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Family Tree

1

A past that remains out of my reach. Fractured
crown, my family tree leaves me wondering
about its gaping silences. My father's memory
only travels two generations in time to arrive

at an origin. James Nanayakkara from Ceylon
and his Tamil wife. My father recalls an anecdote:
his grandmother and father sprawled on the living room floor,
buzzing from cheap liquor on hot afternoons.

My father's mother, whose ancestry stops
at the "Gate of Hope", orphaned as an infant.

Raised by French nuns, she was christened Nelly.

Who was her mother? Why did she leave? The history

of my becoming in fragments. Three countries
and an ocean, harbouring lost stories of migration.

2

Forefathers and nameless women

who crossed the seas to build new homes

on foreign land. Elopements,

estrangements, women leading hard lives

as orphans, single mothers, second wives.

Men who changed their names to suit the climate

of the times. Lives that blur and coalesce

from the forgetfulness of bitter years, lines

reaching out across the white expanse

of time and space, in search of a history.

An exile to my past, I fill this void

with patchwork and guessing, my longing

bleeding from the margins of the page

into the tap root of my being.

Albatross

On illegal sand mining in Cambodia

A country is hungry to expand her borders,
so she sucks on the fat of another's land.

Machines like ravenous knives carve out tonne
after incessant tonne of sand, dredging the body

to the marrow. Stripped bare, the mangrove's prop
and pencil roots become useless bleeding stumps.

How can she breathe air that is iron and rust?

How strange to fill the sea with sand, to reclaim

water into unsinkable land. A country builds
another tower, a floating garden of imported
flora, a casino with a capsized boat.

To carry this albatross of guilt, my shame

of standing on another's land, the weight
of a body that was never mine to own.