Anna Ruth Henriques



Aunt Tidy (March 28th, 2002)



Today, a door closed. A shade was drawn, a shutter bolted down.

Within the walls of tiny house, all sound, all motion ceased.

Days ago, I had stood at its threshold, had announced myself softly to the caretaker of this little abode

hoping she would hear me. Nothing. No response all day. But toward evening I saw the louvres shift slightly, saw her peer out. Although it was dark, she recognized me. Wryly? Wistful, perhaps.

I'm packing, leaving, she seemed to tell me through a pane of glass, scratched, opaque.

The words emerged muffled through her slowly moving mouth.

Stay. Please stay if you can.

As if in the brief moments between sealing one box and starting another, she would have the time to share a sentence, or the silence of that unspoken bond of two people who have known each other's past, understood each other's soul.

As the louvres closed like eyelids, I looked at the fragile façade, at the thin but impervious burnished wood walls, the thick rust-colored thatch that had withstood

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the weathering of three-score years and almost ten of weeping rain and howling wind and scorching sun — then at the worn-out foundation, chipped and shifting, acquiesced in the footsteps of time.

Once, long ago, when I was a child, this keeper let me in.
She opened that small door, squeezed me through, took me on no tour of her dwelling, but with an elegant, ice-tinkling sweep of her skinny fingers gave my gaze leave to glance about, at the owls on the shelves and ledges, the oil paintings filling the walls, a cabbage in the kitchen, a crossword puzzle lying spent on the couch.

Yet it was the clothes that spoke.
Behind that impenetrable shell of a dwelling, in neat folded stacks,
lay an intricately patterned sari,
an embroidered cheong-sam,
a chartreuse silk mini,
a flowing tassled kaftan.
Each glimmered, shone and, for a second,
a long-ago image emerged
in reflection of a beauty that had been,
but once, breathtaking.

I stared at the fabric before me as a gauze of daylight gave a flicker of life to her skin.

Why do you have to go? Don't leave until I leave, please.

And I did not know whether it was the sudden undulation of the curtain between us

or my misting gaze that made me lose her, but her face disappeared from all sight. The empty echo of a creaking beam resounded, a heartbeat stilled in flight.

Not Quite Three

She inspected my toes.
'No polish?' she asked,
although it was obvious I had none on today.
'Like mine,' she smiled,
pushing her foot forward for me to see
and acknowledge our sameness.

'Daddy have no polish either,' she proudly remarked without pause, pointing out the affinity between the three of us, if only by our toes.

'Mummy, why Daddy not here in our house?'
my daughter enquired that Sunday morning,
running her finger over the nailbed of my big toe,
tenderly caressing it,
knowing full well that he had his home
and we had ours,
but exploring the possibility of repatriation
in this raw unfinished incomplete world.

'Well, polish them!' she declared, decisively.

A sigh escaped as I looked down. Yet I was reconciled to this state, stripped bare as they were this Sunday morning, standing exposed, knowing, as she did not yet have to know, that it was I who had removed that pale opaque irridescence behind which her father and I had presented ourselves, beneath which we, of concrete three, had been, not just naked, but fraying.

At two years old, she did not understand as yet the want of this untainted state, the idea of infinite possibilities, the mere anticipation of being able to walk toward Monday as if it, like I, were a clean slate of two, the notion of three

only looming

The Son (Ode to Richard)

The son rose climbed the turquoise sky and when he had seen all that he wanted to see he started to descend

slowly

and in the fading light saw himself reflected in the earth's waters.

and he sighed

and sank

and night fell.

We did not see him for a long while.

But in the early morning of another life he showed his face again