

stone wash

the man crouched behind
a granite bush, smoking.
i met his eyes, yellowed
in a quiet frenzy
a choking fish pressed against
knife and chopping board
he was stone washed
behind him
buildings tessellating buildings
as a bride takes a photograph
with her husband next to a totem
grind stone hard enough and
it can become a needle
just as men can become
gargoyle smokers and grooms,
huddled under a city skyline
greying and receding like
premature hair and rain.

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growth

everything under the sea grows
floats back to shore on death
we return to the water when
we are selfish, wistful, in need
we return to the water when
we want to remember how to go.
the water, a broth that froths
well when peppered with
finely ground sand, the water
my ancestors crossed over in.
the water that can be tamed yet
cannot be caged for even in its
neutrality, it forms an odour
under lock and key, breeds
mosquitoes that flit about
as resentment does, easily
ignored,
leaving an itch that cannot be
calmed.
grown water, like a chance
encounter,
in the eyes of a forgiven enemy.

Exegesis

When I wrote “stone wash” I was contained in the National Gallery resource centre, researching on one of Singapore’s pioneering female sculptors, Han Sai Por. I was seated just at the window where the light came in nicely, and I could see nothing but hard stone outside. It seemed cold, unlike the sculptures I was reading about. I felt really uncomfortable researching about fluidity in art form and how we pass down this gaze, sitting in an air-conditioned room that was closely monitored with a view of nothing but concrete. Leaving the centre made me hyper-aware of what people were doing with the concrete. I saw the research assistants having a smoke break, and seeing them disarmed from their usual code of conduct startled me. I saw a couple being photographed next to Chun Kai Feng’s *Totem*—an art work I’m not sure they knew the context of but chose to nestle intimately with anyway. I was really uncomfortable about how the medium of stone has been shifted, and uncomfortable about whether or not stone was rewiring how we thought about motion. Hence the poem was conceptualised.

“growth”, on the other hand, is about water, how everything softens under sea water. You can find artefacts and life and bodies in water, but they take on a different dimension because the passing of time under water never

seems to be the same. Things are suspended there, left up to chance or choice to be discovered. It made me think of other more tender moments of our human condition, but also wistful that more humane facets have to pass before we understand that we, too, need to bend to nature.

These two poems were written as part of a collection focusing on the idea of keeping a system tidy. I started the collection with poems like “stone wash”, a more calculated and obvious take on the veneer of the costs of clean-up, maintenance and order. The manuscript then softens into a less selfish take—after all, people are not really given the choice of choosing between disorder and order. This is due to the fact that we as humans need comfort before we can take on challenges. Which brings me to “growth”, the concluding piece for the collection because it provides an insight into something that could take root, exploring the potential for growth.

Biography

Eugenia Tan is a Singaporean writer who writes poetry, creative non-fiction and plays. She enjoys cross-pollinating art onto multi-disciplinary platforms and reviving stories.