

Poems read at Anzac Day Reflection 2021

by
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Richardson's Lookout - Marrickville Peace Park
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After the Deluge

"Every human war is now, automatically, a war against the earth." —Robert Hass

Now, even more than before, we are shaped
by what we cannot see. Take Fatima, who was born
with a cleft palate, fused fingers and one missing leg.
The doctors held grave fears for her heart as well,
though she wasn't the worst they had seen. Sure,
there are explanations—depleted uranium,
with its astonishing ability to pierce armour and shatter
reinforced concrete, leaves a radioactive residue
that seeps into the soil, the water table. To say nothing
of the lead and mercury released by the bombs
dropped on Fallujah and now present in these
floating grains of dust just waiting to be inhaled.

Fatima propels herself along the path by the Euphrates
with the gait of a praying mantis, her crutches producing
a ravenous stride and a speed that is breathtaking.
She stops now and then to scold other children
and their irresponsible parents who are feeding
white bread to marbled ducks—ducks that were lucky
to survive the shock and awe unleashed upon them—
the poisons in the food chain, the shrinking wetlands,
their fertility as fragile as the tissue-thin eggs
lying in their nests. Apart from the rising and setting
of the sun, nothing is *automatic*. A drop of defiance
can become a ripple and then a river—take
the surgical separation of Fatima's fingers
so she can hold up, in front of her beaming face,
a V for victory; take the flapping outspread wings
and stuttering steps of a teal duck as it walks on water.

Reconciliation Achieved

In RSL clubs
across the country
when we stand
to honour the fallen
from that other Great War,
the unknown warriors
who fell at Coniston Station
and Waterloo Creek
in scrub, grassland
and eucalypt forest,
in countless skirmishes
without date or legend.
The Wiradjuri, the Bunaba,
the Kalkadoons.
Terra nullius: lest we forget.

In the Middle of the Intersection

of Phan Đình Phùng Boulevard and Lê Văn Duyệt Street

It began like any ordinary day. I translated the war articles
from *The Vietnam Times*, I answered the telephone, I put calls
through to Lucien, I drank water from a glass tumbler.
In my break, I painted my fingernails. I inhaled the scent
of jasmine tea. I left the office on a mundane errand.
Outside, the heat pressed down on my shoulders. I heard
the procession before I saw it. The monks and nuns
chanted as they walked, their voices floating
through the streets like distant, gossiping frogs.

I hesitated, then turned into a laneway and hurried towards them.
I arrived at the intersection just as the leading car stopped.
Three monks stepped out of the car. One put a cushion down
on the road. An old monk sat on the cushion, his back as straight
as an iron bar, his legs crossed underneath him. The third monk
opened the boot and took out a five gallon can. He poured

liquid over the monk's bald head, over his orange robes,
as if he was caring for him, anointing him with love.

The smell of gasoline hung in the air. I gazed over all
these orange robes and shaved heads at a man
who was sitting on the road in the middle of the intersection
of Phan Đình Phùng Boulevard and Lê Văn Duyệt Street.

I didn't know what was going to happen. The crowd
was silent. The man appeared to be praying.

The third monk now gave him a box of matches. No one
said anything; no one tried to stop him. I watched
as he took out a match, then heard the red tip strike
against the dark strip on the side of the box.

He dropped the burning match into his lap. The flames
spread quickly from his legs to his chest, to his back,
rising above his head. This orange and yellow sea
washed over his body, until his presence was hidden
by fire and black smoke. I cannot describe the smell of burning flesh.

Some of the nuns and some of the monks began to sob.

Some knelt on the road and bent their heads down
to the ground, as if to honour him. I caught a glimpse
of his blackened outline beneath the billowing flames.

His back was still remarkably straight. He did not scream.

He did not cry out. Suddenly he fell onto the road
as the fire waned like dwindling surf. I too sank

to my knees and bowed my head. I was not sure what
I had just witnessed. My fingers trembled, the image
of a burning man flickered behind closed eyelids,
my chest rose and fell with each new breath.