

Poems from **Quickly Changing River** (TriQuarterly Books/ Northwestern University Press, 2008)

Cosmopolitan

You want a poem on being cosmopolitan.
Dear friend, what can I say?

Sometimes I cannot tell mulberry skin
From blood on the hands of children.

Nor stop myself from tugging a cloth
Where ghostly knives, cups, forks flutter,

Where stones surrender to the hunger of exiles.
Yesterday I jumped the metal door confusing D train for A,

Doors clashed, I tore a sleeve, saved my arm.
Pacing the ill lit platform

I heard the bird of heaven call.
A cry huge, indigo,

Bursting the underground tunnel.
A simple enough bird

Whose voice alone forces it apart.
A dun coloured thing feathers moist

It likes best to perch on green tamarind
Or on a bamboo branch.

The kind of bird you see painted
On palmyra fans

Or at the rim of raw silk
Furnishing a woman's garment.

As the A train spun in I saw claws
Scoring a stubble field,

Rails melting into bamboo hit by a lightning storm..
Ill suited for that train

And where ever in the world it might take me,
I set both hands to the tunnel wall.

In cracks of the broken wall I touched dirt, moist, reddening.
It came to me foolish perhaps,

Yet insistent as night wind after a storm has passed.
Slow sweet tapping on the tympanum:

This is where your home is laid,
Scales unsung and secret geography.

Odd questions massed in me.
Who knows my name or where my skin was torn?

If I could would I return to Kashi?
And might the queen of trumps intercede for me?

On an island, in a high room,
On a kitchen table, by a chopping board

I set a book you once gave me, *The Travels of Mingliatse*.
That ancient sage whispers in my ear:

*I have seen the sea changed three times
into a mulberry field and back again into the sea.*

Closing the *Kamasutra*

In another country at the river's edge
We lay down in whispering dirt,
Then tried to fix a house with hot hope.
If we live together much longer
I'll become a cloud in my own soul.
Sweet jasmine floats in a bowl,
A keyboard harbours insects
(Mites in secret laying white eggs).
I must light frankincense to smoke them out
Else the alphabets will fail.
It is written in the *Kamasutra* --
They embraced not caring about pain or injury,
All they wanted was to enter each other.
This is known as milk-and-water.