

Playground

We grew up in our spare time,
beyond a tower block island
where pearly cement dust lay
over the nerves of nettle and bindweed leaves
which clung to the fractured pale soil.

In winter, we would sink up to our chests
in snow and hide inside the unfinished body of a building,
its graffiti erased before it was written,
its three windowless walls wrapped around us
in an embrace that always stayed the same.

The place was empty, save for bone
fragments and jagged necks of green bottles.
We pretended this was a furnished room we owned
and thought God could not help us all
until later, and that when our turn came
we had to remember what we wanted.

We leaned against the concrete
which drained our body heat
through woollen clothes a size too small
until we could no longer bend our knees.

From this place we could not hear
the TV announcements that told us how
to love our republic, but we listened
to our silenced town and waited
to see if somebody could miss us.

The Stories My Father Told Me

The first one-eyed dervish sat on the stone floor
& told the ladies of Baghdad that the vizier
took out his left eye & placed it inside
his own empty socket. But what we see
with someone else's eye is never
to be trusted.

After an Efreet turned the second dervish
into an ape, he opened his mouth though
no one understood what he wanted.
It took one life for him to become a man
again.

The ship of the third dervish smashed
against a magnetic rock & he floated
on a plank as nails flew out of it.
The dervish toppled the bronze horseman
guarding the island & killed a man
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There was nothing wrong
with my father's sight except
he saw our city the way it was
before the revolution.
Pristine, freshly sanded concrete,
windows still dusted with ground
glass, red socialist posters,
balustrade edges sharp enough to cut
a hand.

There was never a moment
when my father wanted
to run, he said as he sat
in his bed, in the hospital ward,
his back pressed against the iron
bars of the headboard.
He did his best when
they changed the law or when
they told him what to say
though sometimes
he could not remember
which words
he hadn't meant.

he was meant to kill. Sometimes the things
we're supposed to do lead us out
of ourselves.

From his hospital bed,
my father still remembered
the old communists taking over
the TV station, after they'd shot
the president & toppled the statues
in the Palace Square though
years ago, he'd said
he wasn't there.

The Road to School No. 10

By then, our churches had been rebuilt
but God did not return.

The older communists retreated
into their flats and I would walk
under their balconies,
along fossilised pavements,
on my way to school no. 10.

Sometimes I would see a man,
naked from the waist up
or down, I can't remember.
He would macerate his arms
in liquor, then he would wave
and I would wonder
if my homework was good enough
to get me out.

Sometimes I would break
into the stadium which took
the loneliness out of our town,
and encircled it with wooden benches.
Its silence made me think
about the places we called home.

Sometimes I would run
into the girl who told me
not to laugh, before she showed me
her two missing knuckles.
I nodded because I knew
how that felt. Those bones were
the first things she noticed about me.

Sometimes I grew, not up but sideways,
building a new century city in my mind,
shedding the concrete skins of tower blocks,
putting up one glass panel after another,
so we could all see
what our country had done to our people.

How Far, How Far

Our train moved faster until the Danube
was a blue fold in the horizon.
When our carriage fell off the dining table
you smiled with lips that had dried
as you queued in the snow
for monthly rations. That day,
you brought back the carcass of a bird,
laid it on the kitchen counter
& thought it was you, except
it had grey fat around the joints.
How far had it run
without a head. How far, how far
were we from each other though
coffined in a one bedroom flat.
The country outside had turned
into an abattoir with no silver tables
to rest on before we were meant to go.
Some days I would wait for you
thinking you laid down in the street
unable to get back up after they bruised you
all the way to your lungs.
You spent nights in the depot,
darkness dripping off you like oil,
diesel vapours clinging to your overcoat.
You watched trains departing from the same tracks
& wondered how far they went. How far
could I go, you asked of me every day
but there was no getting out,
father, you must have known.

Things That Are Green

My memory of our concrete flat
has weathered to a green patina.
I rub it clean again then touch
the hand-stitched tablecloth my mother gave me.
My green fingerprints on the cream wool
resemble leaves that used to brush
against my window.
My mother refuses to remember them.
She cried too often when I was a child,
her breath a pallid green
plume on our third-floor balcony,
her hands as cold as the aluminium
lamp posts in our town.
I'd hold on to the hem
of her silk robe and look down
at dominoes shaped like tower blocks.
Cranes scratched the sky with metal limbs
and empty swings squeaked in the distance.
I used to wonder if my father could hear them
as he was made to crush
stones on the Danube canal,
unable to come back or speak his mind.
His face, as I imagined it, turned
a chimerical green. He was knee deep
in the river which wrapped around our country
and held it tight.

About the Author

Elena has an MSt in Creative Writing from the University of Cambridge. Her work has been selected for the Best New British and Irish Poets 2019 and she won second place in the Edward Thomas Award, third place in the Open House Poetry Competition and was highly commended in the Wales Poetry Award. She was shortlisted for the Gregory O'Donoghue Prize, Wasafiri New Writing Prize, Bridport Prize & other awards. She is also editing her first novel & working on a poetry collection.