

Fragile Places: A Poet's Notebook

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(This is a work in progress. Some of these thoughts were first presented at a talk as part of a series on the theme of Change, Shippensburg University, April 15, 2003; I also presented a version of this at a panel at Dartmouth College 'Transnational Ethics and Aesthetics in Asian American Literature, May 1, 2003. The others on the panel were Maxine Hong Kingston, Garrett Hongo and Li-Young Lee. I am grateful to them for the discussion we had. A portion of the section 'Crossing Sabermati' was published in The Women's Review of Books, February 28, 2003.)

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Triptych in a Time of War

I searched on the internet for lines by Enheduanna, the great poet of Mesopotamia, the first poet in recorded history. Afterwards, I could not bear the windowless office I had been given and so I walked up to the eighth floor atrium and opened my eyes and on a high wall saw the Dove of Tanna, Frank Stella's piece filled with light. I had first seen the image, in that way, at that angle, lit by the sun, a week or so earlier when David Harvey had addressed a few of us and listening to his words I had turned my eyes to the bright talisman of peace on the wall.

Back in my office I wrote lines in which I felt the beginnings of a poem.(1) But because the printer in the English Department was out of order I emailed the lines to myself so that I could retrieve them in the safety of my home. Later as I sat and wrote I thought of bombs that burst roofs and walls, a woman poet who did not have the luxury of sitting at her desk and writing, a poet flung out of her home, forced to cross the shattered street. This is some part of the email I sent myself. There is in it, I think, some impatience with myself and also some real awareness of the limits of the poem.

Friday March 07, 2003, 4:26 pm

Dear Meena

you are not so far today. why must you email these messages, as if pen and paper were hard to find, or a printer. On the Dove of Tanna the artist cut up bits of aluminum and painted them over into the dove's tail, the arrow's flight, the green bough that signifies the lifting of the waters... While you're at it why not think of the door you have opened, perhaps portal would be a better word, onto the layering of fragile places whose petals spurt scents from Paris and Istanbul and Rome. Or blood spurting from the cut aorta. Wrapping it in raw silk will do no good...

The rest of the email contains lines that incorporate what was to come, lines I had to sculpt into shape to make the bare bones of the poem I began in the building where the Graduate Centre is, 365 Fifth Avenue.

May 18, 2003. I went to the Met to see the First Cities exhibit. The darkness of the silk that draped the walls sent out a pervasive gloom, but the ancient artifacts, bird and spouted vessel and golden ram prancing in a flowering thicket snared the heart.

I found myself in a corner of an inner room and there in front of me was an alabaster disc. Its thickness amazed me, at least six inches in depth, that creamy stone onto which was cut the figure and face of Enheduanna, leading the array of priests, an image I had only seen on the internet. Without knowing what I was doing I made the sign of the cross, an instinctive thing I have carried with me from early childhood, a sign I make in the presence of something sacred. As if in a dream I gazed at her face, the cheekbones scooped away, damage hurting her throat but the profile incised there, the hands held out, the precious poem.

I took my friend Gauri to face the alabaster disc and I said to her, I will stand here to take darshan. And I stood there for a long time.

Poet at the Piano

My mind moves to another country, to which we are bound in the terrible intimacy of war. But it is not just of war I wish to speak, nor of streets filled with what comes in the aftermath of the burning of buildings, the burning of children instead of paper.

I want to speak of the task of poetry, what place the poem might have in the wreckage we humans can make of our shared world.

There is a poem that plays in my head, as much for its musicality as anything. Yet its matter is close. A poem called 'Mozart 1935'. In it Wallace Stevens addresses the poet: 'be seated at the piano.' Even if stones are thrown in the streets, even if there is a body in rags being carried out, the poet must sit at his piano. And the lines rise to a magnificence Stevens could muster at need:

*Be thou the voice,
Not you. Be thou, be thou
The voice of angry fear,
The voice of this besieging pain. (2)*

I think this poem has been in my head in a hidden way all these days. I read it first in Khartoum when I was a teenager, in the dark, cool library by the Nile where I first read so many poems that are still important to me. There was gunfire in the streets, civil unrest. I was a teenager then and anxious to make sense of the world and only the near mystical twists and turns of the poem could afford me anything close to that 'starry placating' Stevens evokes.

In March 2003 I bought two black notebooks. In one I pasted out the pages I was printing of the cycle of Gujarat poems written after a visit to the relief camps there, camps that housed the survivors of ethnic carnage. All the poems including 'Letters to Gandhi' had come in an overflow of emotion that kept me from sleep. I needed the security of a bound covers within which I could turn pages and take flight from poem to poem.

I had to move back and forth between the poems to make a deeply personal sense out of that chaos. A week or two later I started another notebook which I labeled 'Raw Silk' and in that book I set drafts of three poems which also came to me at great speed, a wind smashed bouquet. Some of the images that came to me echoed those that had blossomed in my head in the days and nights of a Delhi winter when I

sat in quiet in a patch of sunlight brooding on what I had seen and heard in the relief camps in Gujarat. So into my notebook I pressed the images that came to me, through layer after layer of sense.

Running my fingers through the notebook I see lines I have written in my squiggly hand. They are lines that tell of how I had tried to make a pure lyric out of the title poem of my new book 'Raw Silk' but without my knowing it, a border was crossed. (3)

March 20, 2003

What happens in my poetic production is that almost without knowing it, the violence of history enters in. Creeps in through the back door as it were, enters my consciousness, so that in the poem 'Raw Silk' which will be the title poem of the new book I started off by wanting to write a simple poem about a scrap of raw silk that my mother gave me from her mother's sari (and about the mulberry patch my grandmother planted after her return from China) and instead, into that entered the soldiers, the tear gas, the grenades of a childhood in Sudan, just as no doubt in my daughter's consciousness the war (now), the bomb drills in school, all enter in.

Later as I returned to composing the poem I sensed that I was in search of an answer to the oldest of questions -- Who are you?

Fragile Places

It's April now, a bright spring day in New York City, sunlight in all the places that winter darkness had made us forget, the crook of a wall, the cranny of a tree, tiny rip in an asphalt road and everywhere the sight and scent of spring bursting forth, petals, stamens singing, the joints of leaf and branch rippling with sap and birdsong from behind clouds.

I saw those boughs, that sunlight coming up out of the darkness of the subway, after a meeting in one of the most crowded parts of the city, the heart of mid-town Manhattan. In a high room a few poets had gathered to talk about Intimacy and Geography. It was a phrase that was meant to encapsulate the theme of an Asian American poetry festival planned for the fall, a phrase that we tossed back and forth, a live ball out of which spilled thoughts of what it might mean to make a home in language, in multiple languages, through exile and uprooting, through migrant memories, fragile places.

Arjun Appadurai has reflected on locality as a structure of feeling. He writes of how the production of locality is 'a fragile and difficult achievement ... shot through with contradictions, destabilized by human motion...' (4) Living in place and the crossing of borders are both part of our lives in this century, habitation incomprehensible without the mobility that some choose, and others are condemned to.

More and more our poems are palimpsests of place, memory and desire written through them, the slow darkness of human suffering underpinning their minute and sometimes joyous illuminations.

Theodor Adorno has suggested that the lyric is a form which in its very intimacy, its solitude, is underpinned by the longing of society, for a crystallised structure, a form of feeling that must necessarily refuse that which society stands for, the hard, crowded, oppressive, regulated world -- the realm of dos and don'ts. Adorno writes: 'This demand however, the demand that the lyric word be virginal, s itself social in nature.' (5)

Virginal I don't quite understand. But I do understand an intensity that scrubs out the awful constraints in which all that is pure can be trammled in, all that the body can sometimes bind us into, being the creature of place that it is.

I once wrote a poem called 'Passion' in which I spoke of the human realms of do and don't – and it was a woman's voice I was thinking of, rising above these, a full soaring note higher, a cry for the paradise only the poem might render possible.(6)

So to that take voice, that longing one might move on and think of the poet as one who dwells in fragile places – zones that can be shattered by the raise of a hand, the quiver of an eyebrow and fused together with the fiery power of dream.

Red Bird

Back and forth I stitch these thoughts in time. In Fall 2002, I was in India, living in Kerala and teaching at Mahatma Gandhi University which is twelve miles from my mother's house.

In December I travelled to Santiniketan, in West Bengal, to the university established by the poet Rabindranath Tagore. It was the dry season, cool and dry. I wandered through dusty paths and came upon huts made of wood and thatch, sculptures set in groves of trees, and a marble temple where there was no idol or godhead, rather the spirit, the empty spirit in vacant space that Tagore's father invoked. Standing there I saw light streaming through brilliant glass panes onto the cool floor. I felt I could live there, in Santiniketan, the Abode of Peace, for a long long time and it was hard for me to leave. I read my poems there, was interviewed, gave a talk which I called 'Identity Works' on multicultural American poetry.

One morning I closed my eyes and when I opened them again I saw a red bird flying over the museum that houses the artifacts Tagore had collected in his lifetime, the silken robes he used in theatre productions, the brocade robes gifted from Japan, the paper on which he wrote, the enamel pen, a model of the train in which he took his last ride from Kolkata to Santiniketan. Even in the rundown parts of his university, I am thinking now of the guest house where wild dogs roam in the dining hall, there was his spirit, something cut apart from, yet powerfully wedded to the earth out of which he drew his songs. Lines from his last set of poems, 'Shesh Lekha' the so called deathbed poems that haunt me.

This was written on May 13, 1941, less than three months before his death:

*On the banks of the Rupanarayan I woke
and realised this world
was no dream.
With alphabets of blood
I saw myself defined.
I recognised myself
through endless suffering,
countless wounds.
Truth is cruel:
I love its cruelty
for it never lies. (7)*

Perhaps it is the cruelty of truth that awakens us to the fragility of place. fragile places which we inhabit as human beings, places that we make in order to be persons, in community, in communion, and how very easily that civil pact can be broken, the key to our co-existence tossed away.

Crossing the Sabarmati

September 11, 2002 I was in Ahmedabad in Gujarat. The city of Ahmedabad lies on the banks of the river Sabarmati. It is where Gandhi, the father of Indian independence, the creator of non-violent action, had chosen to set his ashram. In the clear morning light, in the company of a dear friend, I crossed the river over the main bridge. My friend and I found a decrepit three-wheeler that dropped us off in Shahpur, a poor neighborhood. With the help of a Dalit activist we made our way to a large relief camp, Quraish Hall, that in better times had been used for weddings.

How had this all come about ? A bare bones telling. In February 2002 a Muslim mob had allegedly torched a train carrying Hindu activists and 59 people lost their lives. The aftermath of Godhra--a single word suffices to summon up that tragedy--was carefully orchestrated by right-wing Hindu groups. The plundering and burning of Muslim properties, the killing and mutilation of men and the mass rape of women all showed signs of meticulous planning.

As we sat, two women in our cotton kurtas on the low wooden stools in the courtyard, the people pressed around us. They were the survivors of the killings in Naroda Patiya, a neighborhood of Ahmedabad. Svati explained that she was collecting information for PUDR, the People's Union for Democratic Rights, as part of their project of documenting human rights violations. I don't have anything material to give you, Svati said, but please tell us what happened. People pressed forward. There was a terrible hunger to tell their stories.

Afterwards, I could not sleep, hearing those voices. A thin, elderly woman in an orange sari told us how her daughter-in-law Kausar Banu, nine months pregnant, was set upon by armed Hindu men, her belly ripped open, the unborn child pierced by a sword, thrown into the fire. A small dark man, Bashir Yusuf, had survived by hiding under dead bodies. He showed us the marks on his back from knife blades where the Hindutva men had attacked him. He had to run for his life from the Civil Hospital--you are a Muslim, a doctor said to him, I won't help you live.

Then a tiny child, barely two, was raised up in the arms of a thin woman. The child's name was Yunus. He was dressed in a torn green shirt, and the woman who was carrying him and said she was his mother turned him around and lifted his shirt and we saw the burn marks on his bottom, where the skin had scarred, the marks stretching over his tiny back, making it look like a raw fruit, terribly disfigured. He had been thrown into a fire and someone had pulled him out and rescued him. The child had enormous eyes and kept staring at me. Even now, back in this wintry city, I see his eyes staring into mine.

Ahmedabad itself was a city split in two.. On one side of the river, a thriving city, cars and money and people eating bhel puri on the streets or flocking to restaurants. On the other side of the river, marks of devastation and victims with no means of livelihood filled with fear of what would happen if they dare to return to their old neighborhoods. One thing I cannot forget--when people desperate for help approached the Sabarmati Ashram, those who were in charge of the ashram closed the doors on them, denied them shelter.

I first entered the ashram in what feels like another life, over two decades ago, in the company of Svati's father, the Gujarati poet Uma Shankar Joshi. He was a follower of Gandhi and knew the compound and the buildings well. I followed him into the cool, low-ceilinged house as he showed me where Gandhi and

his wife Kasturba had lived. Now in this season of difficulty I felt the peace inside Gandhi's dwelling. I stopped, touched the walls of the small whitewashed kitchen I have always held in memory. Low shelves, windows, small receptacles for food. There was peace here, but at what cost was it maintained?

At the threshold I shut my eyes. I saw the Mahatma, in his pale loin-cloth. He tore open the doors of the house, he strode down the path under the neem trees. He cried out in words that were hard to understand. He leapt into the river, a flash of flesh and cloth. In bold, unhurried strokes he swam across the Sabarmati. Then, just as he was, Gandhi walked into the burning city.

That afternoon, as always, there were green parrots. I saw them as I walked down the steps of Gandhi's house. They flitted through the trees, into the holes in the outer wall of the ashram. The walls went down all the way to the river.

On the other side of the river innocent human beings had been killed and raped. I watched the parrots disappear into their hiding holes. Slowly it grew dark, then darker. The river, with the smoke-stacks on the other side, kept flowing on.

What I had seen and heard in Ahmedabad was too terrible for me to tell my mother who was waiting for me in Kerala, five hundred miles away, in a house with a sandy courtyard and a red tiled roof, with a pond where the golden carp flit under mauve petals of the waterlily. As if sensing my disquiet she did not press me too hard. After all she had newspapers and watched TV. Gujarat seemed far away, another country. I felt I had crossed a border, entering Kerala again. But Gujarat was after all part of India and that other locality and its terrible dismemberment was portion of the news of our world. For many many nights I could not sleep.

Later I travelled to Delhi to give a reading at the Sahitya Akademi, the National Academy of Letters . On my first day in the city I went to Bengali Market to buy fruit. I had a great longing to eat pomegranates and this was the right season for them. I felt that before I read my poems I had to eat this fruit with its hard skin, its brilliant red seeds. Though pomegranates are available in many parts of India, somehow I associated them with Delhi, its red sandstone buildings and brilliant winter skies.

Entering the market I thought I heard the voice I had heard in my head in the days and nights after my return from Gujarat.

It was the voice of the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova who in her 'Instead a Preface' to the poem Requiem, describes how she stands in a winter street in Leningrad, in a long line of people in front of a prison and a woman recognises her, a woman with blue lips who comes over to the poet and whispers 'Can you describe this?' and Akhmatova replies 'I can.'

One draws strength from the great ones who have gone before and as I stood in that Delhi street, Gujarat already another place, far away, I heard Akhmatova's words. And I saw in front of me, wrapped up in a khadi shawl and wools, a dear friend. He was leaning forward in an autorickshaw, a three wheeler that was about to start. The autorickshaw was parked in front of a tiny storefront clinic, one of many in Delhi that dispense medicines and basic healthcare to urban dwellers. This clinic had a sign in it in big red letters that caught my eye: Dr. Gandhi's clinic. I went forward and embraced my friend who I had not seen for many years. It was Ramu, Gandhi's grandson. I wanted to tell him about my visit to Gujarat but just then there was no time. That had to wait for later. Many months later, back in New York, when I worked on my poems, his voice and figure entered in, restoring time, restoring me to place. (8)

Beauty and Terror

The present is not another country. It is where we live. When I started to write the Gujarat poems, I knew I had to rely on beauty. Otherwise the rawness of what had happened, the bloody bitter mess would be too much to take. The poem can take a tiny jot of the horror but evoke grief, restore tenderness so that we are not thrust back into an abject silence. As if we have heard and seen nothing.

After the poems were completed, I sent them to a friend at the Times of India and he in turn sent them onto a friend at the Hindu with the thought that they might publish them on the Sunday literary page. The editor at the Hindu who is also a poet wrote back to me. First he spoke of how for many years he had followed my work, then he wrote a few lines about my poems that made me stop in my tracks:

'Dear Meena ...I ... am, frankly, amazed by the poems provoked by the pogrom and its aftermath in Gujarat, by the way they weave terror and disturbance with beauty and elegance of form in the way that sometimes makes people who are distrustful of the claims of art suspicious of poetry and its intentions.

He was a poet himself and I valued his words but what did he mean by the distrust of beauty? He had touched a nerve and I wrote back the same day, March 18, 2003, by email: *Dear --, Beauty and terror -- we must speak of all that sometime. I needed beauty there to work so that the pity of it would strike the reader. too much horror, raw, the mind cannot take -- and here beauty can work for us, for the good, so I dare to believe as a poet.*

I feel there is nothing more to add. All I can do now is turn to a few of the poems of whose genesis I have spoken, poems made and unmade in time, on the loom of fragile places.

Notes:

(1) In my reflections on composition, most of the poems I allude to are to be found in my new book -- Meena Alexander, *Raw Silk* (TriQuarterly Books/ Northwestern University Press, 2004). See 'Triptych in a Time of War' pp. 64-67

(2) Wallace Stevens, 'Mozart, 1935' *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997) p. 107

(3) See pp. 34-36, *Raw Silk*

(4) Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: The Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996)p.198

(5) Theodor Adorno 'On Lyric Poetry and Society' *Notes to Literature* Vol 1. ed Rolf Tiedemann, transl. S.W. Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) p.39

(6) Meena Alexander, 'Passion' *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience* (Boston: Southend Press, 1996) pp. 17-20

(7) Rabindranath Tagore, *Shesh Lekha, The Last Poems of Rabindranath Tagore*, transl. Pritish Nandy (New Delhi, Rupa, 2002) p.27

(8) See the poem 'Bengali Market' in the cycle of poems 'Letters to Gandhi', *Raw Silk* (pp.77-83)