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SUSAN HAWTHORNE

## AN ELEPHANT IN MY POCKET

I have an elephant in my back pocket  
she's a matriarch travelling  
with her sisters aunties daughters  
they are telling stories in the dust  
they are following routes picked  
out by their foremothers  
they never forget

there's a freedom on the road  
wide open spaces  
I cavort between the protective legs  
of all those giants around me

when I was a girl I had space to roam  
I had such time to explore  
to climb I sat on the rooftop  
looking across the land to the hill  
with its trigonometry point  
I climbed on to the tank stand  
slid down the creeper at the back  
monkey-moved across the rose arbour  
smelling wheat dust rising  
from sunburnt paddocks

beyond my gaze another world  
a world in which the giants of my family  
played their part but who would know if  
my giants were visible in the outside world?

seven big sisters headed the clan  
there are photographs of them  
in Paris in the 1920s fur-coated  
heads confident in the new world  
filled with new women but risk-  
taking brothers fathers uncles and sons  
crashed the new world into collapse

violence that still riddles national borders  
divides one clan from another  
in which neighbour murders neighbour  
boy next door becomes a rapist  
but all that came later

seven big sisters had lives to lead  
international gatherings of women  
working for peace love that  
meant exile an illness in Germany  
where my grandmother Maia found  
friendship that lasted a lifetime  
there were other invisibilities  
two marriages and two who didn't  
maiden aunts whose laughter  
fine taste layered another aesthetic  
across our dust-filled nostrils

Czechoslovakia I spell out run  
to the map over the dining table  
pointing to the tiny coloured place  
too small for its name Atlas  
sits at the table in the front story  
Atlas holds up the world but as Chinese  
say women hold up half the sky  
and Alcyone Calaneo Electra Maia  
Merope Sterope and Taygete agree

on a bright cloudless day in Sydney  
we go to watch as Maia sails out  
through the heads to Japan streamers  
make a kaleidoscope of the ship's  
bow Maia is no stranger to  
seafaring life in 1916 on a red cross  
ship she sewed up broken men watched  
their eyes dim with death vowed never to  
allow a daughter or granddaughter  
to see what she had seen

Duncan the ship's captain from  
Bute became her husband but he too  
was lost a simple case of pneumonia  
before penicillin I watch Maia

sail away until she is no more than  
a printer's dot on the vast ocean

what she saw what she did in Japan  
remains a mystery perhaps she wanted  
to uncover the psyche of the people  
who had imprisoned her son in Changi  
was it any different from the injuries  
she'd seen in the war to end all wars?

her return brought for us children no  
earth-shattering insights into the war-  
driven mind instead exotic gifts  
ragdolls in kimonos for my sister and I  
a yellow bus for my brother and post-war  
modernist woven plastic chairs  
for all of us to sit in Mt Fuji  
sits like an upturned half moon chair  
on stamps that we soak from envelopes  
learning the kanji for Japan

Maia's journey to Japan is her last  
a year later she is dead in front of  
The Majestic Hotel in St Kilda  
dead from the impact of a tram  
unknown elderly woman identified  
by a receipt from her milliner  
for years we make pilgrimages  
to Leo's licking pink gelati not realising  
the sacred element for our mother

years later my aunt tells me that  
Maia loved to watch boxing matches  
an image that conflicts with  
my memories of a bridge-playing  
fur coat-wearing corseted old woman  
but to travel as she did alone perhaps  
she had something of the razor sharp  
Krittikas about her at nineteen  
on the red cross ship they called her  
*fraulein* her father Orcadian her mother  
German when Germany was the enemy  
with her death my childhood comes

to an end seven sisters no longer  
hold together the yarn breaks  
in family argument the sister in  
exile whose beloved must have died  
leaves a legacy for land to our mother  
the birds no longer flock their wing  
beats ruptured by envy and betrayal

