

MORTAR FLOWERS

The art of remembering.

BY JESSICA MAY LIN

Sometimes in the morning, a single gull would cry, after the mortar shells had rained all night and spilt blood trickled down the alley walls into the sunbaked asphalt.

The Cement Florist boiled jars of coloured resin in the crumbling kitchen of his third-floor apartment, which overlooked the warships in the harbour. He bit a cigar between his teeth as he spooned hot resin out of its jar and let it fall back, occasionally glancing over his shoulder at the neatly made bed with its blue-and-pink-striped quilt.

He had awoken in the middle of the night to gunshots in the cul-de-sac. Another execution. It was at times like these, when he lay alone in the dark and the screams ate into his mind, that he missed her most.

Drawing his brown leather jacket around his shoulders, he set one of his jars under his arm and locked the door.

The alley was filled with cold, pale faces. Eyes open, staring lifelessly past him at the empty mustard gas canisters rolling in the shadows. The concrete had been blasted away by mortar bombs, leaving spiralling, blotched scars that decorated the pavement like bruises.

The Cement Florist opened a jar of hot yellow resin, honeyed vapours rising out of the glass. He slowly poured the contents into the whorled contours of a mortar scar.

Achillea millefolium. The bloodwort flower, once used on the battlefield to staunch a soldier's bleeding wounds.

The fires in the Juku Ghetto had finally died, taking the rotting tenements with them.

The Cement Florist stood under the overhang of a destroyed brothel, carrying his jars. The prostitutes glared at him with accusing eyes from where they huddled in the ruins, neglected, lace garters ripped and nails long.

Street urchins ducked in the rain, hugging to their chests the spokes of a broken chandelier they'd hauled out of the river after last night's flood.

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This was where he had first met her, when he sold flowers out of his rusted truck

to the working men, for their sweethearts. Things had been different then. Lovers walked with their heads up, and children didn't fight each other with sticks. There hadn't been the pasty smell of ashes, which drifted down on the city like snowflakes.



He stepped into the charred street, his face streaked with rain and tears, and fell to his knees. He filled the concrete scars with blue resin, for the urchins' dirty scarves, wrapped around defunct mortar shells that they'd painted into dolls.

Myosotis scorpioides. The true forget-me-not, for children from whom the war had cruelly robbed their innocence, shivering in the cold and forgotten.

He used to walk with her in the Hanging Gardens, which now hung limp, brown and wilted from the mustard gas. Waffle crumbs still littered the marble walkways where young lovers once walked through the dappled sunlight, licking ice cream cones.

He'd read a story in the newspaper last week about a boy and a girl who tried to escape on the long bridge that led from the gardens out of the city. The snipers found them before they could taste freedom. Their bodies still lay entwined in the dust, where nobody had bothered to retrieve them.

Standing in the dry shadows of limp, dead ivy, the Cement Florist wondered about what could've been — if he had taken her hand and run. If they would be together right now, in this life or the next.

He sighed.

Apple pies and warm Saturday mornings sipping coffee in bed, watching sailing-boats race in the harbour. All these things had been stolen from his fingertips.

Eventually he set the jar of white resin down on the ground, and filled the blotched concrete.

Asphodelis aestivus. The summer asphodel, the flower of the underworld. They say that in the Silent Meadow — the place where all lovers are eventually united — it grows in soft fields, slowly bending in a nonexistent breeze. That's where he would meet her.

Back in his apartment, the Cement Florist sat down on the edge of the bed. He lifted the quilt with his blistered hands and breathed in her warm, lavender scent.

The hands of the brass clock hanging over the sink moved onto the hour.

He looked at the door.

They came when he had known they would.

The gloved men with cold faces, who carried rifles and ordered him to come outside into the street.

He followed them in silence, and thought of white flowers in a sweet-scented field, when they drew a knife across his neck and lay him down on the pavement to bleed.

His heartbeat was the last thing he heard, the sun warm against his skin, when he exhaled for the last time into the musty evening air.

His blood swirled into the concrete scar where a mortar shell had fallen that morning — a bright, flowing red.

Protea cynaroides. The king protea, the oldest flower in the world. One of great strength and courage — for a man who devoted himself to changing suffering into art, to making beauty where it no longer exists, even if no one will ever see it. ■

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