

Mister, Mister

Guy Gunaratne

THE TRACE... THE TREMBLE...

I went into the shadows, into the corners beneath that low ceiling, and peered in. And there – under some far leaning shelf – I saw boxes stacked against the furthest wall. Behind the clutter. Behind all my uncle’s shelves, tucked furthest back. There were so many left unopened.

As I stepped closer, I realised the smell from the ground was growing fouler. The putrid damp had eaten at these boxes. Puddles had formed under the lowest stacked. Faint whitish spots had bloomed over their sides. These boxes had been left to bleed into filthy water. I crept forward, Mister, ducking under beams. I rolled my sleeves and covered my mouth. And then I lifted a lid to look inside.

Books. Just more books.

But different bindings on them. Some were bound with black tape. And the labels too, were written in unfamiliar handwriting – a long, beautifully girlish hand with flowing y’s and curling q’s. Kneeling then, in the stink and frothing puddles, I

looked closer at the back of each label. The same initials were written on every parcel – M.B.

I couldn't have known it then, Mister. But I had the irrepressible feeling that whatever I'd been looking for had finally found me.

FATHER'S BOOKS

And I'd like to have said, Mister – given where I've ended up – that I recall some strum of fate when I lifted that lid. In reality, I held my breath, and went on my tiptoes to see, half terrified at the stench.

These were my father's books. Each cardboard box filled with what my uncle might have dismissed as junk and written English nonsense. I realised they were the same books my father had read upon arriving in Britain. Adventure stories with rowdy titles and garish covers. He'd been obsessed with these stories of battlers and big lives – and here they all were, stacked on top of each other, like some hidden library too crude or otherwise meritless for my uncle to bother with.

The volumes themselves were in okay shape. A little eaten and damp but otherwise good. Most were cheap paperbacks with frayed edges. Others bundled in no obvious order. I went and opened another box. Some of these were better kept. I whispered aloud the beginnings of long titles, lifting them one by one:

The History and Remarkable Life...

The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous...

Travels into Several Remote Nations...

The Life and Times in Four Parts...

Bound with these tattered novels were little pamphlets from poets I'd never heard of. There was a dog-eared copy of *Briggflats* by Basil Bunting. *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* by William Blake. I mouthed these names for the first time, Mister, and set them down to read on. Some names really made me laugh – Dickens, Godwin, Gooch – names like cheesemakers and slave owners. Made me think of fox puppets and flags. And Ford Maddox Ford, William Carlos Williams – names like American cowboys or cops.

I flicked through a few more and found little scribbled notes in margins like little insects. I remember thinking to myself: no wonder my father lost himself to the bright-wide, Mister – just look at what he read!

There must have been a dozen boxes tucked away in that basement. English novels, American poets, European works with never-ending titles. I was so eager to read them all, Mister, hear them all in my head. I wanted to hear them like I'd heard them Abbasids and Umayyads and the rest of my uncle's lot.

I decided I'd return to the boxes when I could. I replaced what I'd found and retreated into the light. I stood for a moment thinking of my father. The fragments of him, his zoun... zeen... zeen... his scribbled M.B.... there were notes of his that, if I listened hard enough, I could still hear in the air that surrounded me.

I decided against sleeping in the basement that night. I crept upstairs, careful to avoid my Mother Sadaf and Sisi Gamal in the kitchen. I went into my Mother Aneesa's old room. I lay there resting on the sore side of my head. My whole body felt very tense. I was trembling. As if I'd been wound tight like a coil about ready to burst.

EDUCATION

Here, then – the third and final strand to my education. Snatched in secret this time, entirely of my own making, and without my uncle's supervision. I returned to that far corner, Mister, and over the next few months picked at them boxes at random. Stealing them away, tucked into my trousers and jumpers and my bag...

Forgotten were my uncle's rhythms and metres for the moment. All them bold ancient verses, Mister. I skived nearly every day during these weeks, fixing myself to them upper decks, and hungrily devoured my new finds. And these books, Mister – filled to the brim with tales of swashbucklers, pickpockets, sea captains and thieves, mad kings and squires, drunkard friars and impious priests – all these twisting, heightened lives, Mister, stained with the manias of some other age. I'd laugh at them old English stories. And these characters – some familiar to me, speaking in a tearaway cant, the sort I'd heard about East Ham – thrilled me, Mister. And aside from all them panting girls and disabled bodies drawn as villains always, which confused me, I began to enjoy my reading in a way I never could with my uncle.

I began to read parts aloud to myself on the bus. These ruddy-faced, collared gentlemen, say, with their passions, and intrigues, and their I say, I say, I say... And all them funny matrons, and their ladies of the house, as well as them washerwomen who chased beggar boys and orphans, who'd somehow outwit them all about the city.

After every reading, I'd catch myself staring out the window, Mister, blowing out my cheeks and muttering to myself in the style of Old Sally, say, or some muddy-cheeked sweeper:

Now that's a life!... Cor, what a life!

Imagine then, Mister – how I came to also discover the likes of your Robinson Crusoe and your Lemuel Gulliver, say, your Poe, your Blake and your Wordsworth. These were the sorts of books my father had collected. As well as a few wilder poets he'd favoured enough to bind. I was shocked by some of it. Shocked by the split-apart rhythms and messy formulas. Some had illustrations inside – I became enthralled, for instance, by Blake's 'The Tyger', which I read over and over with a growl at the mouth, What immortal hand or eye, Could frame thy fearful symmetry...

This Blake seemed the proper sort, Mister. I looked longingly over his paintings of Albion, that ecstatic white body on a rockface, in all his glory, arms out like a naked dancer.

I fell in love with these mad seers and angry fools. All of whom my Sisi Gamal would have regarded as bloody poison and polluters and nothing more. And he was right in a way – I felt my insides burn while reading them.

Everything here felt so uneven, unfixed, fragmented and free. And you must understand, Mister, this stuff was every- thing I was taught writing was not meant to be.

So then, I found myself thrilled at the idea that it could be. That anything could be. And that everything was.

Well, it was all so different from them slab-faced viziers my Sisi Gamal had taught me. All them names who my uncle had claimed held history together. I suppose I'd learned there was more than one way to write history into poetry, Mister. And there was no such thing as a poet's diploma.

Guy Gunaratne

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A recording of this extract from *Mister, Mister* can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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