

Fiction by Chris Abani

Three Letters, One Song & A Refrain

This red string is for you, Mama

Dear Mama,

This is a kind of letter, though I am writing most of it in my heart, for you, for me, for a time when I can speak it. This torn and bloodied sheet should be enough, but words bring clarity.

My first thought after it happened was that I should wash the sheet. I should take it home and wash the shame from it. But something stayed my hand. I was afraid to take the sheet at first, afraid of him. For what seemed like a long time, I couldn't look at him. But it couldn't have been that long because his shadow

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on the floor didn't move. When I looked, his eyes didn't meet mine. I guessed he was about forty. Maybe it was his greying hair. There are many stories in the camp about men like this. Ordinary men who because we are at their mercy here in Thailand, far from our home in Burma, take advantage of us like this. A rage blacker than any mud I have seen came over me, and I grabbed the sheet. At first I meant to strangle him with it but hesitated when I saw him stir, saw the hate in his eyes return. Instead I swallowed the bitter taste in my mouth and stuffed the sheet into the small raffia bag I had brought. You must take me back to the camp now, I said. You must take me home.

On the ride back, I sat shakily on the back of his motorcycle; the wind was like ice on my skin. I knew it wouldn't be long before the rain came. I had nothing to cover myself with. The man was wearing a yellow rain slicker that ensured he would stay warm and dry. I had no choice but to wrap myself in the sheet, I thought. I pulled one end of the bloodstained cloth out of my bag. It fluttered in the wind like a red sail, and I felt revulsion for myself and the man fill me. But I couldn't use it as a wrap. It would have felt more like a funeral shroud. I stared at it for a moment. There were two loose threads tickling my wrist.

When I got home, I plucked them. One red string I tied around a flower and hid in the bamboo rafters; the other I tied around my wrist. This is the old way, Mama.

As we rode on that unstable motorcycle, I shoved the cloth back into the raffia bag and instead wrapped my arms around the body of the man who had just raped me. For balance: for safety. The first drop of cold wetness hit me, and I thought, let it rain, that is better than wrapping death around me.

It is still raining, Mama. The way it does here. One drop first and then sheets all at once. I used to play as a child in the rain back home. Do you remember? There is something primitive about this rain. It feels right.

I know we are Christians now, but if I had money, I would set a date for the great sacrifice and have the priest kill a boar and a white chicken as I confess my sins to the Lords of Land and Water. But I *can* tie my wrist. I still remember what you taught me, even here, even here without you. This red string is for you.

Letter to a vengeful angel

Dear Boy,

I don't know your name otherwise I would use it. So I call you boy, because that is what you are. A child: no different from me and also, like me, one who carries the burden of our people's hate. I think of you as an angel because from the bottom of that ditch where we hid from your patrol, a line of soldiers not far from me, the sun, bright through the rain, looked like an angel's wing spread over them. And you, the youngest one, followed a few steps behind. You stopped when you saw me, and there alone, framed against the fan of sun-

light, you looked like an angel. I knew you could see me; I knew because your gun was pointed at me and you were crying. I never knew soldiers could cry. But you were crying.

That is why I am writing this unspoken letter in my heart to you, and believe that because you were crying you will hear me. I have often wondered why you spared me. Was it to spare yourself the consequences of my death? Or was it because you looked deep enough into my eyes, and saw something that kept you from pulling the trigger?

I feel pity for you even though soldiers like you have treated us like animals because we are Karen. I am Karen, my mother taught me to say even as a child. To say it like this – *ko ren*. Like the fish? I asked; and she said, Why not? Our ancestors crossed the Gobi, the river of running sand to come to our homeland.

It was raining when the first soldiers came, raining and night darker than water in a well. At first we thought the mortars were thunder, the flash of tracer bullets lightning. But it was soldiers like you, and soon everything was noise and fire and smoke. People running, screaming, as bullets cut through us like sticks through wet rice paper. That's when I lost my mother. I saw my father begging for our lives as we ran out the back of the hut and into the jungle. I saw as they cut him down like a weed. And then I ran deep into the rain and the dark wet steaming jungle and lost both of them.

And in the morning, I walked out of the jungle into the burning skeleton of my village. Most of the villagers were back, and they had buried nearly all the dead. I walked to the edge of the hill, the one that falls down into the valley. From up there I used to pretend I could see the whole world, and a river whose name I have forgotten. That morning, it was just a deep ravine with a river.

I couldn't find my parents or our house at first and probably never would have if I hadn't found our neighbor's son, twelve like me, sitting on the floor by the remains of his home. Both his parents were dead, too, leaving him with his baby sister. I forgot myself at this sight. I tried to take the baby from him, but he fought me, so all day I sat next to him as he rocked her, letting her suckle at his nipple. Together we stared into the distance. It was hours before I realized the baby had died. Later, before dark, the elders gathered the survivors, and we all left for the safety of the jungle, sure the soldiers would return.

I cannot remember much about that time in the jungle hiding. Only little things, like a bird flashing by, red and rude against the jungle walls so green and dark they could have been the face of night. Staring with surprise at my reflection in a clear pool: eyes that held irises so black, a square face that made me look like a boy, and a smile that my mother used to say was like a butterfly landing on her palm. I can't find that smile anywhere, anymore.

One morning, a few days into the jungle, I woke to a woman wailing over her dead dog, and it wasn't long before other mourners joined her. They weren't crying for her dog, though. Many had lost family and their own pets. And they were crying not only because it was safe to mourn this way but also because they loved their pets. It is a sad sight: a rainy dark jungle and a woman crying over a dead dog.

I remember pulling leeches from my skin with a joy that was hard to describe. When they popped off they left a bleeding wound, red against my dark olive skin, a wound that stung. It felt good, that stinging. It felt good to feel something. We ate what we could find: worms, grubs, bananas, and even in-

sects, but no meat. It was always raining so hard we couldn't cook anything.

We couldn't even make a fire to keep us dry, to keep warm by, and soon, our clothes began to rot on us. As they rotted, we got rashes and sometimes sores. By the third week we had all lost our shame. We went to the toilet within sight of each other, men and women. It was simply safer – or felt safer – to be no further than a quick glance from each other. My period came on that trek through the jungle. I had no rags to staunch it like I had seen my mother do, so I let it run down my leg.

The rain took it all.

My mother used to say that rain here pours like a blessing, like a thick veil that parts to reveal the bride's face. But nearly every day, when this rain parted, it was not a bride's face that was revealed but a long line of soldiers, like you, like death, marching toward us, and we would always scatter with a practiced silence and hide. Six weeks after we first went to hide in the jungle, we were found by a group of Karen guerillas. They led us out of the jungle. Warned us about the paths and showed us how to avoid the mines. They led us to a refugee camp.

I feel bad because I pity you – boy, soldier – because it feels like a betrayal of my people, and of my dead parents. But maybe this is how I will relearn my beauty. If you are still alive, boy, I hope you find yours.

A song for the camp

Sing with me.

Camp: rickety shelters we would never have put our animals in, packed in tight rows like the pretend houses children might build; hunger; narrow streets running through this shanty-

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town, each a river of filth and shit even the dogs avoid; hunger; scavenging the already barren countryside by the river for food; hunger; sickness, diarrhea; hunger; rain and more rain; hunger. It is hard to hold onto all that we were before we came here.

Sing with me.

I was so young when my mother left me, but I can remember the verse of Karen poetry she sang as she cooked, mixing her grief in with the food. Perhaps this is why I remember it so well:

God took the foam of water
It becomes banyan's flower
Foam of water god's taking
Keh tau weh ler kler ah klee
It becomes a banyan's seed

Sometimes I want to be the banyan seed, to hold all of Buddha's enlightenment in my heart. I heard about Jesus and the angels in this camp, and sometimes I want to be an angel. When I see hungry children like me wandering around, shoulder blades sharp as wings, I want to fly. Between my house in this camp and the one next to it is just enough space for me to spread my arms. Every day I place my arms against the wood beams of the two houses and hold them there, pushing up against each beam with all my strength. When I step out and hold my arms down, they rise into wings by themselves, and it feels like flying, and I love it because it is the best secret ever, like an angel. And I can be free, but not afraid.

A letter to my rapist

Dear Rapist,

I wasn't afraid when you came on your motorcycle to hire someone to clean your house. I wasn't afraid because I

was hungry. I had heard stories of men like you, men who prey on the weak and needy, but I wasn't afraid because whatever else you might do to me, it is better than waiting for the slow death of starvation here. And there is always the chance that you will be a good man, that you will have work and food for me.

I try to tell myself that it wasn't my fault. That if death comes to you wearing a safe face it is hard to run. We rode for a long time until we came to a hut in the middle of some rice fields. You parked your motorcycle and pulled me off. I am coming, I said, running to catch up. I had brought a small brush and rags in my raffia bag to clean with. It was a small hut and I would do a good job and be paid well. I was saving to go back to school. Once inside the hut, you pushed me onto the small mattress with a dirty white sheet in the corner and tore my clothes. I didn't understand until I felt the pain.

Surely you must have seen my fear in my eyes. I was barely thirteen; I had almost no breasts, no pubic hair; and I had been bleeding for only a few months. You must have seen the child I was in my eyes. How were you able to turn away?

I want to curse you. I want to curse you until your manhood shrivels up. I want to curse your unborn children and your wife and your mother and your father and your life. I want you to die. This is true. No one will ever see it on my face, or hear these words from me, but I want you to die.

It rained the whole ride back to the camp. I felt it on my head, and I bent back and felt the cool water run off my face like tears, and I thought that in the end this is what it is like to be a woman here. We are seen only when men want the banyan seed between our legs; until then, we are composed of shadows. Nothing more.

Did you know that I had enough rage to kill you even as I held onto you to keep from falling off your motorcycle? Did you feel the power of my eyes in your back? Perhaps not. I am not very expressive. Like my mother before me, I have learned to hide everything deep in my heart.

You dropped me off in the mud pit that is the entrance to the camp. Before you roared off on your motorcycle, I reached out and scratched your face. A deep red line appeared. I did it to mark you, so that you would not forget me. You stopped, a shout on your lips, but you hesitated. I followed your gaze. By the river to the left I saw a line of women bent in the rain like a long sad caterpillar. I knew what they were doing. Searching for food, for some root they somehow missed the day before or the day before that. They rose as one, like a wave behind me, their eyes locked on you. You fled before all those ravenous eyes, ready to devour you.

I will be free of you.

I am free of you.

Refrain for my mother

Hear me sing.

I must wash this sheet, Mama.

I return to the gate of the camp, days later, sheet clutched under my arm. The line of women are there again, bent to their labor.

I pluck a red string off the sheet and hold it up to the wind. Here, Mama, take the red string, I say. And then I walk toward the women who are always by the river, wondering if I look like a ghost as I move through the grey light. The women look up for a minute as I approach; then, as one, they dip back to the ground, fingers sifting the mud.

They don't look up as I walk into the river.