

Michael Holstein

SUBWAY SAMURAI

Each morning shortly before 8:56
Iemitsu stands at ease
At Ike Bukuro Station
Riding to Ueno where he guards the museum's
West wing's cache of Japanese antiquities
Against noise, theft, malicious mischief,
And unauthorized photography.

As he waits he remembers a day,
A cold day in his former life.

He waits near the head of the cavalry
During the third campaign against
The northern warlords during the shogunate
Of Iemitsu. His nervous horse breathes thick fogs
Into the needle-sharp winter morning.

He bends sideways to put his finger
Between the leather girdle and the warm
Belly of the horse — tight but not too
Tight. Against bitter air and edged wind
His servant dressed him well.
His armor pushes at him as he breathes,
Tests him, tightens against chest.
Smoked leather thongs strung through black
Porcelain beads and laced crosswise
Will deflect all but direct hits at close range.
A thick leather breech piece will protect him
When he stands in his saddle in battle.

As he sways on the train his eyes close.
Fingering the black beads, he counts their rows
And files as the cold frosts his beard into mail.

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WOMAN FROM THE BATIK FACTORY

Why do you waste your time
asking me what I do?
You should be over there sitting on the beach
drinking "Anchor,"
looking at the pretty women
and the waves coming in below the clouds.
If I were you that is what I would do.

I work here at the Batik factory far out
on Batu Feringgi.
I take two busses to come from Georgetown.
While I wait for the second bus
I drink a glass of sugar juice
the old woman squeezes from the cane.

We work in those three long sheds.
The low iron roofs keep the rain from
the cloth and out of the dyes.

The middle shed where I work has the wooden racks
to stretch the cloth.
In that long row
the young men stamp on designs
with copper stamps dipped in melted wax.
The middle shed where I work has the wooden racks
to stretch the cloth.
In that long row
the young men stamp on designs
with copper metal stamps dipped in melted wax.
In this row
the women draw designs on white cloth,
While others trace over the designs
with honey-brown hot wax.

When they have finished, I am among the ones
 who paint the designs with dye.
I like to watch the cloth drink up color
 like a thirsty man on a hot night
 like you would drink
 if you were on the hot sands now.
I like to watch the colors mix and soften.

By late afternoon the breeze comes from the sea
 and cools us.

We women then sometimes sing
 to the young men
 in the other shed at the boiling kettles
 and to the young men there at the dryers
 and folding tables.

And they sing back.

This is what I do. This is what I am.
I am a woman from the Batik factory.