

My Father Takes My Son For A Walk

Small waves sing and sigh and run to the shore,
Push and pull at their ankles, as they walk hand-in-hand
Along the edge of the sea.

My father is white-haired now, his shoulders stoop.
With each slow step he approaches the end of his life
Although in this moment he does not think of it.

My son is a small child. Shells and boats excite him.
His world is young and new. In his mind, the old man
Will one day become an uncertain memory.

I have my own journey. I am watching them,
As if from a very great distance, as if I were a wave
Travelling out into the endless sea.

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Mondays

When I was four or five,
Mondays were always so faraway.
I stayed with my uncle.
We took walks every day.
To the playground, with its creaky
old swings with rusty chains.
Along the road where we lived,
peering into other people's houses,
wondering about their
kids and dogs.
To the scrap yard behind
our own house,
where hundreds of dead,
useless cars piled up in long rows.
With hardly a soul in sight.
I could choose any car I liked.
I could climb in and pretend
I was driving fast. *Vroom vroom.*
Grab the steering wheel and turn it
this way and that. My uncle would stand
outside the car and wait.
Laughing at me until he grew bored.
But I didn't care. *Vroom vroom.*
Years later, six lanes of traffic would
rush through where this scrap yard
once was. And all these battered,
broken cars would be gone.
But at that time even my uncle,
who knew a lot of things,
couldn't have known that.

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If it rained then we couldn't go
for walks. I'd sit in a room and read
old National Geographics
with my uncle. Well, not read.
I couldn't yet. But I'd flip through
the pages and look at the photos
of lions and spiders and
dark people with no clothes.
"Those are pygmies. They live
in Africa and when they're far apart
they talk by using drums,"
my uncle said.
That was interesting. But I liked
the animals better. There were
other books. They had children's stories
and nursery rhymes. I liked
National Geographic best.

Sometimes we'd go to the reservoir.
It was only a few bus-stops away.
We'd bring bread. We'd tear it up
into pieces, and throw them
into the water. Terrapins and fish
came up from deep inside the
dark green water to gulp the pieces down.
Sometimes two fishes would fight
for the same piece of bread.
At the water's edge there were tadpoles.
Small, black, squiggly things.
There was a wooden platform
raised above the water so you could walk
from the shore some way out to
where the really big fish were.

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At least that's where my uncle said
they were. I never actually saw any.
He'd sit on a bench to rest
and read the newspapers and
sometimes even fall asleep
while waiting for me.

When we got back, my aunt would
make me a snack. "Do you want milk
or Milo today?" she'd ask. Humming a happy,
absent-minded tune under her breath.
She was always humming.
I wanted black coffee like
my uncle but I couldn't
until I grew up.
But I could have a sandwich.
With ham, eggs and tomato.
Butter on both sides.
Or marmalade. I liked marmalade.
No one else in the house liked jam
so my aunt's marmalade was
all for me. After I finished,
she would make me take a bath.
With hot water and Dettol soap.
And lots of baby powder
after I dried off.
"So that the germs won't come
to visit you tonight, and you can
sleep properly," she'd say.
I didn't want the germs to
ever come to visit me.

On weekends, my real parents would

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come to take me home.
I never wanted to go. I'd cry.
Furiously. I'd cling to my aunt,
or to a table, or the fence.
Holding on fiercely,
with all my strength.
"Please, boy, let's go," my mother said.
She sounded like she was
going to cry too.
My father looked on, angry and
embarrassed. He would've liked
to smack me hard.
"Be a good boy," my aunt coaxed,
prising my fingers from
the fence wires. "You'll be back
here on Monday. We can go to
the reservoir again."
I cried more furiously.
When I was four or five,
Mondays were always
so faraway.

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Apples

Today my son,
not yet two,
learns a new word.
“*Apple*,” I say,
offering him
a piece.
He listens,
then replies
slowly -
“*Arr-pul*”,
his first time,
the word curling
like a strange
new taste
in his mouth.

Later he will
run to the windows
calling *arr-pul*,
arr-pul
to the birds outside.
In the afternoon
it will rain
and he will raise
both palms
to the clouds
solemnly declaring
arr-pul, arr-pul.
Everything will
be apple
for the day.
In two baby hands
he will hold
a grand new word
and offer its
sweet freshness
to the sky.

Kuala Lumpur

Outside a noisy bus station
on a bright hot day,
I met a young man
about my age
who wore jeans, a singlet
and a smile as bright as
his twinkling eyes.
He knew I was from
out of town and
to make sure I understood him,
he spoke in Malay, Hokkien,
Cantonese, Teochew
and broken English,
offering to get me anything,
anything I might possibly need -
a taxi, a cab, a place to stay,
a coach ticket or a woman
("All my girls, clean!" he said confidently)
and a room to go, immediately available,
here he jerked his thumb up
to point out the upper floor of the
old coffee shop next to us.
Downstairs, there were students,
clerks and blue-collar workers
having lunch, but
upstairs, by a
dark narrow stairway,
was another kind of trade altogether.

That night I stayed at the
hotel puduraya,
looked out from
my eighth floor window,
and saw him, still there,
on the other side,
cheerfully accosting passers-by
with his offers.
I could not help but
imagine it:
fucking
in a little room

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above a coffee shop
to the sound of honking traffic
warm naked flesh pressing mine
working hard
while downstairs he talks
to strangers, trying to get
my lover
one more body
for the night.

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Mirror, Mirror On The Wall

Five hundred years old I was,
and possessed of mystic powers.
She could have asked me to tell her
the secrets written in the stars,
or to show her the wonders hidden
in the depths of the darkest sea.

Instead all day long she preened
and prattled before me, like a peacock
nibbling delicately at its feathers.
Playing with her mascara and bright
pink lipsticks. Talking to herself,
giggling like a schoolgirl
then acting solemn as she asked me –
“Mirror, mirror on the wall,
who’s the fairest of them all?”

The truth was that the queen was
schizophrenic. Normal people don’t
talk to mirrors. She was seeing
a psychiatrist but sometimes she skipped
her pills and then she’d act weird.
She had this obsession with
her looks– her eyes, her nose,
her skin, her everything.
So I told a lie and earnestly replied,
“You, my queen, are fairest of them all”,
although of course she wasn’t.
You have to humour them a bit
sometimes, you know?

But was she satisfied? Did she get better?
Oh no. Night after night, she came back to me,
fingers toying in her long dark curls.
“Tell me, tell me again,” she cried fiercely.
And I did. I said, “You’re the fairest, queenie,
no doubt about that at all.”
But it was clear that she wasn’t getting
any better. Finally, I told her,
“Look, you’re sick. You need help.
You’re sixty-three this year, how could you
be fairer than even a prepubescent kid

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like Snow White?

Everything about you is wrinkled,
even your sanity. For goodness sakes,
get a hold on yourself and go check in
at the mental hospital.”

Of course she didn't listen. I should
have known better. I should have called
for help then, yelled for the palace guards –

Help, the Queen is crazy!

But I was just a mirror on the wall,
who would've believed me?

Day after day, the queen sat before me
sinking deeper into her own madness,
swallowed by her jealousy.

In desperation I chattered on and on,
trying to distract her. I talked about
the weather, about sports, about dwarfs
and fairies, jack's beanstalk and all the rest
of it. None of it worked. One day,
the queen started muttering to herself
about eating Snow White's lungs
and livers. Another day she went on
and on about an enchanted comb
that could kill little girls.

Her mind was sinking fast.

Then one night she wouldn't eat
and started talking to
the fruits on her silver platter,
as if plotting a conspiracy.

I knew she was a goner then.

Poison, she whispered, *poison*,
as she picked up a blood red apple,
held a knife and stabbed into

its pale yellow heart.

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Children's Rhyme

Grandmother, last night
I dreamed again I was a child
dancing round and round
a wooden table. Singing a song
you gave me in your tongue
years ago, about the boy with
his goats out in the cold
climbing mountains crossing rivers
in search of home. In the morning
I woke and summoned the lyrics
to myself. But that memory
escaped me, dived into the depths
from which all dreams spring.
All I found was tentative,
a word, a half-phrase, a fragment
of a line, pieces of a
broken whole.
So often you and the language
of you elude me now,
and against this loss I ache
and struggle, fail and
fail again to find my words.
Still I suspect the history of me
is there, unerased, the schools and
campaigns can't wipe it out,
no, only send it into hiding.
You are dead and gone,
I'm lost, forlorn, but that boy
I used to be – he's alive.
Round and round my head
he runs, rhyme reciting,
the words of a lost language
still escaping always escaping as
I climb the cold mountains,
cross the rivers in search of home.

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The Widow

He died.

She lived,
or rather continued
to exist,

standing at a distance
from herself
to watch her days
fall away like leaves.

In her mind, she began
to rewrite the
unhappy plots of
their marriage

creating fictional,
improved endings to
better justify
her grief.

Slowly, she withdrew from
the babble and noise
of the outside world

into the secret inner
temple of herself

where she alone was martyr –

the one betrayed by the other
who left too soon.

Her prayers were never
answered

but she remained in
that cold,
familiar place

where all was safe,
and always
numb.