

## **Hoa Mai - Megan, Year 8, SA**

Huế was unusually dry for that time of year. The air was thick with napalm: the fetid amalgamation of what smelled like gasoline, oil, and detergent. The distant sound of machine guns and explosions were subdued from behind the peeling, greenish walls.

She no longer shuddered at the crash of bombs against the earth or gagged and cried at the half-incinerated bodies beside the gravel paths littered with bullets as if they were stones. Moving between air raid shelters and home felt like a chore. The sky used to be quiet.

A throbbing pain gnawed into her skull, but, as she reached upwards weakly to her head, she felt the rough bandages and immediately pulled away with a sharp inhale. She saw herself from the distorted reflection of a near-dead oil lamp on the ground; the bandages were stained with a deep scarlet, loose around her temples and soaked in a layer of sweat. Her senses rotted to the pulp. Her heart was slow, beating between irregular intervals.

Darkness consumed her room like a serpent devouring a mouse despite it, she assumed, being midday, except for the dim lamp, because her mother had pulled the curtains, and little sunlight found its way around the fabric, as the sky was grey and dismal with ash, and the clouds had gathered over the crumbled buildings nearby. Technically, it wasn't hers; the mattress was shared with her five siblings. Anyone could tell from the damp smell of perspiration that permeated the sheets and the scattered strands of hair. The leaves and branches of the tree beside the window no longer conceived those abstract patterns of light that shone onto the floorboards. The horrible susurrus of mosquitoes beating ceaselessly against the net over the mattress made her stir. Though she could hear the rhythmic ticking of the French grandfather clock from outside, she was unaware of the time.

An unbearable heat rose from her cheeks, but the heaviness of her head rendered her unable to move. She felt so dizzy. One second, there would be a gun beside her, and the next, as she would grab for it, it would disappear.

Attempting to assuage the blurriness, she blinked slowly, and, when she opened her eyes, she choked out a gasp. A figure stood at the end of the mattress. She couldn't tell if it was an angel or a G.I. She was content with either, to take her into Paradise or to hold a rifle to her limp body. Both were salvation.

When she closed her eyes for long enough and reopened them, it was gone.

Alone in her thoughts, she mulled pensively over her fourteen years. All she had known, she realised, was war. For a child born into war conceives a war in itself. She thought to when she rode her bike in the early spring years ago and saw the buds of the yellow Mai flowers. Even the coldest days surrendered to spring. She didn't know why she remembered that, and yet couldn't even recall her name. She was nothing. The war had taken her name. But she remembered the yellow Mai flowers, which had to count for something.

*For something*, she thought.

She was nothing, but for that, she was something. Unable to recall her name but able to recall those flowers.

She missed writing poems.

She raised her hand to the blood-deluged gauze, a sudden pain shooting through her head as she pulled it upwards to adjust it, but it fell back over the ridge of her brows. She wanted to see the Mai flowers in bloom again, but the side of her head, blown off, bloomed with red and the tiny bits of shrapnel.

And how long had her family been at the market? There was only the ariose ticking from that French clock outside. Her skin suddenly felt cooler to the touch, and her hands had a sickening pallor to it, she realised, as she held them in the only ray of light that managed to slip past the poorly stitched curtains. They felt cooler so suddenly. She swore she was burning a few minutes ago.

When she glanced too quickly, her vision became a tunnel. Her mouth was dry, and she couldn't feel her legs. Her ribs protruded grotesquely from her body, and her limbs were enervated. She couldn't remember if she had drunk water yet. Maybe if she crawled to the telephone line, she could get help. But what could she say? She tried to remember the syllables and letters of her name. Nothing came to mind, and a passive grief befell her expression. She was forgetting herself.

Subsequently, she tried to think of everything that she had ever experienced. Her family, the film her sister had stolen, the night where she and her siblings played cards, what day of the week she'd go eat at the bakery with her friends (she forgot their names, too), and those yellow Mai flowers. That was all she could recall. In her mind, she performed autopsies on those humdrum moments, those conversations.

What was the time? There wasn't a clock in her room. She was murdering herself. Forgetting oneself is a kind of murder, she thought. How much of one's identity can one slowly forget before one murders oneself entirely? Her tongue felt weak behind her slightly crooked teeth as she spoke aloud, "I'm dying."

The air was still. The dust nor the crows nor the rustle of leaves outside responded. Her tone was broken into fragments; desperation slipped through the cracks and spilled from her throat like the nib of a fountain pen. She tried to console herself, but the thought of death was overwhelming because there was nothing after death.

This was the second murdering of herself.

Dying was horrifying, she thought. To think that there would be no tomorrow. No yesterday. No time. But she had so much time left, didn't she?

Her head slumped to the side, sinking into the pillow, leaving a fleck of blood on the fabric. She closed her eyes. The darkness behind her eyelids was oppressive. Was this what she'd see for eternity? Pitch black? What time was her family coming home?

She suddenly realised that she was still alive and became aware of her deep, rapid breaths and the smoke that she had inhaled, and let out a loud gasp for air like someone who had been resuscitated from unconsciousness and choked on her breath. She tried to grasp at something for comfort and her breathing maintained its speed. She felt as if she was going to suffocate in the liminal space of her room. Wasn't this the same room, she mused, where she had played cards with her siblings? And here she was, bleeding out on the very same mattress, choking pathetically. They'd have to throw it away after.

"I bought this clock," her brother once grinned.

"French?"

"Yeah."

She retorted, "You imperialist swine."

A glint of passive grief befell her expression. She was afraid. Life's transience scared her. This was inevitable, she thought. Once her heart had given up on her and her lungs had worn out, she would leave everything. She would be in eternal sleep. As far as she knew, this was the only time she'll ever exist, and death will end it, and that terrified her. Oh, right. Her sister stole *East of Eden*.

But wasn't ephemerality the thing that gave life something? Something. Life was transient, she thought. And there was beauty in that. There was beauty in transience because transience spoke to humanity in a way that eternity could not.

But to die silently! No bombs, no bullets, no burns. How beautiful, to meet death headfirst. If anything, she wanted to pass in solitude on that very mattress. She had yearned for silence her whole life, to rid of the violence and noise that pervaded her being.

But she realised: there was nothing to fear. She will have returned to the exact same state she was in before she was born, a kind of primordial state. And if she happened once, she could happen again. There was no worse fate than having to carry on the same life perpetually. But nothing was something. There was something to fear. There was always something despite nothing.

Outside, the sun descended, sinking into the ground like a soldier in quicksand. The ray of light that slipped around the curtains looked alight with fire. Blood stained her fingers; plovers flew southwards across the darkening canopy. Those yellow Mai flowers wouldn't be the same ones if she were to revisit them. Everything felt slower than before. She couldn't feel her face. Where had it gone? Her heart's beating performed a *ritardando*, throbbing weakly between her ribs, and she could taste the blood that pooled in her mouth as shallow breaths escaped her dry lips. Maybe it was okay. It was okay.

There, on that mattress in 1968, Mai slept. She had longed for that sleep since birth.