The Train to Mandalay

Boys swing between carriages on the train to Mandalay,
arms and legs thrust out into an uncertain future,
their bodies hang suspended
in a mid-air trapeze
before plunging into the connecting carriage.

Some carry baskets of soft-boiled eggs, others
have ducks for sale, plucked and dangling from strings,
their bulging eyes surprised
as if death had come too soon.

I take a photo of three young boys, a smiling triad
as they climb over each other in the carriage door.

One carries a large tin kettle full of luke-warm chai…

The boy with the kettle only has one cup, tin and tiny
which he fills for each traveller, then wipes the rim
on his grimy sleeve, grins, takes our meagre coins.

Through windows devoid of glass, dust and dirt blows in;
rain is a stranger to this land—
everywhere trees hunch
like neglected veterans, clothed in brown dirt,
begging for water.

At brief stops along the way, women sell oranges
from baskets on their heads, their arms thrust through
barbed wire, waving their fruit as if drowning.

On board rats are foraging under straight-backed pews
while we sit sore-boned, hour after hour of tedium
broken only by the swill of the squat toilet.

Don decides to try the mid-air swing,
disappears, but later returns to describe
an Indian wedding party in the next carriage.

He makes his way back and I follow after him…

Cary Hamlyn. 'The Train to Mandalay'.
Transnational Literature Vol.11 no.1, November 2018.
http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html

ARCHIVED AT FLINDERS UNIVERSITY: DSPACE.FLINDERS.EDU.AU

The gap between carriages is arm-span wide
the hot steel rails flash fast beneath; here is
a heartbeat of life in a quick decision—

I plunge out into warm rushing air
my hand grabs the handrail and I hoist
myself aboard, my body miraculously intact.

Inside the carriage I am greeted by Sikhs
dancing in narrow aisles,
warm embraces from strangers,
oranges and wedding cake offered
with smiles and bows.

We are invited to sit, squashed between
a pig farmer from Pagan and his father.
We chat with hand gestures, trying
to make ourselves understood,
and they smile and nod indulgently.

For a brief time I am royalty….

Then suddenly, jubilation stops,
dancing ceases, singing fades,
someone has seen a body fall—
hit by a bridge pole as he swung out
between carriages
                his large kettle clanging
as it bounced away behind him.

The train rushes on….

Back home, the photos developed,
I find three boys and the kettle
hanging out of the train,
                their backs
to the Burmese plains
                faces
smiling towards the future.

Cary Hamlyn

Cary Hamlyn. 'The Train to Mandalay'.
Transnational Literature Vol. 11 no. 1, November 2018.
http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html

ARCHIVED AT FLINDERS UNIVERSITY: DSPACE.FLINDERS.EDU.AU