

No Man's Land

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For Lucia,
*because you have led me
to my muse.*

[Reif sind...]

Vorwärts aber und rückwärts wollen wir
Nicht sehn. Uns wiegen lassen, wie
Auf schwankem Kahne der See.

Friedrich Hölderlin

[The fruits are ripe...]

But we shall not look forward
Or back. Let ourselves rock, as
On a boat, lapped by the waves.

Friedrich Hölderlin
(*translated by Richard Sieburth*)

India from the Raj Bungalow

The Kingfisher

*as if they were all one flesh, in a single dream,
and nothing to make them true, but space, and time.*

— John Burnside

The day the big pine fell, missing us by inches,
we watched the kingfisher's slow swirl
over the broken stump. Mutely, it worked a circle,
all afternoon in mother's eyes
as the sun came into the veranda floor.
If the railings stretched their length in silhouettes,
it would be winter.

Light, then darkness inside the wafer thin walls
of pine; layers of exquisite wood-lace.
Our sheepdog ran to sniff at the termite-torn castle,
cocked a leg and went to look for the gecko we tried to tame
with milk and eggs under the rose trellis. And still
the blue flight as dusk flushes over the river.
Mother will paint this, I thought, in her mind at least,
even if she stopped painting when I was born. An exhaled 'o'
of breath as her eyes crinkle against the sun,
a breeze soft in her brown hair.

The timber people came from outside.
The gardeners wore grins
as they helped them roll the logs away.
All winter, they tended roses,
beds of *Bianca* and *Black Prince*, but this was
a windfall.

The hole filled with shadows
in the dark. I willed the moon to show dancers
as it did always; there was no one. That night I dreamt
of roses caught in porcelain bowls, the scent elusive
in their maroon.

Hover

The deluge sudden over trees, mother in her housecoat running down the stairs to let the dogs in, telling everyone to hurry, hurry, or we get caught. My sister closes *Grey's Anatomy*, leans towards the river saying everything can wait; even *Ranikhet*. Mother slams windows shut, says hurry. Father's gaze on the river longs to stay.

Rain turns the lawns to brown pools of mud. We watch the river rise, the paper folding sound not registered till my sister says look, oh look; then it is the rustle of silk saris at a wedding. The sky turns green as the parrots fly by, so close we can see claws tucked up against white-feathered bellies.

Mother says hurry but we wait for the river dolphins. She can move tomorrow, or when the rain stops. The suitcases on the landing trip everyone up all day. At dusk, another snatch of green. It's a female high on a tree, its eyes closed, neck exposed as the blue-ringed male pulls its feathers free of rain. I watch father's hand loop in mother's hair.

Ranikhet: 'Queen's Garden' – a hill station in the Kumaon range of the Himalayas

Coalescence

A few more years, a few more ghosts to embrace
— Yusef Komunyakaa

Inside the Tate's turbine room, I am
sandwiched between dysfunctional machines.
Rain splatters glass. I thought my skin had forgotten
the sudden cleansing of the dive,
hands reaching for the floor of the pool
the CESC children swam in. Only us,
not outsiders who went down to the river.
Something here smells of coal. Gritty,
coated with coal dust, we were
told to bathe thrice daily, all summer.
We didn't recognize words in our mother tongues
confusing dirt with tint of skin. We were children
of the CESC, convent-educated,
playing in knee-socks and organdie dresses,
our days dotted with tennis matches
and rose walks, gardeners and maids'
brushes walloping brown lignite
off door-meshes in clouds.

Clouds that returned to powder our limbs
after each bath. We plunged into the pool,
making the powerhouse chimneys bob in surprise.
Where does the coal smell come from? We would swim
like tadpoles, our washed skins turning
brown in the sun. Mothers yelled from verandas:
'five more minutes' as Zareen stroked the water back.

I can hear it lap against the edge as she swims.
Seven-year-old Buba dives so hard from the top board,
her underwear floats away amidst our shouts;

she swims, her white chemise a scrap of sail.
A few more years and she will have it right.
Nothing keeps us from the pool; not frogs coming back
despite the increased bleaching powder;
not snakes, which nest under the deep-end stairs.
Our arms return to waves, a flail
toward the dark.

Tate: Tate Modern, London.

CESC: Calcutta Electric Supply Corporation, a thermal power station that used to belong to a British company.

My Father's Crown

1.

I don't know if I speak of you
Father, when you opened
your mouth, mother spoke out.
Your ears are tuned
to the power station's boiler room,
clamouring for attention. You
stride through the powerhouse
shouting orders. Soot-covered,
you are a king. When you return,
a dark shape in the deodar avenue,
dwarfed by chimneys,
our dogs bark a welcome
to the jingle of keys in the lock
I ignore.

2.

I ignore the voice in our bungalow
telling me why it is necessary
to chop down the frangipani bough
that thrusts through my window each day
with bouquets of white flowers.
Our father-daughter talk is blocked
when khaki-clad gardeners arrive
to lop off the branch
jammed in the window as I leave
for school. I return to a distanced tree
dripping its white sap
helplessly on the grass. You
say it is love, that silent seeping,
that you are trying to keep away snakes.

3.

You say you are trying to keep away snakes,
the day I put your slippers on,
mother nodding assent. You disappear
behind the newspaper article
about hoodlums stealing place-names.
I can see your defiant smile
as they begin to vanish -
paved stones carved with British names
from our deodar walk
snaking to the powerhouse. An old landmark,
your expression as you watch me
slip my feet inside your slippers,
thinking your daughter's feet fit and
what a small man you must be.

4.

What a small man you must be
sometimes. When mother switches off
the Cliff Richard tapes
and there's nothing left
to echo off my bedroom walls,
silence freezes around me
like an icicle; I am a shadow
drifting down the velvet tunnel
of your mute tongue,
swallowed by mother's reasons
that never ceased to make you
more silent, as if you had been
born tongue-less.
I have never asked how it feels.

5.

I have never asked how it feels
to be carried tall on someone's shoulders
a whole day when you are six,
worlds opening; in front of your eyes
a vista of trees winding somewhere
you would inhabit like a shadow.
On your brother's shoulders you are
a kestrel testing wings,
the avenue of deodars like a landing strip
I begged to take flight from. Your ears buzz
as the blue sky mingles with leaves
and weight drops away, your happiness
at such fever pitch it flies clear
out of hearing range.

6.

Clear out
of hearing range, a voice
telling me why writing will not work.
At seventeen, I cut my hair,
impatient for judgment
to trickle down to 'no'.
The maroon I wore
was for a similar reason, for lack
of narrative thread. You never told me
when the connection went,
memories of treks, pony rides.
I drifted away like a balloon,
romancing gaps; calling home
with fewer words each time.

7.

Calling home with fewer words each time,
Didi kept the banyan tree a secret;
its dark roots drenched in dew, its hollows
where something grew,
new skin swelling like a waxing moon.
She never talked of her first love.
The summer Didi left,
we lay on a hillside in Musoorie,
cursing you. That's the first
I saw you cry, curled on grass
as if you had taken root . We looked on
with dreamer's eyes,
our blue-brown gaze torching the crater
rim of your black eyes.

8.

Lost in your black-cratered eyes:
Red Road and the Strand,
horses in the rear-view mirror
poised over the highest bar, frozen
in my memory as we move away
from the school where I was
to be captain. The perfect balance
found one summer on a see-saw,
that record of my life floating,
a dot in the mirror.
You swallowed my life when you returned
to rule the old power plant. Don't
spew up place names, hoping
to bring me back.

9.

As if you hoped to bring sound back
whole from the doctor's office,
I saw you absorb an echo.
They shone a tiny light in your ear
and you became a hole. Machines resonated
with sounds of long vowels
sliding past your throat. I could feel
your fear sucking in a world
it could not reproduce. Mother's battery
of questions did not reveal
that you held that world captive; or how
your hand reached for something
unyielding in the dark machine room
and hovering, you found me.

10.

And you found me hovering
on your shoulder
when I was three, blue sleeves
of my best party dress wings
in the breeze. I touched ground
to take off. Everybody stared, even
gardeners and day labourers. Officers smiled
as you bore me on your arm
through the canopy of deodar trees
all the way to the power-plant.
Through the din and smoke,
offerings started to appear;
bowls of fluffed rice like frangipani
blossoms. You could make magic.

11.

Magic, this too:

how you never came home until the sun was
a zero in the sky haloed by light,
and the dogs hoarse with barking. You said
life was facts and figures. Four
equal sides in our family, each absolute,
a wall impervious to change
until one left. Then we took turns
as hypotenuse for the opposed
to lean on. You never saw
the kingfisher swirling over pines
or the river swelling with rain. Fact is,
the siren was wailing as you walked home
at sixty unable to talk of emotion.

12.

Even at sixty unable to talk of emotion,
when you came home I was
too far away to see the small shadow
returning through the deodar path.
I can't hide that I have walked out on you
since then, yet how I miss the meadow of bees
buzzing behind your mouth's dam. You
won't fight the head of hair
disappearing from photos, dark
before its release. Were you there
when the owl that mother had freed
returned to my frangipani bough at night
as if it didn't know where to go? Weight is
an inheritance, like the shape of eyes.