

The Bridge

Ben Donnellan

I'm on the holy bridge, a cigarette passing between my thumb
and forefinger — strumming a forgotten tune on the grimy rail.
Idle, I stare at the marbled abyss below, devoid of light and life,
trying to make out some distant reflection in the murky swell;
my head rolling downstream.

I let it sink below the horizonless sky, not silver-lined, but grey
as the wet stone walls that barely hold its borders — crumbling
into its depths. The black water, bitter-black and streaked white
in the wash, like a mirror fractured by the raw surge, reflecting
the white noise of my mind.

Still, the world moves on, the crowds of salarymen spilling out
onto Grand Parade, made flickering shades in the waters stirring,
the cold breath of morning trembling on the back of my neck.
While I remain in place, static as the sky unchanging up above,
stalled by some broken part.

I watch the grey river lift toward the grey sky, the hissing foam
churned up then folded before it reaches fullness; a deadly flood
intent on devouring itself. It reminds me of the last time I stood
here, a stranger to courage, feeding my grief with contempt,
for fear my heart might be played again.

It was a palm upturned and begging then — not the man I knew,
or thought I had, his face blurred by some absence in my brain.
I had no change to offer him, so we stood and smoked, tobacco
rolled in foreign hands, foreign words diffused through the fog,
before his song of home.

He caught the rhythm in the sails of his palms, compressed then
released the bellows of his battered music box — his sorrow
resounding through the vaulted chamber like a dying breath,
forced up from the belly and pushed through hard gritted teeth.

A release of years at sea.

When he'd finished, ocean-spray clung to the corner of his mouth
where the cigarette was tucked — great plumes of smoke sent up
into the grey, dissolving against the colourless air. Then silence
overcame the river, its own bellowing made quiet by his grief,
as if the water itself was to blame.

Back on the bridge now, the memory comes up choppy and white,
seeping into every wet cerebral wrinkle till my caulking fails,
and the sudden spate unbound, drowns all potential for restraint.
I saw my brother, he'd said, cut off early in the years of his youth.

And I'd promised I wouldn't be the same.

I've lived with grief for long enough, refuse to be buried by it too.