

Reverie

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Boy
by Jillian Durance, 2023

Ja, de zomer!

How the boy delighted in the drama and heat of it - red dust rising above his turning wheels, air brushing against his bare legs, pedals skimming the edges of potholes. His first summer in the new country was just the thing.

Down to the creek after school, fling the old - second hand - bike against the reedy bank, strip off the shirt, wade in, duck down, submerge, splash legs, glide arms outward, swim out to the deeper pool - where the current stilled - where, in smooth strokes, as if his arms were brushes he could paint the water.

Then! Swivel the torso round and around to make a pattern of swirls - how he wished they would stay on his canvas of water. That he could he take them with him when growling stomach and cold skin turned his thoughts toward home.

The boy stretched, then turned his face to the sun, floated, squinted tightly against the glare. The water sparkled about him, light invading his eyes almost to the point of blindness.

Schitterend, sprankelend seemed more like what he saw behind his closed eyelids. 'Sparkling' could not yet - if ever - carry the same meaning.

In what language did he think now? In English he was proud of his fast learning. He knew how to listen for the old words within the new. 'Hey you, young 'un,' they might call out. Yes, he was *jongen*, all right. Boy. Or *man*. And 'water' was just that, *water*.

A kind of aloofness he felt in knowing what others could never know. Inside, the old language would hold sway for a little longer. On the outside though, he was more like them. He was good at pretending. He could swear like the best of them. Sometimes he was not sure what he was saying. He put up with their 'hey Dutchie' name calling, and feigned interest if when they showed him nude pictures torn from their father's *Man* magazines. Did they really think he would be impressed? Sorry. He was man already and the day he turned fourteen - soon - he

was out of there for good. He was no student; not good at anything, except drawing. In this new country though, that counted for nothing. Except to make other kids laugh at a quick caricature of the teacher sketched in the margin of his exercise book.

'Could do better if he spent less time clowning and day dreaming,' many an early report had read. 'What's this?' his father had asked. 'But Dad, my day dreams are important to me,' even the seven year old had protested. And now that he was older, they were even more so. Here, *zwemmen* alone in the creek there was nothing to interrupt his daydreams, his thinking, the *werk* of his mind.

Except! Above his own splashing and the metallic caw of ravens in trees on the bank he caught a stranger sound. The hum, then drone of an engine, a plane flying low: a thrum, a chittering beat.

De Havilland Tiger Moth, he said to himself. He knew his planes. After all he had lived near an airfield just a few weeks before. He had put together models. Taken them apart again. And brought one with him on the boat, the only one they had room for. A souvenir of the childhood he had left behind.

A tightening panic arose in his throat. *It's just a Tiger Moth*, but his skin suddenly chilled. Crawled. This is not, *not* the plane that had brought the bombs at *Sinterklaas*, had dropped those bombs in broad daylight. Why, his parents had run out of the house in sheer surprise as the British made a target of the Phillips Radio factory.

But how could *he* be reliving this now? This was not *his* memory! Only the story of uncles, aunts and older cousins recounting their war around the kitchen table. (He was always listening of course.) 'Remember that day' they would begin, 'the Sunday after *Sinterklaas*, the baby - him - kicking in his cradle, the older kids playing with their presents, the wrappings only just tidied, the crumbs of *pepernoten* still scattered on the floor. Why, those planes just skipped over the rooftops, where St. Nicholas had walked - only the night before - with his sack of presents! (The grownups never spoke of the swooping down, the whistling firebombs, the smoke, the stench, the terror, the neighbours killed.) 'They bombed the factories all right,' they would laugh, 'the Germans were just as surprised as we were. And we made sure we took our time to repair them!'

Above the boy the *Tiger Moth* swerved low into a slow and leisurely glide. Turning his head he strained to see the pilot over the nose, but flicked his face down when a plinking of what seemed like large grains of sand speckled and pock marked the surface of the water around him. Not bombs! Relief rushed through him. He had been in the country just long enough to know it was super, plain old super farmers used to feed the tired soil in paddocks alongside the creek. The plane swept on, its whirr and pitter patter fading to a soft purr on a distant horizon. Now he was just plain hungry. The sun had lost a little of its sting. The reeds were growing shadows.

Shirt back on, he hoisted the bike up the bank, planted his wet backside on the saddle and pounded the pedals homeward. He longed for the comfort of kitchen and company, the chattering around the table, before the traditional silence that descended as they ate. More food on their plates now, meat almost every meal; a whole egg each - not the half he had grown up with. His sisters and his parents all practised their halted English, determined to leave behind - to lose even - the old language. To redefine themselves, To go all the way with the adventure that it was.

None of them will ask him where he's been all day. He had always the freedom of not being accountable for his whereabouts, no matter in what country he lived. It's the way it was if you were a boy. The pattern imprinted in the old country he had carried with him to the new. But the old language like a failing globe would slowly dim against the bright squinting light of Australia. He would almost lose the one while the other would nurture his vision.

But deep inside without his knowledge - or permission - he had also carried memories now unwanted by others. Even if they had asked he would not have told them. Nor would they have believed him. His moment in the creek would stay with him quiet, unspoken, until that time he could express it in his own way: in colour, in light, in swirls of water, with him - the young artist - at the centre of his new world.