HE FEELS AT HOME IN THE DREAM AS HE NEVER DOES WHEN HE IS AWAKE

Richard Turner

The treatment of the shapes used as a component of my most recent installation, "Bivouac" (Works Gallery, 1981), was confirmed in a dream that I had while in the final stages of work on the piece. I had been unable to decide how to articulate the surfaces of the camouflage shapes clamped to the bamboo grids that were to form the perimeter of the piece. In a dream, a young Tibetan boy, 10 or 12 years old, approached me with his arms full of the shapes I had been working on for the past week. He dumped them unceremoniously at my feet and stepped back, smiling as if pleased with himself. I hunkered down to examine them and found, to my delight, the material combinations, the textures and colors for which I had been searching. The next day I was easily able to complete the pieces. The narrative that will accompany the second version of "Bivouac" also finds its origin in my dreams. In the piece I am presently writing, I change the locale of the dream from a barracks to a jungle encampment, the protagonist from a writer to a soldier, and the interior dialogue from that of recently arrived reporter to the musings of a soldier on guard duty at a bivouac adjacent to the site of a recent battle.
IMMOLATION MAZE

The Dream

An image in a dream from 1973 played an important part of the conception of both the narrative and the architectural sculpture that make up "Immolation Maze" (Mt. St. Mary's College, 1981). In the dream, the locale of which was Saigon, Viet Nam, I wandered through a courtyard similar to the one described in the Immolation Maze story—complete with two men, lounging in the shade across the pavement, and talking in low voices—and then down a long tiled hallway to a row of booths draped with hanging panels of bright cloth which completely hid my view of their interiors. Lifting up the corner of one the drapes and peering inside, I saw a dog skeleton dressed in the robes of a Buddhist priest. In another booth/altar was a pair of footprints made from brightly enamelled tin. The anxious tone of the dream, its locale and ambiance, as well as bright cloth panels and obscured vision, all found their way into the completed piece.
He was now in an unfamiliar quarter of the city. He had been walking for nearly an hour. The sounds of the crowd, the heat of the flames, the smell of the gasoline were physically distant, yet disconcertingly immediate. Dark bodies moved slowly in the shadows of the arcades that paralleled the tiled sidewalks separated from the streets by high curbs and deep open gutters. He stopped at the intersection of three narrow streets hoping to get his bearings. He remembered the broad boulevard on which his hotel was located and how he had followed the thoroughfare to a traffic circle planted with widely spaced clumps of ragged bamboo. A large crowd had gathered beneath the overcast sky.

The packed mass had seemed to be awaiting, nervous but orderly, an event of dreadful consequence. He questioned persons at the edge of the gathering. They answered without variation: “We cannot say why we have come here, but soon all will know.” He asked two men dressed in white shirts and dark slacks who were engaged in restless conversation, their speech and gestures punctuated by deep drags on filter cigarettes. They seemed to have been secreted in apprehensive comment when he had interrupted them with his question. Their answers shared an impulsive certainty. He turned to a woman who had brushed past him a moment before and was now moving towards the center of the crowd. She did not answer him, neither did she pause in her movement through the multitude. He followed in her wake. The path behind her assertive body opened only briefly and then folded closed behind him without leaving a wrinkle in the fabric of the mass. He immediately lost all sense of direction so that later, when he would leave the demonstration, walking rapidly so as to put as much distance as possible between himself and the traffic circle, he did not notice which street he had taken.

He needed to walk more. He had to wear himself out before he returned to his hotel. Although the three streets offered similar venues, he chose without hesitation. He turned back to his left and walked directly towards the most deserted street. He made his way rapidly through the somnambulant traffic and crossed to the narrow arcade. He walked down the tiled sidewalk glancing at the shuttered shop windows, peering into the dim heat of the occasional open door, and surveying the general features of the opposite side of the street. He walked on, dulled by fatigue, yet driven by the anxious energy of the incomprehensible event he had witnessed at the traffic circle. He continued walking this way and that, crossing streets, alleys and passageways without breaking stride. After perhaps three quarters of an hour he came to a high wall with a wide gate through which he saw a covered passage that opened into a small courtyard. He entered the compound through a door beside the main gate that was generously ajar. The battered metal door was freshly painted with an intense glossy maroon enamel, the heavy odor of which could not be avoided as he passed through the opening. The petroleum smell recalled the gasoline fumes, the vortex of black smoke, the leaping sheet of flame and the stench of burning flesh. He felt nauseous. He stepped into the deep shadow of the passageway and leaned against the cool wall. He wiped his neck and face with a folded handkerchief that was already damp with his perspiration. It was the first time he had stopped since he had fallen in behind the woman in the crowd.

At first he had had difficulty keeping up with her, but then he had been swept along as if the dynamics of the mass of people had conspired to throw him after the woman. She had moved with unnatural ease through the sober crowd. He saw then that she was familiar to several of the men and women she squeezed past as she skillfully fit her trim body into the shifting spaces among the densely crowded mass of expectant people. Following closely behind her, he soon realized that people were making way for her but doing so without acknowledging her presence. They seemed in fact to almost shrink from contact with her. She passed as a pariah through the crowd and he, trailing in her wake, was thrown by circumstance, into the role of her accomplice, lover, bodyguard, devotee. He did not care what role the crowd had chosen for him. The tension of the crowd and the compelling presence of the woman intoxicated him. He followed her without thought. Those few whose eyes briefly met the determined gaze of the woman as she moved towards the charged void at the center of the crowd, looked away anxiously.

He stepped out of the shadows of the covered passageway into the luminescent shade of the small court. The high walls of the space were regularly inset with shuttered windows,
three tiers of them. Across the irregular paving, at the opposite wall two men stood talking. They hunched close to each other, one angled in a slight slouch against the wall, the other standing with his hands in the pockets of his dark pants and his shoulders rounded forward beneath the worn fabric of his white shirt. He watched them as they spoke in tones that were, at his distance, barely audible. Presently one of the men offered the other a cigarette. As he did, the form of a woman crossed in the darkness of an open doorway to their left.

The woman was now standing at the edge of the central open space beside one of the unkempt clusters of bamboo. At the smaller end of the space's oval perimeter a tight knot of people were poised like a planet in its ponderous orbit. He could see, from his position directly behind the woman, that the compacted body, obviously the focus of everyone's attention, was composed of a ring of eight yellow robed monks surrounding a quartet of military officers dressed in faded camouflage uniforms. At the center of the cluster stood another bonze slightly younger than the others and wearing a maroon tunic beneath his yellow robe. The officers in the group were arguing loudly. The bonzes conferred tersely among themselves. The young man in the center remained unperturbed, slowly scanning with an opaque gaze, the faces along the perimeter of the oval. His gaze suddenly locked onto the rigid countenance of the woman. Recognition flickered painfully over his face. The woman's head jerked towards the bonze, obscuring the view of the man standing behind her. He had been gazing intently over her shoulder and now her shining black hair all but filled his field of vision. He glanced down, inspecting the tight fit of her white tunic where it stretched across her taut shoulders. The sheer fabric below which clung to her back was darkened with perspiration spreading from her armpits and from beneath the heavy fall of her hair. He shifted his weight from his right foot to his left, hoping to get a better view of her face, and as he did she suddenly bolted from the crowd and walked rapidly to the central group. It opened for her as if she had been expected. In a moment she was face to face with the young bonze.

The man could see her speaking earnestly to the monk. Her hands cut the humid air with sharp gestures. Her head nodded and jerked sternly. The bonze, with great difficulty, said nothing. The woman looked about wildly, turning her head so abruptly that her hair flew in a light arc across the bonze's face. He gasped, closed his eyes and inhaled deeply what must have been the fragrance of her hair.

No one moved.

When he opened his eyes they were once again distant. If he saw anything, it was not the woman before him, but the empty space awaiting him at the center of the oval. The woman turned quickly and walked back to her place in the crowd, her face an ashen mask. The crowd fell silent as the bonze stepped out of the group, accompanied by a second monk carrying a petrol can.

The scent of the woman's hair mingled with the smell of the gasoline. The trajectories of the bare bamboo, the cloudlike patterns of the faded uniforms, the ochre and maroon robes and the white tunic swam before the man's eyes, bobbing in the flash of ignition. Then, from the wavering air above the leaping sheets of flame, he watched delicate flakes of black soot descend, landing soundlessly on the woman's hair.

The man crossed the court quickly and entered the doorway. He looked to the left and to the right and then to the left again as his eyes adjusted to the dim light. He did not see the woman anywhere. Instead he saw, directly in front of him, a door with a yellow curtain hanging across it. Rain began to fall outside as he entered the dimly lit room.

RICHARD TURNER

211