

Poems from **Illiterate Heart** (TriQuarterly Books/ Northwestern University Press, 2002)

Muse

I was young when you came to me.
Each thing rings its turn,
you sang in my ear, a slip of a thing
dressed like a convent girl--
white socks, shoes,
dark blue pinafore, white blouse.

A pencil box in hand: *girl, book, tree* --
those were the words you gave me.
Girl was *penne*, hair drawn back,
gleaming on the scalp,
the self in a mirror in a rosewood room
the sky at monsoon time, pearl slits,

in cloud cover, a jagged music pours:
gash of sense, raw covenant
clasped still in a gold bound book,
pusthakam pages parted,
ink rubbed with mist,
a bird might have dreamt its shadow there

spreading fire in a tree *maram*.
You murmured the word, sliding it on your tongue,
trying to get how a girl could turn
into a molten thing and not burn.
Centuries later worn out from travel
I rest under a tree.

You come to me
a bird shedding gold feathers,
each one a quill scraping my tympanum.
You set a book to my ribs.
Night after night I unclasp it
at the mirror's edge

alphabets flicker and soar.
Write in the light
of all the languages
you know the earth contains,
you murmur in my ear.
This is pure transport.

Translated Lives

The past we make presumes us
as pure invention might, our being here compels it:
an eye cries out for an eye, a throat for a throat.

We muse on Rimbaud's mouth caked with soil,
his Parisian whites stiffening:
Quick! are there other lives?

Who shall fit her self for translation?
Letter for letter, line for line,
eyes flashing at squat gulls

on this mid-Atlantic shore
with sail boats rudderless,
a horizon scrawled in indigo.

What water here, or air?
A terrible heat comes on,
birds scurry

swallowing their own shadows,
lovers couple on hard rock
groping for the sea's edge.

Neon mirages mock
the realm Columbus sought.
In Times Square selling the National Debt

electronic numbers triple on the light strip
and where the digits run -- pure ciphers -- 000
mark heaven's haven.

Into that nothingness, a poverty of flesh,
track tanpura and oudh,
the torn ligaments of a goat's throat

still bloodied, strummed against sand.
As boats set sail through our migrant worlds,
as faxes splutter their texts

into the crumpled spaces in our skin
and the academies bow low: white shirts, threadbare elbows
scraped into arcane incandescence,

shall we touch each other stiffened with sense,
bodies set as if in Egyptian perspective,
full frontal necks craned to the glint of the horizon?

Will a nervous knowledge
a millennial sense be kindled?
Must the past we make consume us?

Illiterate Heart

I.

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 kurta 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.

II.

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 had 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.

III.

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 sprang from the hips of consonants,
vowels grew ribbed and sharp.
Pages bound into leather
turned the color of ink.

My body flew apart :
wrist, throat, elbow, thigh,
knee where a mole rose,
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.

IV.

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 *fiscus 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*
dominé de flambeaux.

V.

In dreams I was a 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 vestements
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.

--For Adrienne Rich--