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Writing Sample

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Includes "from Entries on Light," "Mammont," and "Mahout."

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Mimi Khalvati
Three Poems

from *Entries on Light*

Today's grey light
is of
light withheld but
softly
shyly like a sheltered
girl's.

It's a
light in gentle
motion
like a young girl sitting
splaying her skirts

her listening smiles
around her.
When
barefoot
she disappears
momentarily to another

sky
gleams like glassware
we can hear not see
we
contract but air
expands

into a memory
she has thrown
behind her.
And in the memory is
light
and lightness.

Scales are evenly
weighed, inside
outside. Light is
evenly poised
- blur to the gold
glare to the blue –
it's twilight.
In two minds.

Who can read by
a lamp, focus
land's outline?
But blue soon
sinks and gold
rises. Who
can stay the balance
if light can't?

*

Streetlamps
threw battlements of
shadow on a lawn, somewhere
a travelling

clock ticked; rockplants
hung faceted
with lurid
orange raindrops

dustbin lids
gleamed
under gutter-pipes
and eaves.

But given
the minerality of
shorelife, rain's afterlife
it seemed

with a moon in the sky
tide going out - and
wave coming in on wave -
a miracle

that the one should draw
 the other, as though
 gravity were more to do
 with weightlessness than weight.

*

An Iranian professor I know asked me
 the first time we met, as he'd asked so many
 students: Saheb-del - how would you say in English
 Saheb-del, can you translate it? And each time
 he pronounced the words his fingers tolled the air
 like a bell, a benediction. Years have passed.

Saheb means master, owner, companion; del
 means heart. Heart's companion, keeper?
 Heart's host? And in those years I've asked
 friends who in turn have asked friends
 who know Urdu, Farsi, and no one has come up with
 the English for Saheb-del. Is it a name

for the very thing that won't translate? And why
 don't I remember having heard it said?
 They say it of people who are hospitable, 'godly',
 I'd say it of the professor himself. Trust him
 to keep asking, us to keep failing, and if we can't recall
 its tone, tenor, with what word shall we keep faith?

*

I've always grown
 in other people's shade.
 Not for shelter
 in solidity, neither they
 being spreading oak or beech nor I
 some shrinking violet

but when a face upturned
 towards frail light, a voice
 that interweaves between
 dark leaves a space for
 flower, path for thorn, catch something
 of light's reach and axiom

then lower on the stem
 my edges breathe, droop
 through dust re-invents desire
 not for gloss but growth
 from this common soil, that upward
 thrust from lateral roots

to a realm
 wholly natural, and radical.
 When a face, a voice
 like new leaves on a vane
 promise turn by turn
 a view, on a spiralling belt

towards that light, then
 being roused I know
 while upholding the crown
 in whose shade I too
 throw shadow, I draw
 a freight of light in tow.

*

*...Human beings must be
 taught to love
 silence and darkness.*

But in silence comes
 the seepage of
 a gas fire's breath

in darkness the pink
 of a child's
 mosquito net - it seems

their very presence
 is that love
 for how else can we invoke

after-worlds without
 voice, light
 but through things that

breathe and move, obey
 an absence

that is deified because

absence is unbearable
unless, in a residue
of breath and light

we bear the agony
of presence, and do
call this bearing, loving?

*

Nothing can ruin the evening -
car doors slammed, voices raised
in the last of the light, voices
without owners. And that's
a difference between art and nature -
art transforming - voices, traffic
tawdriness - but in a gathering-in
an almost selfish motion; nature
extending outwards as the shore its arms
night its stars, an open invitation.

The palace of a ship at night
blinking stars like cursors;
those disembodied voices from
who knows which shore, drunk –
why note them, fail them?
Torn between life and art, why is one
without the other like a shore without its sea
night without its stars, why am I
- still beautiful - so unable to contain
the ugliness, my own, in either?

*

It's the eye of longing
that I tire of
the eye of fantasy
lost in the grey horizons.

Having neither the heart
nor talent for

invention, why should I
 - no child of mist -

be party to this cold
 imagination, its cloak
 and hood, smuggled goods
 its faery in the dingle?

Where are my sunlight's
 givens? Near the sun
 and far from folk
 an albino child, skin clean

as silver, hair white as
 snow, under the Simorgh's
 eye as she flies
 over the Alborz Mountains

years later will hear her cry:
*... behold my might,
 For I have cherished thee beneath my plumes
 And brought thee up among my little ones*

before she ferries him home
 gives him a feather to light
 as a signal
 in times of trouble.

But this is my borrowed plumage
 language, more strange to me
 than this foster-tongue, this English
 fairy godmother.

*

To be so dependent on sunlight
 - small desires on the lookout
 like feathers snagged on slates -
 is to be, in a climate
 doomed to cloud, its changing mind
 a paler version of the story:
 he whose glory flew away from him
 three times in the shape of a bird
 whose wingspan was so great that rain
 could never fall but when faith
 at last deserted him and falsehood

took its place, fall it did to prove
that glory goes back to God, resides
with God by any other name.

*

What is he looking for
the great white sun
throwing the force of his search
like torchlight onto the sea?
What he looks for
will be present
only as long as his looking;
what he fails to find
absent
to the precise extent
of his brightness
blinding himself by reflection
while the passerby takes in
a high sun, a broken

and a peninsula of violet
the translation between.
It's darkness
the white sun looks for
the one thing
by the light of his eyes
he'll never see; one thing
the brighter, further
he throws his rays
the more recedes: it's
his shadow that he looks for
and will never know
if it is God or self, friend or foe
if it follows or precedes.

*

It is said
God created a peacock of light
and placed him
in front of a mirror.
In the presence

of God, being so ashamed at his own
 beauty, his own
 unutterable perfection, the peacock

broke out in a sweat.

From the sweat of his nose, God created
 the Angels.

From the sweat of his face, the Throne, Footstool
 Tablet of Forms, the Pen
 the heavens and what is in them.

From breast and back
 the Visited House, prophets, holy sites, etc.

From the sweat of his two feet
 God created, from east to west, the earth.
 The sea is
 glistening peacock sweat.

Tarmac too.

From sweat of the peacock's feet of pearl
 comes my window view.

Perhaps I am formed from a trembling

drop on his ankle.

Cypress, sunflower, bicycle wheels
 grass dried in heat

to the colour of wheat, all, all are
 peacock water, peacock dew
 shame and beauty, salt and light

God's peacock
 in his consciousness, walks over.

*

Too much light is tiresome.

Knowing this, today's
 keeps its counsel. Tight-lipped
 the sky has closed its door
 against the sea which
 like an aimless child
 spreadeagles on its bed. The day
 is set aside for function.

Every shrub, roof, windowsill
 broods on its own
 injunctions. Even birds on errands
 forget to play on thermals

winging it straight across the sky
as though time and light
were the same thing, same task
and every bird and bush accountable.

*

Light's sharpening
knives of water.
I long for the coolness
of a room downstairs.
White grapes. A morning
cigarette. To take
umbrage behind hessian
blow on a glass
of tea, sugarlump held
between my teeth, taste
how bitterness
too quickly sweetens.

Light's packed its water
of knives in drawer
upon drawer of
darkness. Where sea's
banded in shadow. Laid
smaller silvers
out in the calm: glimmer
of tines, crests
salvers and scoops, flatware
embossed on handles.
And that downstairs room
never to have, never to hold

the way Proust says
on meeting with colons
that inviolate pause
when a gathering falls silent
before it intones
has brought him, while
reading, the scent of a rose
which has never evaporated
though centuries old, there it comes
with its teas and spoons
luminous fridge, against the light
bowed silhouettes of people.

*

I've stored all the light
I need. Stored it
in the dark jars of my body.
Light's in its phase
of falling. Souring, sweetening.
Boring us with its constancy

polishing, straightening. Light's
like a grandmother tiring
pushing a strand of hair behind
her ear, knees aching, sighing.
No one looks up, the sky's too bright.
Four boys on seaweed ledges.

We look at the sea instead or
inward to reservoirs
four-handed jars, fats and oils
seven-herb pickle, smoked fish, spice
down to the cold slabs of our stores
under bone and cartilage.

(1997)

Re-printed in *Selected Poems* (London: Carcanet, 2000)

*

from : *The Inwardness of Elephants (a sequence)*

Mammoth

Long before the mammoth there was
mammoth, an enormous creature
with feet resembling a bear's.

In Estonian, *maa* and *mutt*
mean 'earth' and 'mole' and indeed
mammoth lived underground, ate mud

and sometimes on subterranean walks
poked its head above ground
only to duck back down for it found

sunlight hurtful, so hurtful
it perished in the open air.
Elephants still hate the glare.

But in moonlight
they spray themselves with water
and discreetly, under its fountain, mate.

Arc you the year's last sun then,
husband? Snow in your hair?
It's a long time since we've spoken.

Once, long ago, at the mouth
of the Lena river, a mammoth
was found with an eye and brain

still intact after isatis, wolverines,
foxes had fed on it and skinned,
the remains were sent to St. Petersburg

where they fuelled endless debate.
The body, however mutilated,
records what the mind forgets.

Mahout

We trust each our own elephant
till our own elephant kills us.
The attendants holding the silk umbrellas,

the one who plies the fan
of peacock feathers, the man
with the flyswatter of yaktails.

You cannot cheat on the amount of oil
poured in the lamps for an elephant
will always honour the pace of the ritual.

Nor is the elephant's love less manifest.
He will insert his trunk, like a hand,
inside your garments and caress your breast.

He will follow, with his mate,
the undulations in B minor of *Iphigenia in Tauris*
or, on solo bassoon, *Oh, my Tender Musette*.

And the cow will stroke him with her long
and flexible member before bringing
it back upon herself, pressing its finger

first in her mouth, then in his ear.
While over their transports, whistling fire,
the harmony of two human voices

falls like summer rain.
Meat that walks like a mountain
among giant flowers, huge nettles and lobelia.

Child, don't be afraid.
The circle of nine precious stones
is never absent from his forehead.

1 I have drawn and collaged material for this sequence from *The Life and Lore of the Elephant* by Robert Delort (Thames & Hudson, 1992).

From *The Chine* (London: Carcanet, 2002)
