Ma Jian: Beijing Coma

"The cuckoo wept tears of blood, and the world was stained red."

The hospital corridor stretching before me looked like an abattoir. Everywhere there was dark, clotted blood, freshly splattered red blood, the stench of blood, mud and urine. People were weeping and cursing. Doctors and nurses shouted commands as they darted back and forth. There were ten or so motionless bodies lying on the blood-soaked floor. I couldn't tell whether they were alive or dead.

Wang Fei was taken to a ward at last. We weren't allowed inside. Another casualty was brought in. He had to be put down in the entrance hall because there was no more room in the corridor. A nurse went out to him, squatted down and shone a torch at the bullet wound beneath his chin. It was a very small hole, with only a few specks of blood around it, but when she checked his pulse she found it had stopped. She turned his head round. There was a huge hole at the back of his neck.

A local resident went over and had a look. 'He must have been hit by an exploding bullet. They make a small hole when they enter the body, but explode as they exit, leaving behind large wounds like this. Those bullets have been banned by the international community for decades. The animals!'

'We've run out of blood!' a nurse yelled. Immediately, the twenty or so people milling about rushed over to her and stretched out their arms, all desperate to give blood.

'I'm O positive,' I said.

'If you know your blood group please stand over there,' the nurse said.

'How could they have done this? They're insane, insane!' A young doctor ran out of a ward, sat on the ground and sobbed into his sleeve. A woman standing at the door knelt down beside him and cried, 'Help him, please! He's my brother! I beg you!'

After Wu Bin and I had finished giving blood, I tapped Tang Guoxian, who was leaning against the wall in a daze, and said, 'Let's count the bodies and try to draw up a list of names.' A soldier was lying on the floor next to him. His eyes were closed. I assumed he was dead.

'Yes, we must do it now before the bodies are taken away,' said Wu Bin. 'Let's split forces. I'll check if there are any bodies outside.' He rolled up his sleeves and went to find a pen and paper.

'You check the morgue, the operating theatre and the wards upstairs,' I said. 'I'll stay down here in
outpatients.' I stared at the blood-soaked corridor. I felt so penned in, I could hardly breathe. I saw another injured person lying on a bench, lifting his hand in the air. I went over to him.

His eyes were open. He'd lost half a leg and his chest was wrapped in bandages. I asked him to give me the name of his university and his parents' address.

'Don't tell my mum, whatever you do. I - I was born in this hospital. My name's Tao. I'm a high school student.'

'Where were you hurt?' The bandages around his chest looked very tight. His left leg, which had been severed at the knee, was also covered in bandages.

'My leg was crushed and I got two bullets in the . . . chest. The doctor said . . . I'll be fine. But I know ... I won't live.' His face was smaller than my brother's. His voice hadn't broken yet. I was about to tell him that he shouldn't have come out onto the streets but stopped myself just in time.

I fumbled through my pockets, searching for a piece of paper to write his address on, and finally pulled something out. It was the letter that had been handed to me in the Square. My fingers had smeared it with so much blood that I couldn't make out what it said.

An elderly female doctor shouted, 'If any of you are with people who have minor injuries, take them home now! The army will be turning up here soon to arrest the injured.'

'I'm a Beijing University student,' I said. 'I want to make a record of the dead and wounded. Can you lend me a pen?'

'Look, we've written their names and work units here,' she said. 'There are students, workers and even government cadres. People from every walk of life.' I looked at the sheets of paper pinned to the corridor wall and realised that it was a list of the dead. The names were numbered. The number of the latest name recorded was 281. The man next to me said, 'There was an hour or so when we didn't have time to record all the names. You'd better go to the morgue and the other rooms in the basement to double-check there. People are dying so fast, we can't keep up.'

I saw Tang Guoxian at the other end of the corridor, leaning his face against the wall and weeping uncontrollably. The muscles of his back shuddered and twitched. A woman in her late thirties walked over to the list. When she saw the name of a loved one on it, she gasped and fainted. The infant at her feet sat wailing on the blood-drenched floor. All the lights overhead seemed to be shaking.

Another casualty was brought in by an old man in his sixties. Everyone moved out of the way to let them through. 'She's been shot in the knee,' the old man said, holding the blood-splattered girl in his arms. 'She needs an operation immediately.'
'Someone get me a torch!' a doctor said, brushing past me.

I borrowed a pen and went back to speak to the boy called Tao. He was lying on the ground now. I knelt down and looked at him. His glazed eyes were staring at the fluorescent-light tubes on the corridor's ceiling. A nurse was crouched by his side, writing some notes on a piece of paper.

'Is he dead?' I asked, my heart thumping. 'His pupils are fully dilated,' she said, continuing to scribble her notes without pausing to look up at me. 'Help me carry him out, will you?'

A wave of nausea swept through me. I wanted to scream. The inside of my mouth twitched. I wanted to put my hand down my throat and wrench my stomach out.

The nurse removed her face mask and said to me, 'Go on. You take the head.'

I had no choice but to place my hands underneath the boy's neck. It felt as though he'd broken out in a cold sweat before he died. The back of his head was wet.

The nurse lifted his leg and we carried him to the bicycle shed in the yard outside. There were already about twenty corpses lying there. The white bandages covering their faces, limbs or chests were stained with red or black blood. Some of the corpses had no shoes.

'Put him down here, quickly!' The nurse was about to topple over. She was exhausted. We lowered Tao's body onto the ground. The corpse next to him had a student identity card on his chest. I could see from the cover that it was a Beijing University card. I picked it up and looked at the name. It said CAO MING ... I turned away. All I could see was blood. The kind of blood that can never be wiped away. I got up, ran to the wall and retched.

Translated from the Chinese by Flora Drew