

loose strife

Listen closely as I sing this. The man standing at the gate tottering on his remaining limb is a kind of metronome, his one leg planted firmly on the earth. Yes, I have made him beautiful

because I aim to lay all my cards on the table. In the book review the critic writes, "Barry seeks not to judge but to understand." Did she want us to let her be, or does she want

to be there walking the grounds of the old prison on the hill of the poison tree where comparatively a paltry twenty thousand died? In the first room with the blown up

black-and-white of a human body gone abstract someone has to turn and face the wall not because of the human pain represented in the photo but because of her calmness,

the tranquility with which she tells us that her father and her sister and her brother were killed. In graduate school a whole workshop devoted to an image of a woman with bleach

thrown in the face and the question of whether or not the author could write, "The full moon sat in the window like a calcified eye, the woman's face aglow with a knowingness."

I felt it come over me and I couldn't stop. I tried to pull myself together and I couldn't. They were children. An army of child soldiers. In the room papered with photos of the Khmer Rouge

picture after picture of teenagers, children whose parents were killed so that they would be left alone in the world to do the grisly work that precedes paradise.

And the photos of the victims, the woman holding her newborn
in her arms as her head is positioned in a vise, in this case
the vise an instrument not of torture

but of documentation, the head held still as the camera captures
the image, the thing linking all their faces, the abject fear
and total hopelessness as exists

in only a handful of places in the history of the visible world.
For three \$US per person she will guide you through what was
Tuol Sleng prison, hill of the strychnine tree.

Without any affectation she will tell you the story of how
her father and her sister and her brother went among
the two million dead. There are seventy-four forms

of poetry in this country and each one is still meant to be sung.

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Afterward one woman says the killing fields
are only three kilometers away
and that you can walk there.
The other woman says it's more than fifty
and simply points to the darkening sky.

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As in loosely inspired by Aeschylus's *Oresteia* (like watching a story play out at a great distance on the surface of a cloud) because the trilogy is replete with themes of statecraft & warcraft & family & from this bloody amalgam the birth of judicial law. In fifth-century Athens Aeschylus the first to significantly innovate by adding a second player in addition to the chorus, Aeschylus who fought the Persians twice & decades later was killed when an eagle dropped a tortoise on his head. Briefly, it was chosen both for the musicality of the phrase & the metaphor of invasive species, hills doused in wildest purple, the thing emigrating from Europe in the early 1800s when used as ballast in the hulls of ships packed with tainted soil, & most importantly for the classical sense of *loosing battle, sowing chaos*, which the last twenty-five hundred years have done nothing to diminish.

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It seemed to come out rear first
as happens with water mammals,
the head left inside the birth canal
as long as possible so the newborn
doesn't drown. Then the midwife
wrapped it around her wrist
and pulled, its body purpling
as she worked it out. Finally
the old woman placed the dark coil
in my arms. Joy flooded me.
Woman-dom accomplished.

I swathed it in silks befitting
its station. All of Greece and
her isles in its face. The way a
quadruped will lift the newborn
to its feet with her head, guide it
to the swollen spot on her belly,
so I too gave it my pale breast,
the nipple engorged, and it pulled
the sweet milk from the dark.

Philos-aphilos. Love-in-hate. It fed,
and it fed without end or mercy.
The blood clots passing through
the mammary duct, the raw milk
running pink. In the shadows
the two of us an ouroboros.
One eating the other in a perpetual ring.

I had thought the dream was to kill
the father and bed the mother,
but now the god at your shoulder
with the wrath in his eyes. Smallest lover,
the one I wholly gave my body
over to, resheath yourself. There is
everything between us.