Four Poems from The King’s Coin: Danish-American Poems

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HIJAB IN SORØ

“You are sick,” she said,
the Danish doctor,
in perfect English.
“Ja, jeg er syg,” I said.

In the waiting room
talk hummed, muted,
pages fluttered, rustled.

When a patient left
all muttered “farvel”
looking up.

When a headscarf
entered, murmurs ceased
eyes averted, rustlings rose.

When the doctor’s door hissed
closed behind the scarf,
talk resumed as strident chatter.

Hijab came out. All voices stilled.
Hijab retreated, exited
with a click and a thud, the outer door
let in, cut off, the clanging of church bells.

“Farvel,” I said as I rose
“Farvel,” they muttered, looking up.

I left in search of a pill
against infection.
GRANDDAD’S SONG BOOK

My grandfather’s hand
has worn down the gold
on his song book’s leather spine,
but the Danish sang and bog still glow.

My thumb finds the spot,
where his thumb has worn through
many layers of cardboard paper,
their edges sealed with sweat.

He carries this hoard of lyrics,
spine on palm, thumb on cover,
through his island village
to the meeting hall to sing.

In step with neighbors—
farmers, blacksmith, teacher—
they arrive under cloudy skies
bundled in grey and black.

Creased, coffee-stained
pages open to the text
of beloved songs whose melodies
they know and sing in brightest hues.

They sing of Dannebrog in red and white.
In green, they praise the island’s beech groves
then raise blue voices for the sea
embracing, cradling Denmark’s shores.

Now back in Tennessee,
I clutch his song book and recall, I feared
my granddad’s calloused hand, but I never
knew the man who sang these songs.
EVERY TIME I SEE A KITE FLY

The war is over when I am four years old. My dad brings out the kite that he has built in secret, hoping, believing that it will soar above the copper crosses of Copenhagen, higher than the twisted spire of Our Savior’s Church, launched on a shifting wind now blowing from the west, freed at last from its covert attic workshop, his pigeon released from its dovecote.

Cold wind stirs dormant grass on our commons. My clog boots crush liberation fliers in the mud as we try to launch the monster kite, father pulling, mother holding, me clinging to her skirt. She wrestles the buffeted kite, thrusts it heavenward. I feel a lift in her dress. I hear the crash.

THE KING’S COIN

_In memory of Christian X, King of Denmark 1912-1947_

I know I promised to keep King Christian safe in my pocket on his Danish coin, but I lost it on the Greyhound bus between Chicago and L.A.

I have gone back to Copenhagen between castle and canal where I, then five years old, had held the flag and mother’s hand as his empty-saddled horse rang steel on granite cobblestone.

The coin shop clerk ransacked his drawers until he found King Christian’s _krone_, apologized for smoothed-out edges, the king defaced and pocket-worn. He did not understand when I said, _perfect!_