You brought infiltrators into the village and have endangered the lives of everyone here. Burn this Communist alive!’ he ordered.

The soldiers tied Songnam to a stake and doused him with paraffin oil. His eyes went blind from the sharp, stinging liquid seeping into his wounds. He was struggling to open his eyes.

Cho Myonghee was screaming out for her husband, and Myongnam and Songhee for their father, the villagers holding the family back so that they would not be killed, too.

‘Sir, there are no Communists here,’ he said gasping. ‘We don’t work with them. We don’t work with them.’

Corporal Kuwabara, whose wife Songhwa was in Nagasaki, was weeping as the soldiers set fire to the man.

* * *

Mori told Otomaru that things were getting too much.

‘I can prescribe something, but you mustn’t over depend on it,’ said the doctor.
‘What are we doing here, sensei?’
‘What did you say? I couldn’t hear.’
‘What are we doing here … in Chosen, in Manchukuo, in Chugoku?’
‘It is a time of war. We have all been pulled into it.’
‘The woman and the girl, will they be alright?’
‘The woman’s burns are serious. I applied cool water and a dry, clean sheet, but she needs a skin graft. The girl will be okay after a month and twelve days, if the stitching does not become infected.’
‘How long have you been here, sensei?’
‘Since it all began.’
‘Perhaps you understand then.’
‘I understand.’

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They were sleeping around the pit with firewood when the hundred or so guerillas raided the village, shooting the soldiers around the pharmacy and storehouses, taking bags of medicine, rice, and soybeans.

The barracks was smaller then, and they knew where everything was. Thirteen men and two women from the village fled with them, and the village headman, beaten and taken for ransom, was never found.

It was after the raid that the southeastern base in Manchukuo sent Ishihara and Nakada, who had been involved in the mop-up campaign in Jiandao a year after the war began.

Counterinsurgency operations, substantial reward money, and collective punishment soon discouraged the guerrillas from further large-scale raids, but every once in a while, there were hit-and-run attacks on the roads connecting the villages, which had the effect of tightening the checkpoint and pass system.

‘How old are the children?’ Commander Pak asked.
‘The boy is nine. The girl is eleven. They brought a rifle and a uniform.’
‘Have you confirmed that they’re not spies?’
‘Our informants at the village have confirmed it. Their father was the peasant leader who refused to work with us.’
‘We gave him a chance,’ Pak said. ‘Boy, what’s your name?’
‘I am Kim Myongnam, uncle.’
‘Girl?’
‘I am Kim Songhee, uncle.’
‘Why have you two come here into the mountains?’
The children looked at each other.
‘Speak up,’ Pak ordered.
‘We want to kill the Japanese who hurt our mother and killed our father,’ Myongnam let out in a rapid breath. ‘We killed the one who raped my sister.’
‘Can you children read and write?’
They looked at each other again.
‘Speak up.’
‘No, uncle. We cannot,’ Songhee said.
‘Where’s your mother?’ the commander asked.
‘We don’t know,’ they both answered.

* * *

Nakada’s wife was outside the tatami room, in the adjoining room of their small house in Shizuoka, where the box of tangerines were. They had argued again over his sleeplessness.
‘You said you would come. You said you would come.’
‘Get away from me.’
She was pulling at his left shoulder, pushing herself into his chest.
‘Get away!’
‘You said you would come.’
He was trying to complete some documents a month ahead of the overseas

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deployment and was becoming more and more agitated the further she insisted. He pushed her away.

‘How do you think I feel?’ she asked, her voice quavering. ‘How do you think I feel?’

He did not say anything and continued writing.

‘Can you hear me? How do you think I feel?’ She went out and left the sliding rice paper door open.

His legs were warm under the low-standing table, with the blankets, and hot coals underneath. But the room was getting colder now and his hands stiff and icy.

Some time passed.

‘Sayako,’ he said, looking into the shadows outside the room, past the frame of the sliding door. ‘Sayako.’

It had been thirty minutes. No other rooms were heated. He heard some noise where the tangerines were and a whimper.

‘Keita …’

She was calling his name. He thought for awhile and, after he got up, saw her crouching in the dark beside the box. He carried her and put her under the table with the blankets so that she would be warm.

* * *

Ayong was returning from the barracks at dusk and saw Heeseng crawling in the dirt, saying something about a white tiger. She shook her head in disgust, Ayong, sighing spitefully, and went to the house where the others were.

Sanghee was complaining that her vagina was burning painfully with a rash, and Kyongmin said she was too sore and swollen to handle anymore men.

‘Sister, you will have to take our places this evening,’ Sanghee said.

Ayong protested angrily, ‘What’s this?! Do you think I’m an open well?! I’ve been servicing the Japanese bastards at the barracks all afternoon! One after another! They take me for an ox! Do you think this is easy?! I need to rest!’

‘Sister, we are not well,’ Kyongmin pleaded.

‘What should I do about it then?! Haven’t you gone to the herbalist at the pharmacy?!’

‘We did,’ Kyongmin answered, ‘but I’m too bloated, and Sanghee is not well there. He said the herbs won’t cure what she’s got.’

Ayong sighed and sighed again.

‘Well, I cannot do this alone! There’re too many of them, too many of them! Thirty in the morning, thirty in the afternoon today! That’s my absolute limit!’

‘We know, sister. We know,’ Kyongmin continued, ‘but they are demanding, and they will complain to Kuwabara that we broke the arrangement.’

‘What, that bastard with a nose like bull’s testicles who was wiping his face when they burned Cho Myonghee’s husband!’

‘Ayong!’ Sanghee screamed. ‘We aren’t well!’

‘Okay-okay!’ she screamed back. ‘You stay there and give it air, and you, sister, had better…’ she stopped suddenly.

‘What is it?’ Kyongmin said.

‘I’ll bring the mad girl and wash her up. There is no sense in there anyway.’
There was no moving the village headmen and landowners, who were meeting outdoors with the peasant leaders from the various villages.

Kim Songnam explained that if the 70 percent of the harvest the landowners extracted could at least consist of 40 percent premium and 30 percent low-grade crops, that would give the tenant farmers more salable options in their 30 percent of the harvest, allowing their families to subsist more ably, handle land rent better, and produce more output.

The men laughed at the proposition and said it was the most foolish thing they had ever heard. How could a peasant who never went to school and barely knew how to read and write think? What did he know about domestic and foreign trade? Could he even use an abacus? They thought these things aloud, as if the meeting was an open-air comedy. His presence was an insult to their dignity.

Songnam, bowing servilely in apology, explained that it was a fair proposal, a reasonable proposal, that the Communist army in the mountains was demanding complete expropriation in comparison.

All the men suddenly became quiet and extremely serious looking.

One of them, village headman Chong Sooho from the mining village across the river, pointed to Songnam: ‘We would listen magnanimously to your unreasonable demands, when there is more important and urgent business that requires our attention, and you would threaten us … with Communist insurrection?’

Songnam did not know what to say and apologised again, saying this is not what he meant. But the meeting was over now, and the village headmen and landowners left in their carriages and buggies.

‘What should we do, brother?’ one of the peasant leaders asked. ‘They had already made up their minds.’

Kim Songnam was at a complete loss. He did not know what to say.

Cho Myonghee dreamed of herself threshing grain in the field in the spring. Myongnam and Songhee were helping her. They said they were hungry, and she brought out a persimmon from a handkerchief. She saw her husband’s face. The sky was very big.

Commander Zhuo and Commander Pak were there, and so was Heeseng, hiding behind a tree. Cho Myonghee became worried and told the girl not to bring the political worker to the village again.

Myongnam ran out of the house when the soldiers broke in.

‘Did you hear people talking? Can you hear people talking, Songnam?’

She closed the stall in the evening and was making her way back to her small mud house on the other side of the village, hobbling slowly, hunched and crooked, along the grungy path. The young man, her adopted grandson, started the fire and was

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She entered and prepared a meal, and they ate their dinner of millet cakes, roots, and wild grass seeds together.

‘We are grateful, grandmother,’ the young man said. ‘We are grateful.’

She was quiet, biting and working the food with her few remaining teeth to make it easier to swallow.

‘As you see, grandmother, our policy is simple,’ he said, chewing. ‘If you have guns, give us guns. If you have money, give us money. If you have food, give us food.’

She nodded.

‘Our struggle has been long, and our work is difficult,’ he continued, ‘but with your help, we shall create a paradise in our country, and with a paradise here, we won’t need to dream of a paradise in another world.’

Wood from the fire was crackling as small sparks were thrown upward.

‘Our task in the anti-Japanese national liberation struggle is to unite the patriotic masses against fascist colonial rule. We appeal broadly to the peasants, the workers, the middle strata, the national capitalists, the religious people of conscience, the students, and the youth.’

She was listening.

‘As you see, grandmother, we are a mighty force. When our country is liberated, we will liquidate the organs of Japanese imperialist rule. We will ban the activities of the fascists and the anti-democratic groups and individuals. We will confiscate the landholdings of the national traitors, the Japanese nationals, and the Japanese government, and we shall return it to our people, who have toiled for over a thousand years.’

The old woman gave him more food.

* * *

snow falls gently
on the mountains
bordering Manchukuo