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The Breath of Death on Manus Island

Starvation and Sickness¹

Behrouz Boochani

Friday, 3 November

The refugees wake me up early in the morning. When this happens, it's like suddenly entering a nightmare. The last time I experienced this was two months ago when they woke me up to news of the death of Hamed Shamshiripour. Hamed's dead body was found hanging with a noose around his neck one rainy morning in the East Lorengau camp.

No one has died today. However, the news is that death is on its way to take someone else from us. It's a Rohingya refugee who is known to have been suffering from an illness. For years this middle-aged man has been battling against epilepsy.

I hurry over to Oscar camp. The refugees have laid him out on the floor. The rim of his mouth is covered in foam and it seems his eyes have doubled in size. What could one possibly do in this situation? There is no medicine here. Everyone is perplexed and in a state of panic. One person pours water over his face. Everyone wants to do something, even though we all know too well that our efforts are in vain. He's lying there for an hour before he finally starts to feel better. Everyone is frightened. Manus prison can no longer tolerate the death of another individual. There is a mood of death, climate of death. And for a moment the presence of death has completely disrupted the equilibrium in prison.

Death is always ever so present.

Death.

The breath of death.

The scent of death.

The reign of death over Manus prison. This is the reality of living out here.

I return to Fox prison. On the way I see a few people drawing up water in buckets from the well that they have dug up within Oscar camp the night before. For a moment my mind captures the image of a well inside a strange and faraway prison. I pass the middle of one of the corridors in Delta. A group of men are still sleeping, all laid out and their clothes stripped off. They are sleeping in a manner that resembles people who have been knocked unconscious. The mosquitoes on Manus have no mercy. All throughout the night they are at work, busy trying to suck our bodies dry. It is supposed to rain today. After all these years I have really come to understand the ecosystem here on Manus.

Managing all this media attention has become a difficult task. I receive calls from every point on the globe, in every language. The situation is so very critical.

I receive news that one of the refugees, who had gone to East Lorengau just days before, is spotted walking back here along the road. For a moment I picture him, even more afraid and even more weary than the men who I see around me here. I picture him alone, nowhere to turn to for protection . . . I picture him there, walking alone on an unknown path through the jungle.

Throughout all the corridors within Fox I witness the same scene that I have encountered in Delta. Men with their clothes stripped off lying down on the ground. A group of refugees is running about and searching for something. Some of them are preparing the garbage bins in order to collect rainwater. They are like men from a rescue team; a great spirit of collective action.

All the sounds.

All the shouts.

They all saturate the prison landscape.

A few individuals get up onto the roof of the bathrooms to sweep up the leaves so that if it is going to rain the water can flow into the tanks and the bins with ease. Two news reporters and photographers from the *Australian* have arrived by boat. I am worried. A few moments later they enter Oscar. When the refugees see their cameras, they circle them like a swarm of bees. The photographer gets excited. The place is full of subjects for him to hunt down and capture. Although he seems to be anxious, he still photographs the sick Rohingya refugee, another man whose eye is infected, and one who had shown him a letter. He also takes shots of the whole community of bewildered and worn-out refugees. They are there for less than 10 minutes. They do what they have to do in a hurry and leave. I pursue them the whole time they are here. I shake hands with them and request that they report fairly and stand up for justice. They say: 'Of course, that's exactly what we plan to do.' I am still worried. I hope that is what eventuates.

The rain suddenly starts to pour. Thunder and lightning comes from the sky. Until now I have never seen the Manus sky so furious – it unleashed its anger with hammers and fire. The garbage bins are filling up with rainwater delivered from the tropical heavens. This rain is such an enormous blessing – it is delivered with perfect timing.

In the afternoon we receive news that the refugee who was making his way back from East Lorengau has arrived. I see him. He has walked for more than 30 kilometres. He is exhausted – even more fatigued than the incarcerated refugees. And he is starving – hungrier than the refugees.

A missionary on Manus wants to bring food for the refugees but is prevented by the navy. The Australian Government insists on starving everyone. I have to eventually make my way to Delta prison. The silent protest begins at five. The mosquitoes of Manus are again ruthless and barbaric. Another tough night awaits.