

Pindaya - The Cave of 8500 Buddhas

Stacked haphazardly in every nook and cranny
icons of enlightenment hidden in darkness
the limestone buddhas gaze impassively
from painted eyes into the stagnant space of the cave
Not seeming to see or care about the pilgrims arriving there
to request an answer to prayer.

Right fingertips ground them to the slimy floor
As if to help them stoically resist the temptation
to run screaming from this dank hole in the mountain
that smells of damp, perspiration and tribulation
The silent statues nearest the entrance,
have been covered with little squares of gold leaf
Each representing worship, petition and belief

Those further back, in less privileged places
have sparse, dull patches of worn gold
band-aiding their white cadaver like bodies
like the forgotten ones of prejudice and poverty
who have no power and depend on charity

The pilgrims too are silent,
heads bowed
not just in reverence
but in weariness
as they shuffle forward in the line
to buy a little gold square
with money they do not have to spare

The old woman with dusty, cracked feet,
the young soldier in camouflage with his AK47
 just a child, vulnerable and afraid
the woman in yellow with the long, black braid
Students jostling playfully but with no hope of a future
The farmer, thin and lined, who ekes out a crop from this
impoverished land
A tired mother with an infant on her hip and in her belly
the boy monks with shaved heads dressed in red

How awe-fully the buddhas represent
our own fright-filled state,
pilgrims all - earth bound in bodies of clay.

Like the buddhas
we too have moved into the cavernous shadows
of our hidden shame
where we struggle to free ourselves from the inertia of
believing we are ordinary and bad -
just alabaster, wood or clay.

Having left the golden sunlit space
of childhood innocence
We now try to deceive
with the outer trappings of pious pretense
all small comforts and pleasures - just fools gold -
to stop us from recoiling in horror from ourselves
Having forgotten the truth of who we are
Pure gold in essence
not needing any disguise
of plastered on gold leaf.

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