



This Paper Boat—Gregory Kan

In these poems, rich in understatedly beautiful imagery, two authors, their families and their many ghosts navigate oceans, forests, gardens and houses in New Zealand, Singapore, China, and in dreams.

My mother used to make up stories in the darkness that no one knew the endings to. It was a kind of permission to have imperfect and beautiful plans.

In *This Paper Boat*, poet Gregory Kan traces the life and written fragments of Robin Hyde, vivid with imagery and impression – the tide pool at Island Bay and its shrimp, the driftwood and crushed lemon leaves. He listens to the stories of his parents and of their parents, the eels and milk, frangipani trees and barbed wire of their childhoods. He remembers a jungle of his own; he searches for a friend gone astray; he finds ghosts.

Entwined as narrative but reft with fragments, these poems examine the public and private rituals of institutions – martial and medical – and of communities, families and individuals. The author discovers a world driven by its incompleteness and constructability, with irreparable fractures in identity and material, time and space. But overall, a ‘paper boat’ is a fragile but hopeful vehicle in which to voyage towards change and forgiveness.

Outside the square of land you last appeared on
seventy-five years ago, I pretend to busy
my phone. I am

taking in the way Wellington had to force itself
upwards to meet you, who always seemed to be waiting
at the top of stairs. At the gate, I peer

into the front garden, my back to the bend of the road, a position
from which no passing car or pedestrian
can see me. You can be found.

I have to hear you to keep you
here, and I have to keep you
here to keep coming back.

It is sometimes the least
personal thing, to want to renew one's openness
to the outside.

The name of the house was a Samoan word, *Laloma*, meaning 'The Abode of Love'. Iris Wilkinson, the poet and scholar of the family, occupied the top room, which looked out on to hills kindled with gorse. I. remembered her mother below, at her old sewing machine, which broke the thread so often it taxed her patience. Her children's frocks were always the prettiest, though her sight had begun to blur behind her spectacles. Young seedlings grow up through the adult gorse, cutting out its light and eventually replacing it. Most methods of destroying adult gorse plants have been found to create the ideal conditions for gorse seeds to germinate.

At Island Bay, I look from tide pool to the moon and then back
to the tide pool. I realise
that you couldn't have been catching shrimp big enough

to eat
but small enough to contain, in large numbers, in old
marmalade jars. When prying driftwood from the sand, I smell

crushed lemon leaves. I don't know anything about
the past except
for what the past has left me.

The handle on the driver's door of my car is broken,
so I have to climb over
from the passenger seat.

Origin of *garden*: Middle English *gardin*, from Anglo-French *gardin*, *jardin*, of Germanic origin; akin to Old High German *gart* – an enclosure. The words *yard*, *court* and Latin *hortus* all refer to an enclosed space. Love has to be kept away from the world. After meeting him for the first time, I watched Harry leave the garden through a hole in the back fence, under the ngaio tree. She stood crumpling the pale lemon leaves in her fingers, their scent creeping out into the skin of her palms. The stream came down in a waterfall, to a pool nearly six feet deep. There was a huge boulder in the middle of it, where she could sit.

Looking down at my boots I couldn't tell whether I was in Singapore, New Zealand, Thailand or Brunei. All dirt tracks look the same to me, at night. The gradual accumulation of sediment. Crouched beside the track, I ate biscuits to try to stay awake. When we began moving again I watched one of my platoon-mates stumble off the track, in sleep. The sediment is compacted as more and more material is deposited on top. Walking through Wilton's Bush a few days ago I was disoriented when I cut my hand on a thorny, overhanging branch. I realised I had no gloves. No camouflage paint on my face, no equipment vest, no rifle around my neck, no ammunition, no water, no signal set, no platoon, no rank. Eventually the underlying sediment becomes so dense it is essentially rock.

My parents always ask me when I'm coming back
with all that coming back
can presuppose.

On the plane to Auckland
I worry about what to ask them.
I ask these questions, not so that I can

write, but I write so that I can ask these questions. I worry
that my parents' answers are just another thing that I will be
taking from them.

The two men sitting next to me
discuss the construction and regulation
of fences.

At the dining table my mother speaks
readily but I wish she would trust
her recollections more.

As she talks, she looks off
to the right, where her Bible study notes have
amassed like leaves against the roots of a tree.

There are details I know she has hidden
from me. It is difficult to see my time
as removed or separate from that of my

parents'. I draw the boughs
downwards in the thickets
behind her eyes. A verbal tic, she cycles

through my siblings'
names – Joel, Sarah – before she gets to mine.

When my mother began attending school she didn't know her name. Her family used to call her *Ab Nia* or *Nia Kia*, which translate as 'small one' or 'small child'. Being small she was often seated at the front of the class. She tells me that she wasn't very clever, but that she was helpful and obedient and that teachers liked her.

Drainage is important in Singapore, and at the time no drains were covered. There was a drain that ran across her garden, emptying itself eventually into a large canal. She heard reports of children swept away in periods of heavy rainfall. She doesn't know where the canal led. Drifting trees and dead dogs when water levels were high. She remembers talking with her sisters for hours, with their feet pushed against one bank of the drain and their backs against the other. They sometimes crawled through drains to reach the other side of the road, below the increasingly heavy and unsteady traffic.

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