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India Sutra¹

By Susan Hawthorne

*For Hugh David Hawthorne
31 Jan 1913 to 28 Jan 2004
and for travelling companions,
Lariane and Renate*

Prologue

They say that in ancient times
women didn't travel,

but I, Avis, say they did.
Women travelled in pairs

across the Australian desert,
Isis sailed the Nile,

the seven girls became birds,
took flight heading skywards, Amazons

rode horses, protecting their lands,
Medea, Helen, Sita and others

not yet known to us travelled for love.
So why not ancient lesbians?

In this time lesbians travel
for love. Our relationships

span continents, cross oceans
and gather frequent flyer points,

modern day swan-maidens.
Here are three voices:

Sakhi from India, displaced
at fourteen to a land where

the secular rites of cricket
and football take the place

of gods, mandalas

¹ *Sutra*. Literally, a string or thread. Also a literary form. What appears here is an extract from a longer poem of the same name. The complete "India Sutra" appears in *The Butterfly Effect* by Susan Hawthorne (Spinifex Press, 2005).

and yonis carved in stone.

Sakhi is on a quest for
an identity both elusive

and forbidden. She is searching
for a lost recipe and hoping

to catch it in a photograph.
Leda is of European descent.

One day I called her Scintl
and it stuck. She says,

*I am no Leda, I refuse to represent
dead Europa.* She longs for India

as for something lost, some
quality of life, some release.

Will this trip ring out the end?
Will her knees hold up?

Her wings rustle with uncertainty,
but Scintl's humour keeps her walking.

Then there is Avis who longs
only to fly, who in attending

one meeting in India, is missing
another in Melbourne where

she is the black sheep, the crow
who cannot cease speaking

the awful truth. Avis is a poet born
in the town named for its crows.

For each, a longing,
for each, a release.

The plans are made, the tickets
booked. Three women

caught in a mix of cultures
rehearsing imagined futures.

*28 Dec 2003, Bingil Bay
Avis: I dream of mortality.
My father not yet dead,*

*the coffin missing
but still they try to bury him.*

*Seven ages of men buried beneath the flag,
he's not ready yet,*

*not dead yet,
and the coffin is not built.*

*Bingil Bay
Scintl: A troubling dream,
an operating theatre filled*

*with masked women and men.
They open my knee*

*only to find the plastic
and steel has dissolved.*

*I wake to a ragdoll knee
unable to walk.*

*Geelong
Sakhi: I dream of Chowpatty Beach,
the recipe for bhel puri has been stolen.*

*I go in search of it all over India.
I interview thousands and no one*

*can remember it. In the end
they tell me it has never existed.*

First Sutra

*16 Jan 2004, Mumbai
India raises its nuclear hand
and so does Pakistan*

but on this stage in Mumbai
a single stage

the band Jinoon blasts out peace
Pakistani rock rocks Mumbai.

*

From the parade ground
a lakh of souls watch and listen

*Debating imperialism is like debating
the pros and cons of rape, says Arundhati*

Roy. Her absolution, she says,
is to be allowed into Frying Pan Park²

unlike the others, she talks turkey
with the condemned turkeys.

*

Manjula, thirteen years old,
and Vice-President of Bhima Sangha,

laughs with her eight- and ten-year-old
friends, ragpickers all of them,

she smiles into the camera.
Small fry, condemned to be

a turkey, forever scratching
through the rags of others.

17 Jan

We – Sakhi, Scintl and I,
(Avis of the crows)

begin the day with masala

² In her opening speech at the World Social Forum, Mumbai on 16 January 2004 Arundhati Roy spoke of the annual Thanksgiving Day pardon of a single turkey by the US President. One turkey is pardoned but fifty million turkeys are slaughtered. “That’s how New Racism in the corporate era works. A few carefully bred turkeys – the local elites of various countries, a community of wealthy immigrants, investments bankers, the occasional Colin Powell, or Condoleeza Rice, some singers, some writers (like myself) – are given absolution, and a pass to Frying Pan Park.”

dosa, crunching it into being.

*

We're at the gates of another world,
Cerberus is here, so too

the old guard and the avant garde
The grounds are abuzz with banners, leaflets,

drummers beat out a rhythm for the
protestors, some sing, some dance

GLOBALISE HUMAN RIGHTS.
MUSLIM WOMEN & SEXUALITY.

ORISSA ADIVASI ADHIKA
NO COMPANIES, NO CORPORATES

ONLY COMMUNITIES CONTROL
OVER LAND FORESTS AND OCEANS.

GLOBALISATION IS A QUESTION,
DALITS ARE THE QUESTION MARK.

WOMEN IN BLACK AGAINST WAR.
NATIONAL DISABILITY NETWORK.

IF ANOTHER WORLD IS POSSIBLE
MAKE TIBET A ZONE OF PEACE.

WHO WOULDN'T DIE TO WEAR A SHAHTOOSH
SAY NO TO SHAHTOOSH.

Each brings to the event her own hopes,
her stories of hardship and action.

For me, it's a dream turned reality.
My theories tested in the dry dust

of Mumbai. Here, if anywhere,
perhaps another world is possible.

*

A buzz of black and yellow

padmini cabs swarm toward me

in the late afternoon sun
dancing into the lucrative hive

so many customers
from so many places

the negotiations spiral
toward the vein of honey.

*A thousand rupees ...
Four hundred rupees ...*

*Eight hundred ...
Four hundred and fifty ...*

*Six hundred rupees ...
Five hundred.*

And the queen makes the deal.

*

The flute-seller carries
his wooden pipes

an echidna's spines
humped on his back

his tune calling
each passer-by

each child dancing behind
the pied piper.

My lens is fractured,
what I see, like the colonisers before me,

comes through the eyes of a different
geography a world of other fauna.

But India and Australia share a substratum,
Gondwanaland.

18 Jan

We ride in the ladies-only carriage
to Goregaon. Crushed body to body.

Above the fans whirr hot air, below
our feet the rails zing with electricity.

Women board selling from trays
earings, hair clasps, ribbons.

Disgorged at the other end,
Scintl, friend of Cerberus,

stops to photograph dogs
lazing on railway roofs.

Mementos for Sindhu, she says,
since she can't be with us.

*We need a world that's
friendly for dogs too.*

*

A sarong covers my head
I throw up behind its wrap.

A group of men in white
jalabas look at me,

I care nothing for their stares.
My head pounds, like the pounding

of old Sisyphus tumbling
headlong down the rocky slope.

My body removes itself
from the pain, taking flight,

I stand, wobble into the crowd
of Dalits proclaiming on the backs

of their jackets that it is they, Dalits,
who will make another world possible.

Right now, all I want is a world

in which migraines are impossible.

19 Jan

I walk to the workshop
B42, says the program.

It's at the edge of the grounds
a marginal place to talk about

a marginal group, lesbians
beaten, killed, jailed, ostracised

tortured because of love
I find B45, B44, B43 ... B41?

Where is B42? Is this a metaphor
for our invisibility?

*

We begin to talk. The students
of psychology speak about delinquent girls

whom they hope to rehabilitate
so they might marry, be normal girls.

When I speak, what do they hear?
Am I the Dalit? Am I untouchable

in another way?
I say, *What of the trauma?*

What of the suicides? The silences?
They hear my words

but not the silence between us.
In spite of this, we build small trust

through conversation. We speak of
the insults and assaults

encountered in the countries
represented by these twenty women.

It's a women-only session, I say

to the man at the door.

It's Ganesh in drag,
neither here nor there.

I repeat my sentence, and as I do
some women inside the door

rise to leave. Small trust is shattered,
openness ruptured into fragility.

We begin again,
shuffling into speech.

*They burned the house of
a couple in Kerala, says one.*

*They flog the women in my country,
says another from Iran.*

*In Cuba, I cannot speak, there I cannot exist,
says the Canadian activist.*

Each knows the precarious
existence of the world

she inhabits, of the world
which claims another world is possible.

But even in this tent at the margins
of possibility, that possible world remains elusive.

*

A rainbow of protestors gather
each pinned with a multicoloured badge.

HIJRAS³ ARE WOMEN, says the banner.
But, I ask, *Are lesbians people?*

No hijras attend the session on
Muslim Women & Sexuality.

Is that because

³ Hijras have played a social role in Indian society for many years. Traditionally hijras are eunuch men. These days the definition of hijra is broader and includes men who are gay, transsexual or cross-dressers.

hijras are also men?

*

The tongue is silent, still we
cannot speak, cannot name ourselves.

Is this what freedom amounts to?

*

Later, at the hotel,
I mull over my invisibility,

my untouchability.
The migraine recedes,

into its shadowlife.
Temporary relief.

I am back in my body again.
What a surprising experience!

20 Jan

Who is at the door?
Is it Ganesh, doorkeeper

to the women's quarters,
the world of women

who from their own fluids
give birth to the elephant-headed one

neither male nor female.
Perhaps it was Ganesh who wrote the

T-shirt slogan,
Heterosexuality isn't normal – just common.

*

Scintl is in the midst of debates on IVF,
infanticide of girls, stem-cell selection

and cloning, I can almost hear
her feathers ruffling the canvas-walled room.

Between words she passes the old
fruit bar from the airline,

suddenly hunger takes me.
I chew through the remainder

until with a nudge of wings
she insists I share.

*

The women's toilet has a queue
outside the door, where a sign reads,

Hurry up!

2.4 million people want to use the toilet.

*

Here we sit, activists from
four continents, five corners

one chair empty, a reminder of
our visa-less friend. *Allowed out,*

they say, *but not back.* The risk
is that she'll speak out of line

in this global line dance.
I talk through the jarring

jackhammer; through the migraine
still hammering my skull.

21 Jan

Chowpatty Beach is home
to Sakhi's childhood memories

We've been filling up on bhel puri daily,
tasting the past on your tongue.

In the night's warm air we watch as chefs
in high hats and red gingham aprons

cook up scents of coriander,

mint and lemon mixed with ginger,

tamarind, onion and chilli.

*

Scintl dreams of returning
to this world as a cockatoo,

she dreams of a life without pain,
without papers and files,

knees that can take sudden landings.
Is any other world possible?