

Aruni Kashyap

The House with a Thousand Novels

This is a house, L-shaped,
seven-hands high; soil-veranda—
with twenty-one novels in it.

Every evening, five daughters beyond the banks,
who rested like bees in other houses,
with higher lower or equal soil-verandas
and more or lesser novels,
lift a night-black iron cauldron
so that it squats on the hearth.

This is a house, with twenty-one novels,
forever spanning
in episodic form, like long yarns.

In the room facing the east, where the eldest son lived
an almirah stood, with termites battling against it—
every night, along with the odious *I'll-take-you-away-song*
of the bespectacled inauspicious barn-owl;
proud, filled to the neck, with a thousand books.

Many of them were novels.

Popular, unpopular, pulp
erotic (hidden between old “important” newspaper cuttings).

This is a house with eight doors,
seventeen windows, no ventilators.

In summers heavy with sweat and skin
snakes creep in for coconut-water-cold soil,
coated cool with greenish cow-dung
the epidermis of the seven-hand high veranda.

Everyday someone comes in—
leaving rippling traces forever
like generational earthquakes:

A wailing woman leaves a story of oppression, licensed-
rape, barrenness, adultery;

A married daughter, beyond the banks, comes back to
disrupt diaries;

A worker runs away, digging up hidden gold jewellery
from one of these story-ridden rooms.

This is a house, with
a thousand serialised novels
floating in the heavy air.

Someone shrieks everyday.
Someone reads the caws of the crow and expects guests.
Picks up a mosquito from the milk and prays that no one dies.
Lights a mustard oil lamp in the household's prayer-room singing
pleading songs.
And children carry love letters for peanuts from here, from there,
leaving traces of story
to be ruminated forever:

with meals.

At night, around winter-fires,
the chewing and grinding of betel-nuts,
while lifting the iron cauldron.

This is a house with a thousand novels
(or more).
Every window or a room that mourns for a vent
treasures a story in it, which
no worker can run away with;
more precious than gold
buried deep enough, deeper than
a spring, a well
so that it lives forever and grows
like tears, hair and serialised novels in journals;

inadequate to live anymore
in a wooden almirah eroded by termites.

Encroachment

I have known this river like tea leaves.
I have bathed, ran on its wet sands.
Grappled in its shallow banks for fishes and caught tadpoles.
Sometimes, avoiding restrictions I have even plunged naked
into its arms.

Hence I know, it has young blood in it.
And many cultures, ammunitions that have sunk into it.
They lie like treasures, loot
of seventeen victories against Mughals
over six-hundred years by Ahoms.

I have touched its chest, its shallow.
When it swells under weeks of rains
river-dolphins show their tails like mermaids,
just one glimpse
showing displeasure over constrained spaces.

We are the generous ones,
always embracing
not hollow men.
Only time has made our hearts narrow,
our spaces constrained just like this river's bed.

In eighteen ninety-seven
it swelled like rain clouds.
Paddy fields moved like sea waves
villages sank creating lakes
And one of those first sun hills,

cracked open.

And Digāru flowed down like Gangā
from Śiva's whorls.

In this way we have made spaces.
Even for new rivers and lakes.

Sometimes villages too.

Notes

1. Earthquakes have rocked Assam and wreaked havoc almost every fifty years for centuries. One of the biggest earthquakes was in 1897, which measured more than 8 on the Richter scale.
2. A river in Assam.
3. According to Hindu mythology, King Bhagiratha prayed to Goddess Gangā, who lived in heaven until then, to flow down to earth and bestow her holy waters to the mortals. While descending from heaven to earth, she alerted King Bhagiratha that her forceful waters might destroy the earth and hence she would need something very strong to fall into. King Bhagiratha prayed to Śiva, and he agreed to hold Gangā in his whorls from where she flowed down to the earth.