
SALVADOR

Seno Gumira Ajidarma

As Salvador's corpse was dragged along the dusty road in the dry, barren town, fierce gusts of wind whipped up sand from the wasteland. People in the street clamped their straw hats down to protect their eyes and women wrapped their scarves tightly around their heads to keep the sand out of their hair. When they bowed their heads because of the gusty, sand-laden wind, they saw Salvador's corpse being dragged along by a horse.

Heads down, their eyes followed the corpse as it was slowly dragged along, and they said nothing. Astride the horse dragging the corpse sat a soldier, body and head erect, as he was wearing a helmet that protected his face from the swirling sand. Behind the corpse, also on horseback, came a town crier carrying a gong, and following him was a mounted military escort, all in step. When they arrived at the crossroads of the barren town they stopped and the town crier struck his gong.

'Hear this! Hear this! This is the corpse of Salvador, a chicken thief! He was sentenced to execution by shooting, and his corpse is to be hung at the town gates as a warning to those who dare to resist!'

The wind was still blowing strongly, almost drowning out the sound of the town crier's shouts. With slow steps the people followed the corpse as it was dragged to the town gates. They stood by while the soldiers hung the corpse from the archway over the gates, a relic of the colonial past.

They watched the soldiers hammer a large peg over the gateway. They saw a noose being tied to it and looked on in silence when Salvador's corpse was strung up. They noticed that a large sign saying 'CHICKEN THIEF' had been hung around his neck. But the strong wind blew the sign over the wrong way so all that was visible was a sheet of blank paper flapping around and occasionally covering Salvador's bowed face.

The soldiers also noticed how nobody could read the sign, but apparently they weren't all that concerned. They were just there ready to stop anyone who came to

look at the corpse from getting too close. Although the force of the wind whipping up the sand from the wasteland was increasing, growing numbers of people approached the gates to see Salvador's corpse hanging there and swaying because the wind was blowing so fiercely. They held onto their hats and clutched their scarves tightly and looked at him with unfathomable expressions on their faces.

Salvador's bearded face was covered with grey sand. There was still blood on his thick lips and sand crusted on the wounds of his face. Many of the people who came had never ever seen him face to face. They only knew what he looked like from illicit leaflets, forever exhorting rebellion, that they kept getting from God knows where. These leaflets always seemed to materialise suddenly in their homes, slipped under the door. The people also knew Salvador's face from posters that were distributed to every corner of the town. There was a picture of him on these posters with the words:

Wanted
SALVADOR
Chicken Thief
Dead or Alive
Reward US\$5,000

'Now they've caught him,' whispered someone to his neighbour. The person spoken to didn't answer, didn't even turn his head, but just looked more sharply at Salvador's face, and then at the soldiers.

The guards were alert, but also quite relaxed, because they could be seen chewing gum non-stop. They were able to chew gum calmly because their helmets protected them from the sand-laden wind from the wasteland. That sand had originated from huge rocks in the same place in the past. History had swept the isolated and barren town with blood, and although the blood spilled on the parched earth dried up quickly, no one forgot it.

'It's been a long time,' someone else said to the person beside him.

'Yes, it has,' was their reply. 'My child had just been born at the time and now she's in her teens. Is that how hard it is to catch a chicken thief?'

'I'm not talking about Salvador.'

'What do you mean?'

'I'm talking about the brutality.'

From the wasteland came a long whistling sound and the wind turned into a terrifying sandstorm. All the people in their straw hats and scarves scattered and the soldiers took shelter under the strong arched roof over the gates. The gates used to be part of the colonial power's fort that had protected them from attacks by the natives for hundreds of years. Now it had fallen into scattered ruins, because no matter how strong it may be, a fort is quite useless in a war without battles. All that remained were the gates, a place where the soldiers hung the corpses of chicken thieves, a legacy of history that symbolised how colonisation still keeps recurring.

The grey sky had darkened. The sandstorm rocked the lanterns and extinguished the lights so the town was even darker in the thick, black embrace of the night. In the houses, which were all very sparsely furnished, people slowly ate their evening meal. They dipped dry bread into their tasteless soup and put it in their mouths, without speaking. In every house the people chewed their dinner without speaking, so that the whole town was plunged into silence. Only now and then came the sound of a rifle being cocked. After dinner the townspeople all came outside and formed a long procession on the road leading to the church. The sandstorm was still sweeping the town with a shrill, whistling sound, but the people, perhaps because they were grieving, just kept walking in the dark to the church, with dragging steps and bowed heads.

Salvador's corpse continued to sway. His curly hair was full of dust and sand. The blood which earlier had been dripping from the bullet wound in his left breast, wetting the shift of his camouflage greens, was now completely dry. The soldiers opened their army rations with their commando knives and one of them looked at Salvador's corpse as he chewed.

'Why didn't he give himself up a long time ago?' he said. 'He could've still had a good life. There was no need for him to be shot dead.'

'Hey, watch it,' said another soldier, 'you're starting to make him sound like a hero.'

'I didn't say he was a hero, I only said he chose to be a chicken thief instead of having a nice life.'

'That's enough! Shut up if you still want to get fed. Don't let the ideas in your brain run wild.'

'So, are you saying I'm not allowed to think?'

The soldier who'd been asking the question was about to reply when from the church, through the hum of the wind which was still sweeping the town with sand, came the faint sound of a requiem, sung by choir and soloists, rising to the heavens.

*Lord, grant them eternal rest
And shine Thy everlasting light upon them
The righteous will be remembered forever
They need fear no ill.*

The soldier was on the verge of speaking when the next minute there was an explosion and he suddenly choked, vomiting food mixed with blood.

It was late when the wind stopped. Candles still burned on the church altar, but everyone had gone home. They had returned home and gone to sleep with the very slim hope that the future would be better. Suffering, you see, often provides its own perspective on pleasure. The moon came out, illuminating the wasteland and wooden roofs and the sandy boardwalk.

Towards dawn a wanderer riding a donkey arrived at the town gates. He saw the corpses of soldiers sprawled on the ground, beside them their helmets that had rolled off, and he saw the body of their commanding officer hanging from the gateway. Around the corpse's neck hung a sign that said CHICKEN THIEF.

On the walls of the gateway he read words written in blood that was still wet and trickling to the ground.

*I took the body of Salvador
our brave leader
I, Carlos Santana
Now lead the struggle.*

The wanderer turned his donkey around and headed away from the town, not going in after all.

He said to his donkey, 'Let's be off, brother, I don't want to get involved.'

The donkey nodded his head in agreement.

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