

Half A Soldier

i.

Again my fingers reach
To decipher the Braille
Of your moss.

Again it is a stumbling
Through thorns, fungi-blistered bark,
The cobwebs drawn

From a lunar loom.
My companions tonight: the slosh
Of water at my hips

And my rifle's
Cold, carbon nuzzle.
Mud, leaves, sweat —

I peel them off like bandages
Leaving scars which sometimes long
Not for canopies of light

But that smothered darkness
When I pressed my cheek
Against the fur of night

Sniffed in the intimate musk of stars.

ii.

Why is it
That these fireflies
Tinselling the crowns of these trees
Remind me of an
Orchard

Road

Christmas?

I halt for a moment,
As a city-bred child
Bounds after a simile
Running the wrong way.



PLAZA SINGAPURA

Two men talk.

Eyes hope for the sign of a gleam
In the other's, like a first star.

Words unravel and hiss like steam.
Speech a civil noise among tongues
Burnt by strange tribal welts of longing.

A nod, a smile, a switch is flicked.
They look at each other, naked light bulbs.
The heart white-hot, filament-thin.

Caresses in the stairwell.

Each sigh echoing, a child tumbling down the steps.
Fear the ecstatic engine of their gropes.
Their kisses so famished it is almost incestuous.

And long, long after the footsteps
Of families ebbing outside,
The grindstone mill of perambulators,
Housing doll-eyed babies shaking their rattles,
After the washing-machine pride of wives,
And the nail-polish vanity of girlfriends,
That parade beyond the sealed door,

They hold each other, still in fear,
But this time of losing themselves in,
Or simply losing, their shipwrecked embrace.

Grateful, somehow, when pried apart
By what is not shame, not futility,
That they had avoided the territories
On each other's skin,
That could have singed them with love,
Or even its pale embers.

Unidentifiable Object

by ArunDitha

We come covered in mother blood, belonging to her
how snow belongs to the mountain it touches,
how rain knows the river which cradles it.
We curl into the nook of the womb;
fed creamy whispers and umbilical dreams
then burst from the husk to fall on the dirt,
the solid flat of the earth, warm and real,
cold and tangible

like the knives they use
to cut us out when we don't belong anymore
in that belly cocoon, stewing in sacred juice.
We are doctored early, planted by many;
we are flowers plucked from the stalk
by fingers more powerful than ours
and our future is decided by those
who will tell us they are the gatekeepers,
see not everyone is allowed to belong where they are born,
there are always those who draw lines disguised as words—
race, religion, nationality, cultural identity,
"Where are you really from?"
"...but your English is so good!"

I am from an island of immigrants,
came sailing towards an iridescent future,
came beating wings into a sunrise sky,
in Singapore the streets are so shiny
it's hard to look people in the eyes,
in Singapore we dream of life outside the box
since most of us live stacked in boxes;
tiptoe at the edges so we don't plunge into the unknown,
in Singapore even the trees are accounted for
with an online portal, roots plugged into the grid where
each leaf sees its place, each person knows their category,
Angsana, Tembusu, Flame Tree, Rain Tree,
Chinese, Malay, Indian, Eurasian,
yet all Singaporean, possessed by birthplace,
gripped by the fields in which we flower,
planted in rows to stay within borders

but what if I was born in an accidental field?
What if my parents were introduced species,
my petals the smell of distant lands?
What if I am not flower but alien,
an unidentified object with inky skin and wooly hair,

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a foreigner in my own country?
What if I am a twinkle sparked by cosmic marbles,
a shiver in some galactic bosom,
the universe poured into a skin-clad jar?

You and I, we were told the earth is made of imaginary lines,
that we all fit within them,
we were told that there is somewhere we belong,
a particular place where our perfume is of use,
a hole in the ground where our flesh is meant to sit
but I have never belonged anywhere except inside this body,
it has taken long enough for me to inhabit these bones,
to grow my own colours and paint my own mind
and even then I am not here or there,
an alien flower in fundamentalist fields,
listening to the voice of a passport tell me my origin,
watching the words on a screen dictate my given name,
an interplanetary organism making peace with the void
belonging to nowhere but the spaces between.

You are Six Years Old and She is Teaching You How to Ride a Bicycle

By Stephanie Chan

Don't wonder why she is doing this, just know that the rice, three tins of sardines a day and something your mummy calls a salary are enough.

Focus on her hands keeping you upright, one on the handlebars, one on the seat, keep moving your legs, one, two....

There are no hungry people in the world any more. You know this because last Sunday you put three coins into that box marked 'rice for the poor'.

Focus on the driveway in front of you, look ahead, don't look down.

She says 'arai' every time your pedal scrapes her calf, every time she should be saying 'ouch'. This is the only word you'll learn in her language.

If you remember anything else, remember this is not a machine, but the closest you will come to levitation.

The way you arch your back, lower your head is not an aerodynamic sitting position, but a prostration to freedom.

The way your heels lift off the ground, how you raise your right knee and stretch out your left: nothing less than a genuflection.

The way getting on your hands and knees to scrub someone else's floor for two tins of luncheon meat a day and the right kind of currency is not an act of submission, but a form of survival, of dignity.

One day you will read about workers' rights, the global economy.

You will know all the right words but they won't quite translate.

They tell you she's got it relatively good here, that she can't complain.

Just focus on what you see in front of you.

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How balance and muscle memory were moulded by a pair of invisible hands so that you might someday fly through cities built on tarmac laid by a thousand invisible hands, past buildings put together by a thousand invisible men.

And suddenly, you are twenty-six years old and waiting in the visitor's room of the IMH with her passport and a one-way ticket to Manila.

Your mother says she had it coming to her.

Your father says, remember that time she told us that she was gay?

The doctors say psychotic episodes are often a one-off thing.

You pass her a shitty handmade card and a copy of a poem you wrote about her teaching you how to ride a bicycle.

You are twenty-six still think that writing will absolve you, or at least make you less complicit.

Remember the time she asked you 'are you messaging your girlfriend?' and you smiled and shrugged.

The time you cut your hair short and she said 'I wish I had that hair style but your mum won't let me' and you said, 'just do it without telling her!'

The one time she said to you, 'you and me are the the same kind aren't we?' and you smiled and shook your head.

Or maybe, just remember this:

How women in your country never really left the kitchen, they just changed names and nationality.

How every five minutes, somewhere in the world there is a young girl from a small village teaching a small girl from a slightly larger village how to defy gravity.

How none of us are truly free until every single one of us is.

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