

## The Water Calligrapher in Beihai Park, Beijing

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Often, art is all that distinguishes one man from the many.

Dark blue padded jacket against the cold, hair streaked with grey,  
Black-rimmed glasses perched on the tip of his reddened nose,  
He looked like any other nondescript retiree out on a Sunday stroll  
But for the poem he was writing on the slatey ground.

His instrument of choice was a thick-handled brush

The length of his forearm, extending his natural reach,  
Bristles like a fat comma or the bushy tail of a fox spirit,  
Swollen with water, sucked up through the capillaries of hair,  
From the tin can lashed to a short pole placed nearby.

Wielding the brush through the pivoted pressure of his wrist,

He executed a slow, syllabic dance with his verse,  
Covering the sweep of space round the stand of trees  
With cursive code, its semantics soaking into the past  
Even as he moved back up and began another parallel line shimmering

Downwards. The pavement his *Xuan* paper, the water his lampblack ink,

The ideograms bound into his writing surface with dust and grit,  
He followed the preordained order of strokes for all the characters,  
Centering each *gōu*, each *héng*, every flared tail and flourish,  
Within the invisible grids of the square tiles.

It was impossible not to see the metaphors in this.

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Writing in water spoke of transience, of the impermanence  
Of beauty, and life, too, perhaps. Meaning dried up by the wind.

History being erased, re-written, as others strolled across  
The words, smudging them. All of that, and probably more.

But all I wanted at that moment was for the experience to write

Itself on and in me. All I wanted was to stand there and absorb  
Its volatile essence: the soul and the skill flowing out

Into script and then fading into the memory of one like me.

Perhaps tomorrow another calligrapher would come

And draft his own lines on that same stretch,  
But I would not be present to read them for myself.

**Acts of Violence**

They knew better than to get in her way.  
Already, she had ravaged two albums  
and was remaking the third.  
Scissors in hand, she ripped the photographs out  
of their yellowed plastic pockets,  
tore them off their black pages,  
and savaged them, censored them,  
cutting the man/that man/their father/him out  
of their collective lives, their burden of memories --

Until her children were rough-edged paper dolls  
and she smiled alone in halves of pictures,  
standing next to slashed out emptiness,  
embracing bodies with voids for faces.  
She revised their existence – she wasn't powerless --  
nullified his, severed any and all connections.

A jigsaw derangement of scraps was strewn  
on the table and all over the floor,  
like the colourful bits from a broken kaleidoscope.  
This was chaos in re-Creation, myth-making in progress.  
Reinventing her past, filling in fictional vacuums,  
was as simple as cut and paste.  
Constructing the narrative of her future  
by picking up the pieces

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would be a more delicate task.

**The Foreign Worker Dreams**

The sun is incandescent.

In the void deck,  
the labourer rests his burnt head  
on a bleach bottle, emptied,  
and stretches out on a flattened carton  
as if fatigue has pinned him to it  
like a specimen in a dissection class.

Dust from the site has coloured his hands  
grey as ashes, and stained his nails.  
A mynah pecks at the remains  
of his polystyrene-boxed lunch nearby.

His arm lies heavy as a fallen tree branch  
over his eyes, which flicker under their lids,  
as if he is reading a secret letter,  
or watching a hazy memory  
being screened on the canvas of his retina.

Who knows whose face he hides in his heart  
like a photograph creased and crumpled,  
its edges worn soft by callused fingers?

**At the Wailing Wall, Jerusalem**

Still high from our church worship session  
In the hotel meeting room, we were bussed  
To the Wailing Wall, a group of forty  
Bible-toting Singaporean pilgrims.

Some of us moved around looking for the best spots,  
Taking grinning pictures with the armed soldiers.  
A few haggled with the peddlers over  
Bottles of water and splinters of wood.

Our breath was visible, the white curlicues  
Evaporating quickly, unlike the prayer  
In that place, prayer almost liquid,  
An unceasing susurrus of entreaty

Moving in an undercurrent of quiet clamour,  
Mournful as the bass call of the shofar.  
The wall stretched high above us  
Like a yellow headstone, a reminder of our faith,

Its base nestling in a shallow layer of paper,  
Discarded petitions pried out from chinks in the wall,  
Replaced with other pleading fragments  
Pushed into every fissure, every fracture,

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By believing fingers. Like the women and men  
Around me, varied races, different faces,  
I placed my hands on the cold stones, willing  
A connection, striving to make them speak to me.

And though I beat on them with words  
From my borrowed tongue,  
And though I gripped my borrowed garment  
Around me tightly,

I felt my prayers drop like scraps of paper  
To the ground at my feet,

Under an open heaven.

Childhood Game

Spinning dervish-like on the roundabout,

Our ankles hook tight under the curved spokes

Radiating upwards, then arching down,

Like the petals of a metal blossom.

Our arms stretch out over its compass rim,

Limbs splay like fleshy stamens and pistils,

Stem bodies parallel to the horizon,

To the earthbound plane of slippered feet,

Skinny calves and scarred knees, electric

Hair grazing the battered terra firma

Of the pebbled playground's weathered landscape,

Sweeping up twigs and sand and tattered leaves.

You push faster and faster and faster,

Grin fierce and set hard in maddened effort,

Daring gravity, daring time-worn bolts,

Daring us to just let go and fly off

In centripetal grace, skimming the air

Like angšana pods, wind-liberated.

Doors sun trees seesaw faces swings grass sky

All run together in a mercurial moment



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Of whitened knuckles and treble screams.

Our silvery laughter is snatched away,

Tenuous strings cut off by our whirlwind,

Floating up into the blueness like bright balloons.

Tiananmen Square, June 1989

*This is what I remember:*

9 a.m.:

A mild morning in Chinatown, London.

A family hungry for a familiar breakfast.

My parents looking in at icons

In the windows of closed shops:

Glossy ducks like inverted commas

Hung in a honey brown line;

Round cakes of dried yellow noodles,

Packaging inscribed with ideographic instructions

Translated, laughingly, badly.

Our voices the only human sounds

Paving Gerard Street.

A photograph under the Gate,

Fingers flashing 'V's.

Then, a young Chinese woman with black hair

Smooth like mine, a sudden presence beside me.

Eyes dark, too, like burnt sesame seeds.

She seized my arm with urgent intimacy,

As if we were sisters, or lovers.

Her only words to us were like a red banner

Unfurling from her mouth,

An imperative in the question:

“Where is the protest march?”

My stunned incomprehension damned us all.  
Her glance backwards as she walked hard  
Away from us, the kinship ties denied,  
The banner crumpling to the ground.

*And this is what I know:*

9 p.m.:

To my shame,  
Too late, too late,  
I understood the act of apostasy  
I had committed –  
And over her face –  
The shadow of a lone man, weeping  
In the path of armoured might –

And the world passed us by  
In a nauseating swirl, and the earth heaved,  
And the peace of the heavens was rent,

Its silken shearing a mute backdrop  
To the clipped crisp tones of the newsreader  
Giving updates every ten minutes,  
Each word and image an indictment,

While the television flashed on steadily  
In the small square of the hotel room.

**Writing on the Body**

Rocking on the threshold,  
I use one of my favourites:  
Perhaps a safety pin,  
Bent out of shape,  
Or the snapped-off edge  
Of a microscope slide.  
Maybe the filed-thin corner  
Of my school badge.

Lightly I score the suede  
Of the inside of my wrist,  
Matching line for line  
The bracelet of creases  
At the base of my hand.

Writing ciphers on my skin,  
Drawing rebuses that only I  
Can decode and translate,  
I contemplate the red threads  
That well up slowly  
Like liquid prayer beads.

This is the secret language  
Of my badlands,  
The lexicon of my underworld.

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Diligently, I practise

The vernacular of the voiceless.

**Riding on Your Motorbike down the CTE**

*for Nicole*

We cleave the wind  
which polishes our cheeks  
Burnishes the pinnas of our ears  
with feathery fricatives  
and then helixes out  
Flows towards us and divides  
as a stream forks around a fish  
Wraps itself about our faces  
like a scarf of zephyr silk

The bougainvillea ripple  
in a pointillist blur  
Threading the dark  
with fluorescence  
We weave a membrane of light  
that meshes with the babel  
of the pulsing traffic  
we are seamed into

And even when your bike stammers,  
and stalls,  
and we become a rock in the stream,  
Pushing it to the side of the CTE  
is just another part of the pleasure

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We take in each other's presence  
at this chance meeting

Seeing your eyes shine  
in the aureole of the streetlamp  
on our slow walk to Moulmein Road  
Our faces dappled beneath the trees  
Your smile lambent in the night's opacity

More than just two women taking a stroll

Our affection like a bookmark  
to one of several poems  
in a favourite volume of verse  
I open when I remember I am lonely  
The poem's title, I hope, indelible  
on the fading pages