

DREAMING IN SHIMLA  
*Letter to my Mother*

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MEENA ALEXANDER



GOLDEN JUBILEE SERIES

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## Three Poems

### *I. Fragments in August*

#### I.

In the garden of black throated tits  
Someone is cutting the grass  
He wears a straw hat.

Dew collects  
In the brim of the gardener's hat  
Gnats pour into the sun.

#### II.

At dusk pine trees  
Shake — gold  
Of leaping monkeys.

III.

I will wait for you  
By the fountain:  
Little fishes are breathing hard.

IV.

In the converted stables  
Where I live  
Someone is weeping.

She scrubs dirt  
Off her footsoles,  
Tries to forget his hands.

Fruit flies buzz  
Over the ripe mangoes  
He brought her

In a paper bag,  
Bits of straw  
Still clinging to sap.

V.

At dawn  
She writes in her notebook  
The one with blue lines

She bought  
In Boileauganj —  
Why am I a body?

Even the buddleia bush  
Sheds its shadow  
When the moon glows.

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2. *Game of Ghosts*

I.

No water in the fountain  
The garden of consolations is at hand.

II.

Twin monkeys pick at the edge of the lawn  
Who knew they ate grass?



III.

Sunlight — a mauve hibiscus consumes itself  
Bare stalks flash.

IV.

Someone is playing tennis on Lord Dufferin's court  
He puts us all to shame

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V.

He comes closer and closer the beautiful boy  
He has no toes.

*3. Future Perfect*

I.

Children with butterfly nets dawdle on stones  
What do they hope to catch?

II.

By slippery rocks pine trees scrawl themselves  
Into a future perfect.

III.

How this swerving tense  
Unsettles me —

IV.

Tomorrow the mountain  
Will have sworn itself to secrecy.

V.

Why do I feel as if I were walking  
Into my own death?

VI.

If I stand on the footpath utterly still  
Will houses swarm into light ?



## Dreaming in Shimla : Letter to my Mother

I.

Dear Mother, please do not call me any more.  
I cannot pick up the telephone

I am preparing for you to disappear.  
The mountains keep watch over me

Here in my study in the Corridor of Princes.  
Dust on the bookshelf, in the folds of the telephone directory

Shimla Special, silver fish crawl.  
A potted begonia sits on the window sill

Its blackened leaves put me in mind of veins of ore  
On the slopes where Mira still wanders, half naked

Feet cut with stones  
Singing hymns to a dark God.

II.

Grandmother died on you with absolutely no warning,  
Left you a raw girl clad in wild cottons,

Just sixteen,  
Weeping into your own sleeve.

No mother and a father who did not really care for you –  
Forced to walk on eggshells

Rub a dub dub of wretched want and need.  
Stony tutelage.



## III.

I cannot bear it when the phone rings.  
I have wedged the coal black thing into the bookshelf,

Behind it, a tattered screen where I hide to comb my hair,  
Fix my lipstick, slip into a sari.

Kanjeevaram silk, green shot with purple threads,  
The hue of begonia petals.

You gave it to me, for my sixteenth birthday.  
*You are the age I was when my mother died.*

How can I forget?  
I hear your voice in my head

*You think you are doing something special  
Hiding away, writing in the mountains.*

*What use is it to anyone?  
You should be more like your sister*

*Look at all she does, she manages the cook, the driver  
My house and hers, takes care of us all.*

*When the dust rises in the plains  
Sinus troubles afflict her*

*She sits in the garden beside me  
Under the flowering camel's foot tree.*

*Don't you know child  
That's what a woman's life should be.*

*What can all your scribbling do for us?  
Will it draw us into eternity?*

IV.

Dear Mother I have your mother's diaries with me.  
I brought them in a paper bag marked *Ram Lall and Sons*,

All the way from Siddharth Vihar  
The converted stables where I sleep.

In dreams I hear the snort of horses,  
Crude rub of saddle against flank

Englishmen with polished boots  
Yelling for valet, butler, chowkidar.

V.

I pull the diary out, set it on the rickety desk,  
Pages translucent as butterflies wings.

The recipe for mutton curry  
In her firm rounded hand

Sits next to Gandhi's injunctions to spin.  
Grandmother wonders what to pay the dhobi,

The woman who pounds rice,  
The man who culls pepper from the twisted vines in the garden.

Will she burn all her silks in the nationalist bonfire?  
Can she keep a few?

*I have laid out my khadi, washed and ironed it .  
Tomorrow when I wear it, the sky will be blue.*

## VI.

Last night as hailstones struck the roof  
I hid grandmother's diaries in a leather suitcase

Thrust it under my bed for safekeeping,  
Set buckets on the bedroom floor

In all the spots where the ceiling darkened  
And rain water seeped.

At dawn monkeys rollicked on the rooftop,  
Then quick hooves of horses in caracole.

We live with ghosts, Dear Mother  
So what else is new?

## VII.

Under the twisted branches of Himalayan oak and wild  
rhododendron,  
The whispers of lost women:

Child brides forced to bear firewood  
Up the slopes for the fretted furnaces of lords and ladies,

White haired women with their makeshift canes,  
Bodies bent in a hoarse wind that rattles bridge and bay window

Spews dirt onto pillar and polished marble —  
The furious wealth of empire.

VIII.

In the Tiruvella house before the monsoons came  
We collected coconut shells to trap water drops

When the shells overflowed  
Water streaked the red tiled floors,

Lightning rippled on our upturned faces.  
That's when I learnt to shut my eyes and dream.

Hard dreaming mother, in a new century.

IX.

Children from a school set into the mountainside  
Beat drums, chant their lessons.  
What do they learn?

X.

A brown bird cries out  
From the deodar trees.  
It has no name.

It makes warbling cries I cannot catch.  
Nothing to punctuate those sounds  
Except wild air.

XI.

The heart's illiterate, Dear Mother  
No reading or writing  
In those bloody clavicles.

Only whispered words, illegible sentences  
And all the marks the body bears  
Violent, ecstatic, lingering.

XII

I dream in Malayalam, the sound and scratch of it.  
Quick cries in the garden  
As earthworms squirm

Jasmine splutters into incandescent bloom,  
Mango and jackfruit trees  
Surrender to the lightning storm.

XIII.

The garden is forever lost.  
Does *forever*  
Have a sound, a scent?

I think it smells like wet sandalwood,  
Raw sawdust, blood, phlegm, excrement.  
What the body expels.

XIV.

In spite of ourselves we start imitating nature  
Raw frond and crooked stalk

Exquisite stitch of black in the pansy's claw —  
We who try to distill our desire

Into the forms of workable speech,  
Words to piece the screen together

Ancient screen,  
Perpetually in tatters.

XV.

In the Corridor of Princes  
Water floods my marble bathroom

The window quickens with monkey faces:  
One has smeared its face with coal.

Another has a pumpkin mouth,  
The third, blood around its nostrils.

I press my palm against the tottering screen,  
To shield me from the gaze of these creatures.

XVI.

In fissured rocks  
I find a pool

At the rim of clear water  
I see Mirabai searching out clots of chrysothite,

Wisps of goat's wool, chords of love  
From the humming bird's claw.

XVII

Dear Mother, you won't believe this  
But yesterday in the market on Mall Road,

Close to the shop that sells strands of speckled wool  
I came upon the blind man.

He was crouched on a smooth rock  
That rose out of freckled soil,

Beside him, a girl in a frayed dress,  
Her hem line torn.

XVIII

I saw him when I was six years old  
Deep inside the bamboo grove.

Boughs gleam round his head  
Snakes slither in between his toes

Hoarse bulbuls perch beside him  
As he kneels on dead bamboo leaves.

XIX.

After our house was sold,  
Flowering trees were axed,

Bamboo burnt to clear space for luxury flats,  
A flat roofed shopping center grew

Where sharp green leaves once whistled in the wind,  
Jyoti Bazaar they call it,

A concrete slab hollow inside with neon lights  
Stainless steel pots, slices of plum cake and pizza.



XX.

The blind man's eyes are masked  
With a strip of mottled cloth.

His flute is still the color of dry earth.  
He came north as Basho did

Taking a narrow road through the mountains.  
The blind man of Tiruvella

Has fled the ruined grove of childhood.  
He has come to these mountains to play his flute.

XXI.

He squats on a rock in Shimla, by a shop with peeling paint  
Where lengths of wool purl and sway,

Beside him, a child with a basket of fruit.  
The basket is covered with jute.

XXII.

When he lifts his flute, torn jute floats free  
Figs skip and roll on the broken cobbles.

Hearing that music all over again  
O makeshift memory –

I know why I have come to these mountains.  
How long I can stay, I do not know.



## I Thought of Making a Journey Poem

I had come for a month to the Institute, to the old vice regal lodge with its intricate layered balconies and chiseled woodwork. I found myself in Room 19, a suite of rooms really, sunlit living room with high ceilings and faded drapes, bedroom, dressing room with tilting mirror, bathroom decked out with slabs of marble. I had never seen such musty grandeur close at hand, let alone cohabited with it.

Surely the place was filled with ghosts of our erstwhile rulers. What would they do to me? Would they tear my hair out, force me to flee?

I had been carrying in my head thoughts of a journey poem, a cycle of poems, something that would have a woman at the heart of it, a woman born in Uttar Pradesh, just after mid-century. She had traveled right from childhood. She was trying to keep a journal. I had hopes of turning these fragments into a poem.

What was just outside room 19 took my breath away — a stone terrace stretching to the mountains. It undulated in sunlight, bluish tinged, an underwater color. A double sided stone bench, elegant, isolate, completed the picture.

It was the perfect place for a poet. Or a ghost. ‘She comes there,’ a newly found friend whispered in my ear. ‘The ghost of Curzon’s daughter. Have you seen her?’

Each morning before the sun rose high, burning up the clouds, I sat on the stone bench facing the mountains. The snow capped mountains were in the northwest, visible to the naked eye when the mist cleared. I felt I had never been so high up, so close to the sky.

I took my notebook . One never knew when a line would come. It was useless to make firm plans, decide to write this or that. Impossible to force one's way forward. The best one could do was lie in wait.

Each morning, I sat on the stone bench, watching the clouds. Clouds: sometimes they came so close I felt I was breathing them in. Sometimes they were far away and drifted in ripples and clumps over the mountains. I had brought Basho with me, his *Narrow Road to the Deep North*.

In a dim way I sensed that when the time came for me to make a journey poem Basho could keep me company. Sitting on the stone bench my eyes lit on a line: *I wandered all by myself into the heart of the mountains of Yoshino*. The line stayed with me, even when I walked down to the mess to eat our dinner of chapatis and dal.

I envied Basho his great freedom. What had it cost him? The most I could do was sit on the stone bench and wait for the Dhauladhar peaks to reveal themselves.

I shut my eyes. I imagined a woman poet born just after the middle of the twentieth century. And the medieval poet-saint Mirabai, could one imagine her born into our migrant world? I saw her walking down the dusty path, stopping by a stream to drink some water. And all the time the image of her beloved Krishna burnt inside. She sat on a stone, she wrote what she could.

I thought of Basho, I thought of Mirabai, two figures who could guide me. I saw them holding hands, walking into the horizon.

Before traveling south to my mother's house, I thought of writing lines evoking the mountains, the men with great weights, refrigerators and washing machines strapped to their backs toiling up the slopes.

Lines about the ghost of Curzon's daughter wandering the terrace searching for her love.

The monkeys! From the maple tree, young latched to their backs, they leapt onto the terrace, ambled past me. One afternoon they burst into Room 19, stealing the sweet scented mangos we had found in Boileauganj. They left a mess of paper and lingerie, a book of prose chewed up —*Poetics of Dislocation* —essays on poetry, migration and memory.

My poetry was left unscathed. I try to take courage from this. Still the monkeys are there, chattering away in the margins of the invisible page always in front of me.

What will they do to my lines?

Only time will tell.

*Tiruvella, June 26, 2010/ Shimla November 25, 2014*



## Poetry, Landscape, History

### I.

There are questions that have haunted me. And though they are not questions that permit ready answers, they do seem worth asking. How does poetry bear witness to ordinary experience? How does the real as we call it, emerge in the poem? What relation does poetry bear to history?

The hope is that in asking these questions we might muse in however provisional a fashion on the precarious nature of truth as it appears in the poem, the making and unmaking of landscapes, and how poetry and history are bound together even as they split apart.

### II.

Landscape permits the present to irradiate what we feel of the past, so that elements of our lives start to clarify and take shape within the symbolic space of the poem. Making a poem in this way has to do with allowing one to exist in the present, freed but not shorn of the burden of a past — lacking which the self could not in fact exist.

And perhaps this is the paradox on which the poem turns, acts of attention, acts of love creating a counter-world, momentarily freed of time.

But what of our shared life? The Italian poet Eugenio Montale speaks of ‘the second life of art’— a life that goes beyond form into shared memory, even if what is shared is just with one other person. He speaks of this as the poem’s ‘obscure pilgrimage through the conscience and memory of man.’

III.

It seems to me that the lyric poem is a form of extreme silence, which is protected from the world. To make a lyric poem one has to enter into a dream state. But at the same time, almost by virtue of that disconnect, it allows one an intense space to reflect on the world.

IV.

It was well past dawn the other morning when I woke up, the sun though not visible, was clearly shining beyond the window frame. Through that same window, above the stark branches of a winter tree, the full orb of the moon was visible.

In my sleep I had been tossing and turning about the various snares I had set for myself in proposing such a hard topic — linking poetry and history.

Then suddenly it came to me in the way that images do, with their sharp clarity — history is the sun. It will burn us if we get too close. Poetry is the moon with its incandescent glow, utterly ephemeral.

V.

I think of the lyric poem, the poem of deep privacy, language haunted by its own rhythms with a dim yet true sense of an emerging ‘I’, a subject haunted by its own inconstancy in an all too fragile landscape.

Might one think of the poem itself as coming into existence at the precise moment when the self, with all the mess and baggage of our ordinary life, vanishes?

What kind of transmutation of subjectivity are we speaking of here?



## VI.

I think of the intensely personal archive that each of us possesses — precisely what gives materiality to the poem — the pungent and precious power of the sensorium, the sight, sound, smell, touch and taste that make up our being in the world, utterly real yet constantly vanishing, available to the poet as a delicate repository. This is what one might think of as the traces, the original inscription of *rasa*, ephemeral base from which the poem is translated into existence.

Abhinavagupta c. 950-1020 CE realised this clearly. In his reflections he writes of how poetry far from dealing with the literal, reaches into what lies in memory, in memory fragments. It is in this way that *rasa*, the quick of aesthetic pleasure, is reached:

*On the other hand rasa is something that one cannot dream of expressing by the literal sense. It does not fall within workday expression. It is rather of a form that must be tasted by an act of blissful relishing on the part of a delicate mind through the stimulation of previously deposited memory elements... beautiful because of their appeal to the heart... the suggesting of such a sense is called rasadhvani and is found to operate only in poetry. This in a strict sense is the soul of poetry.\**

## VII.

There are many sorts of translation, from muteness to speech, from the fitfulness of feeling to the steadiness of inscription, from a landscape known and loved to another still unfamiliar and new, from one language and its culture to another.

The zone of the poem is where dreams cross language. And with the rhythms of composition the invisible enters. As a young poet the here and now was never something I could take for granted. To be somewhere, was also to not be somewhere else.

I now think that each rock, each root, even in the garden of my earliest childhood, carried its own shadow. In the poem, the visible and the invisible are entwined and place becomes a living palimpsest.

### VIII.

The poems gathered here under the title ‘Dreaming in Shimla: Letter to My Mother’ were made in the months I spent at the Institute. I had a study, Public Entry Room #11 with windows that looked out onto the evergreen trees, deodar and chir pine. When the weather was fine, one could see the mountains beyond. I grew to love the changing face of the mountain slopes, in mist, rain and bursts of sunlight when the great blue sky opened up.

Often while composing my poems I would walk. It’s become my habit to walk when I am working on a poem, so that with some luck the rhythm of my steps might unlock lines otherwise hard to come by.

Images flashed as I strolled in the lower garden. Some of them entered my poems. In dreams I imagined ‘Dreaming in Shimla: Letter to my Mother’ as one long ample line, curving in on itself, a pathway on the earth where one might walk. But in the act of composition the long line turned into shorter lines with the shape of stanzas for the breath to flow through.

It had become my practice each morning to stroll with my notebook and bookbag from Siddharth Vihar, up the winding path to my study. On the way I would stop to look at the scarred trunks of trees, boughs quivering.

Monkeys with their golden skins were leaping from branch to branch. When one or two approached too close on the footpath, I would whisper to them in Malayalam, begging them

not to pounce at me, to let me walk on. I would address them as grandmother monkey, or uncle monkey, or tiny baby monkey. I fancied that one or two perked up their ears and listened. And so far I have been fortunate, I have been able to walk on.

#### NOTE

- \* Abhinavagupta, *Locana*, *The Dvanyaloka of Anandavardhana with the Locana of Abhinavagupta*, transl. Ingalls, Moussaieff Mason, Patwardhan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990) p. 81

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\*

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