

MEENA ALEXANDER

## *From Quickly Changing River*

### In Kochi by the Sea

You walk in darkness,  
A candle in your hand, your sari unravels,

An inch of cotton snatched underfoot,  
Sheer wax catches the doorpost.

Amma, is something burning?  
*Anamnesis*, I looked it up in the dictionary,

A seventeenth century usage in the language  
You helped me learn, of Greek provenance

Used by some in medical literature for signs  
That help uncover bodily condition.

Who was she?  
In Kochi, that sunbaked city by the sea,

I was high as your armpit.  
You held me in your umbrella's shade.

We saw a woman very pale, squatting on a doorstep  
`Rahel, Rahel!

Someone was calling out her name.  
A man, knife raised, circling a squawking bird.

The woman paid no heed.  
The bird poked under her sari, disappeared.

In the shadow of her clothing in between her feet  
We saw vermilion dots, a trickle, a slow pour.

She dipped one pointed finger, then another  
In the show of blood

Making a flower, a fist  
A cockrel's head, a candle, a cloud,

A quickly changing river,  
Parts of a city, many houses burning,

The sheaves of redemption reeling.  
You drew me aside so sharply, shielded my eyes.

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*Anamnesis*, I try to think  
Of what Plato might have meant,

The body cleansed,  
So seeing with the soul,

True recollection perfectly attuned  
To every jot of what the future brings.

But there's a discomfort in the inner life  
I had not bargained for—

A stream with blistered rocks where I must walk  
Barefoot as I did so many years ago,

But now in a river bed  
Not marked on any map I learnt to read

In a schoolhouse with a palm tree outside  
Where the barbarous sun pours.

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When you dropped your candle  
Nothing came to fire,

The future for an instant, pacified.  
The dark was sweet and filled with singing birds

That fly into this garden without being asked,  
A breath of joy, a fragrant certitude

Scarcely to be set into sentences.  
Your umbrella was in the corner by the doorpost

Cupped in a flash of stormy light,  
Its ribs bent and broken by that wind renewed,

A monsoon crossing the Arabian sea.  
And the woman we left behind?

Not to be seen except in figurations  
Of the damned on Mattancheri palace walls.

There she squatted on a stony road  
Making forms of blood—

Auguring what? Who could tell?  
Figures cupped from the chaos of our dailiness,

Such ordinary things through which  
We try to learn what the past presages,

And we think we touch  
A clarity of longing, a blessedness.

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The afternoon you dragged me from the street,  
We walked beside the pounding beach

Past tiny wreaths of wood the color of wax  
Washed out from the belly of a river

Cast into shapes of ruined cities,  
No-nation cities lacking anthem, flag,

Their lintels blown, gardens stilled into ash.  
Torn free of you I ran into the wind.

Waves crashed into voices,  
Highpitched, vulnerable

The color of dropped blood,  
The color of indigo cut from the mothering tree.

And underneath—in memory now—  
I heard a darkness, luminous.

## Food for my Mother, One April Night

Snails on a black branch,  
Sticky rice,  
Burst morsels of light.

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Under a stone arch  
On white cloth, set cold figs, hot shrimps—  
O fragrant night!

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Outside the cook's hut  
A stone, a sieve,  
Butterflies in flight.

## Three Sisters

We polished rosewood, folded up silks, shook out linens, she was coming home,  
Second sister coming back at last.  
Why linger at the bamboo root?

Stalks quake, a green break, a stake, hole hot at the heart's core.  
Fishing flesh, a nook of tears.  
Three sisters grew in a garden. Littlest sister sang: *High horse come get me!*

Born first I swore in my shoes to be mum.  
Middle sister, crouching, cried as the wind hit the bamboo grove,  
*Thistle, thistle, come cover me!*

## Summertime

It was the hot season, fruit flies in bushes,  
Mosquitoes on the porch boring  
Through mesh, my straw hat buckling  
Under packets of what looked like sea salt.  
Plants suffering in moonlight.  
It was far too bright, sky utterly cloudless  
And bits of larkspur edged with stars.  
The sea was all over,  
Foamy, seamed with black where blunt  
Rocks stood out in the bay.  
Then someone came in a flat bottomed boat  
Saying a bomb had burst in Tavistock Square,  
That a bus was on fire and, he added  
Perhaps it was safest to be on water.

## Pond at Giverny

Out of the bushes comes a girl  
In a boat and there is no noise in her.  
She is ceremonious in a way  
We are not used to anymore.  
In her right hand is a net clipped  
To a long pole and she uses it  
To fish out leaves, twigs and other  
Impediments to the clear surface  
Of the pond. Her movements are marks  
On a clockface when time stops.  
At her back are a clump of waterlilies  
Someone planted well before her birth,  
Sky coloured, brushed indigo by water,  
When touched by her net, fit to explode.

## Water Garden

Needing to live within the life of things,  
He painted what he saw, water lilies rampant,  
Rutting stalks the color of scarab claws,  
Flung turquoise, iridescent opal  
Cool as a rider guiding his horse's flank  
Through clouds where the horse's head  
Reappears, severed in a momentary mirror.  
Something juts free, no ready shade discernable,  
Blunt and raw and breathless.  
Blind worm poking its head through filth.  
Can form draw being, call it forth?  
Breath skirts bone as you say to me:  
May seems a good time to go to Giverny.  
I'll come with you to Monet's water garden.

## Monet's Trousers

In the garden, poppies and irises  
Bled onto his shins and the cotton trousers  
Alice had stitched for him got stained  
At the cuffs with flowering colors so  
He shuffled into the kitchen, thrust himself  
Out of his clothes and stood there utterly naked.  
In the pewter bowl he saw himself, huge—  
A monstrous thing . Then a woman so frail  
He could barely make her out in all that summer  
Sunlight got up out of her chair, picked up the soiled  
Mess of cotton, stooped over the sink  
And started to wash it. Could it be her?  
His body shook with terrible love  
And he wept and wept facing death.

## Aletheia ( Girl in River Water)

First I saw your face,  
Then your whole body lying still  
Hands jutting, eyelids shut,

Twin nostrils flare, sheer  
Efflorescence when memory cannot speak—  
A horde of body parts glistening.

Your feet were at an angle  
Stuck in a tainted stream,  
And under your ankles the specter of a horse,

Its chestnut mane lopped off,  
An ordinary creature in a time of war,  
Hooves blown, trying to make do.

## Travel Time

To make the subject matter.  
Is this a nightmare?  
My luggage blown into air.

I race after it but cannot bump my self  
High enough in heat to catch it.  
The plane has flown, no shadows there.

My luggage hits the runway,  
A mound of zippers and locks  
Unhinged, raking sparks.

I hide behind a bush, see leaves  
Burn in cold rotation, my baggage too,  
Sheer melisma, ravenous ash.

## White Nile, Love Song

Coarse sunlight, cotton shirt,  
fistful of dates, bitten orange,  
your sandals , my scarf.

Behind us  
a room with a polished floor,  
roses in extremis.

Will you love me after the end  
before the beginning,  
by a stream of Nile water, bloodied by roses?

# Three for Winter

## 1. Afternoon

I hear birds in the field  
They are singing a long silence  
It's a winter without guns.

Once I stood at the edge of the field  
Where the trucks pass.  
Perhaps you will come in the afternoon

When light is long and silence quickens.  
What will love do to us?  
No one can answer this.

## 2. Trees

I watch you in the distance  
Strolling through winter trees  
Some of which have fallen,

White pine and balsam  
Toppling onto each other.  
This has been going on for a long time.

Slow scrape of trees  
Where water hardens,  
Icicles snapping at the doorpost.

Sometimes its as if I cannot see you.  
Then love breaks me.  
If I cry out, will you come to me?

### 3. Sky

The ginkgo tree has a hollow trunk,  
The snow around is blue.

Sometimes at night, moonlight  
Leaks through.

How did we find each other,  
You and I?

We make one creature with two wings,  
Searching for the sky.

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