

Aruni Kashyap

Bohag: 1979

All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

—“Easter 1916,” W.B. Yeats

I

I never met them to exchange
polite meaningless words,
never sat with them and debated over
cups of strong tea, boiled with ginger.

But I have met them in my dreams
after sniffing them from dusty newsprints,
talks with my father, with whom
I had gone to find a rare flower
once, but could never hold it.
We just came back, exchanging
polite meaningless words with
the men who he grew up with,
with whom he played football
with an elephant-apple; men
who looked eighty at fifty,
on whose chests you could
play the harmonium soundlessly.

It wasn't my metaphor,
father told me in the forests when we're
returning, making way by trampling German-shrubs
exchanging meaningless words,
that some flowers are lost forever,
that it happened when a terrible beauty was born.

II

Grandma told me, they went in search of a Sunrise
across the hills, crossing rivers, brooks, fields,
to come back withered, with wounds on their hands,
with hollow hearts where sounds echoed; she doubted
if they will ever sleep again, especially
that boy, who was picked up for he had a

copy of *Das Kapital* on his table, which he had borrowed
from the school library; sight: sucked away
by the brightness of five-hundred watt bulbs.
He doesn't even wear shades,
days and nights being the same for him
it happened because a terrible beauty was born.

III

Sometimes at midnight, I have heard the wails of seven
strange women, in dreams I have seen fourteen bleeding thighs.
Someone tells me: like the teeth-imprints on their necks,
scratches on their breasts, those rivers of blood
aren't from their thighs; you should be able to
read in the dark, find meanings, smell beauty
even in the coldest winters, hottest summers.
With brass pots hung from their necks, with
jute-ropes around their necks, they bid the world goodbye,
after the night when sounds of boots entered their homes
a few years after, a terrible beauty was born.

IV

I have only heard about that woman,
who returns every month, sometimes even twice,
from the morgue, with the smell of corpses
stuck to her nostrils, clothes and hands,
only because she wants to know, if one of those
is her son: who took a whole sky away with him
when he merged with the forests; in that house,
all alone, she sings about the days she walked on the streets
when a terrible beauty was born.

V

We also snatched small skies with us, carried stories,
thousands of kilometers away. Some of those
stories will be told, for we believed not in the power
of stories but in the power of ruminations,
congregating, speaking in the language
of pain and ecstasy, though we are away
from the Red River, hills that give birth to rains also.

The Red River? Who hasn't written a poem for it?
Who hasn't thought of it when we saw the Thames,
the Mississippi? Who hasn't missed its redness?

its whirlpools and mystery, even on the banks
of Yangtze Jiang or Hudson?

But one day we all shall come back, with different stories,
this time, with a belief in its power,
to transform pain into joy during censored times.
Learning to ignore the sound of boots, rendering
them insignificant, unimportant, invisible just
with the power of a hopeful story of revolution

or maybe a song

and a terrible beauty will be born.

Note

1. The Assam Movement began in 1979. Lasting six years, this tumultuous agitation for self-determination in India's north-eastern state of Assam affected millions of people in eastern India.