



Illiterate Heart
“Fallings from us, vanishings”
Wordsworth
for Adrienne Rich

1.

One summer holiday I returned
to the house where I was raised.
Nineteen years old I crouched
on the damp floor where grandfather’s
library used to be, thumbed through
Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*
thinking why should they imagine no one else
has such rivers in their lives?

I was Marlowe and Kurtz and still more
a black woman just visible at the shore.
I thought it’s all happened all happened before.

So it was I began, unsure of the words
I was to use still waiting for a ghost
to stop me crying out:
“You think you write poetry! Hey you —”
as he sidestepped me dressed neatly
in his jurta and dhoti
a mahakavi from the temples of
right thought.

Or one in white flannels
unerringly English lured from Dove Cottage
transfixed by carousels of blood
Danton’s daring, stumbling over stones
never noticing his outstretched
hand passed through me.

2.

How did I come to this script?
Amma taught me from the Reading Made Easy
books Steps 1 & 2 pointed out Tom and Bess
little English children
sweet vowels of flesh they mouthed to perfection:
aa ee ii oo uu a(apple) b(bat) c(cat) d(dat)
Dat? I could not get, so keen the rhymes made me,
sense overthrown.

Those children wore starched knicker
bockers or sailor suits and caps
waved Union Jacks,
tilted at sugar beets.

O white as milk
their winding sheets!

I imagined them dead all winter
packed into icicles,
tiny and red, frail homunculus each one
sucking on alphabets.

Amma took great care with the books
wrapped them in newsprint lest something
should spill, set them on the rosewood sill.
When wild doves perched they shook
droplets from quicksilver wings
onto fading covers.

The books sat between Gandhi's Experiments
with Truth and a minute crown of thorns
a visiting bishop brought.

He told us that the people of Jerusalem
spoke many tongues including Arabic, Persian
Syriac as in our liturgy Aramaic too.

Donkeys dragged weights through tiny streets.
"Like our buffaloes," he laughed.
I had to perform my Jana Gana Mana for him
and Wordsworth's daffodil poem —
the latter I turned into a rural terror
my version of the chartered streets.

3.

What beats in my heart? Who can tell?
I cannot tease my writing hand around
that burnt hole of sense, figure out the
quickstep of syllables.

On pages where I read the words of Gandhi
and Marx, saw the light of the Gospels
the script started to quiver and flick.

Letters grew fins and tails.
Swords sprung from the hips of consonants,
vowels grew ribbed and sharp.

Pages bound into leather
turned the colour of ink.

My body flew apart:
wrist, throat, elbow, thigh,
knee where a mole sprang,
bony scapula, blunt cut hair

Then utter stillness as a white sheet
dropped on nostrils and neck.

Black milk of childhood drunk
and drunk again!

I longed to be like Tom and Bess
dead flat on paper.

4.

At noon I burrowed through
Malayalam sounds,
slashes of sense, a floating trail.

Nights I raced into the garden.
Smoke on my tongue, wet earth
from twisted roots of banyan
and ficus Indica.

What burnt in the mirror
of the great house
became a fierce condiment.
A metier almost:

*aa i ii u uu au um aha ka kh
ga gha nga cha chha ja ja nja
njana (my sole self), njaman (knowledge)
nunni (gratitude) ammechi, appechan,
veliappechan (grandfather)*

Uproar of sense, harsh tutelage
*aana (elephant) amma (tortoise)
ambjuan (lotus).*

A child mouthing words
to flee family.

I will never enter that house I swore
I'll never be locked in a cage of script.

*And the lotus rose, quietly, quietly,
I committed that to memory,
later added: ce lieu me plaît
dominè de flambeaux.*

5.

In dreams I was child babbling
at the gate splitting into two,
three to make herself safe.

Grown women combing black hair
in moonlight by the railroad track
stuck forever at the accidental edge.

O the body in parts,
bruised buttress of heaven!
She cries,

A child in a village church
clambering into embroidered vestments
to sing at midnight a high sweet tune.

Or older now
musing in sunlight
combing a few white strands of hair.

To be able to fail.
To set oneself up
so that failure is also possible.

Yes,
that too
however it is grasped.

The movement towards self definition.
A woman walking the streets
a woman combing her hair.

Can this make music in your head?
Can you whistle hot tunes
to educate the barbarians?

These lines took decades to etch free,
the heart's illiterate.
The map is torn.

Someone I learn to recognise,
cries out at Kurtz, thrusts skulls aside
lets the floodwaters pour.

MEENA ALEXANDER