

Meena Alexander

Elegy

In your nostrils, the scent of paddy,
Bitter-sweet of whisky, flash of chilli

On a branch of the tree of heaven
Your jute bag, swinging.

We sat together near the tree,
You had a book of pictures

Sunlight fell
On 'Wheat Field with Crows' dazzling me.

*Those birds are question marks
Coming, or fleeing?*

*The middle path,
In between the other two*

*It flows through wild wheat and golden,
Part of the ground, part of us.*

In the town where you were born
A doe leaps over thorns.

A woman pulls a saffron thread out of torn cloth,
Uses it to mend a child's skirt.

*We must listen to each other,
How else shall we live?*

Your voice, filled with the musk
Of crushed leaves

Breaking my heart—
Already night becomes you.

(In memory of Ramu Gandhi 1937 – 2007)

Teatro Olimpico¹

At three in the afternoon,
A girl tumbling out of an unmade bed

Skirts juniper colored, she rushes out of the room,
Sand in between her toes and in the creases of her knees.

She runs very fast
Towards what was once a prison yard.

She stops in a clump of rosebush and thorn
Strips off her coat.

Through a hole in a brick wall
She leaps onto the stage Palladio made.

Above her, a ceiling where clouds drift.
Is that a ghostly horseman?

Clouds sift a future the gods painted
In scarlet and gold can scarcely comprehend.

Why search for the seven roads of Thebes?
There are fresh tragedies waiting for her.

A bitter wall of concrete cuts the sky—
In its shadow a woman kneels,

Eyes shut tight she sings
To a lad laid in the dirt

Bullet holes in his hands and feet:
In his wounds wild roses bloom.

Indian Hospice, Jerusalem

Yesterday it rained so hard
Lemons spilt from the lemon tree
And rolled all over cobble stones in my Jerusalem courtyard.

I thought of Baba Farid
Who came on a pilgrimage centuries ago.
In a hole cut from rock by the room where I sleep

He stood for forty days and nights
Without food or drink. Nothing for him was strange
In the way his body slipped into a hole in the ground

And nothing was not.
Rust in the stones and blood at the rim of his tongue.
In the humming dark

He heard bird beaks stitching webs of dew
Sharp hiss of breath let out from a throat,
Whose throat he did not know.

Was it his mother crying out O Farid, where are you now?
She had done that when he swung
Up and down, knees in a mango tree,

Head in the mouth of a well
Singing praises to God.
Crawling out of his hole there were welts on his cheeks

And underfoot in bedrock, visionary recalcitrance.
A lemon tree shook in a high wind.
Beneath it, glistening in its own musk, the black iris of Abu Dis.

Wild with the scents of iris and lemon he sang—O Farid
This world is a muddy garden
Stone, fruit and flesh all flaming with love.

Note

1. I composed this poem in Italy. Somehow the separation wall came into it. I had the poem with me and read it out a week later—April 7, 2011—at the Al-Midani theatre, Haifa, part of a memorial for Juliano Mer-Khamis. The poem was translated into Arabic.