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Spaces of Work · *Padma Perera*

(India—USA—Greece)

a personal essay from a book of
nonfiction titled *Sumi Spaces #1*

Poona (India)

THE FICTION I'm beginning to write here (*Afternoon of the House*) focuses, intensifies, my usual preoccupation with fusion and antithesis: space/substance, stasis/movement, silence/sound. I need to bring them down to their stringency, that uncompromising level of a human touchstone, without which they are merely so much verbiage.

This book has to be written in the spaces between the words, the spaces between incidents, so that even if I do deal with factual detail, even if I do delve into physical and mental landscapes, my concern is to try and speak without speaking. I want to get to the beginnings of definition. What is "holy" . . . ? What is "mad" . . . ? What is "healing" . . . ? What is "thief" . . . ? Eliminate all notions of *prowess* with words. Do away with that spurious, retrospective headiness of being articulate. Get down to the sources instead. Wrest them out of that silence/cry from which your experience is born. PUT INTO WORDS THAT MOMENT BEFORE YOU CAN PUT IT INTO WORDS. And of course that's an impossibility. How can I presume to try? But there's the monkey on my back, saying: "How dare you not risk it?"

Not just a question of technique: of demarcating that tightrope, perilous here, between *simplicité* and *simplesse*, between real simplicity and its sophisticated semblance. More. It's trying to keep that connection, in work as in life, between inner and outer—so that any epiphanies I have the temerity to attempt can truly become moments of extended privacy. . . . Extending into insight. And I hope into art. Even saying it here is spurious. In the book, of course, I haven't that recourse, I have to *do* it. But how? is the question. Can I? is the question. And the monkey says: "So what's another pitfall? Stake your life."

Bombay (Elephanta Caves)

India for me is where these inner-outer connections keep, strongest, and are also most capable of being frayed, simultaneously reinforcing and undermining that private mantra: the line from the Hopkins sonnet: *what I do is me, for that I came*. There is no upholstery here. Against the constant surrounding hunger and deprivation, you can't raise your voice in the most justified complaint, from a personal cry to a metaphysical protest, without feeling reduced to a *kvetch*. To have a roof over your head, a desk, a typewriter, is to go from guilt to fruitless apology. There is a point after which it's no use saying "O.K., we all have our sources, we all have our strictures." Won't wash.

Yet here, where bellies have to be filled first, art still has roots. In Elephanta, Ellora, Belur, Halebid, Mahabalipuram, it isn't the obvious genius and grandeur and scope of the finished caves and temples that prove it, as much as those abandoned and time-blurred carvings where your eye completes what the sculptor's hand began, what no one else perhaps can see quite as you do, so that the very seeing of it becomes an act of creative complicity between the past and the present, between the visible and the possible.

Poona

The book again, which I seem to unwrite as fast as I write. . . . Struggling with its spaces even as I keep a wary eye on the external spaces that bring it to birth, to make sure even tangents won't ring false, won't be just tangents. Taking the manuscript from context to context—the watcher-in-the-head never falling asleep. Yes. Insomnia. "Many have it."

How fortunate to be able to hole myself here and work every day. A conch shell blows for somebody's morning prayer; children and neighbours come around, peering through the windows at this weird anomaly of a woman closeted with her typewriter, under a sky illimitably full of sun. Subservient to my monkey, I want to scratch and ask for peanuts.

Outside, the hills around town change all day, from blue to lavender to a deep drenched purple and then, after dusk, to the exact tinge you see in the smudges of fatigue beneath a child's eyes. It is June; we are wait-

ing for the monsoon to break. It has hit Ceylon. It has rounded the tip of the southern coast. Then the wind drops. How to describe it? —Day following hot, breathless day; the inexorable parching, all colour drained from the earth and the sky and the hills; the unspoken anxiety in everyone's eyes: "Please don't let the rains fail, please don't let the crops fail, please let our bellies be filled. . . ."

The wind picks up, reaches Cochin on the west coast, gets up as far as Bombay, and then stops again.

Early morning, my mother and I go up to the roof to watch a cloud above the mountains—small, purple-grey, no bigger than the proverbial man's hand. And there it stays. "You might as well get back to work," my mother says.

In my work room, at some point, I realize I need to turn on the light. Clouds have massed overhead. Suddenly, a breath of coolness courses through the trees . . . there's a roll of thunder (incredible timing) . . . and then *down* comes the rain. A roar rises from the whole neighbourhood, as if from one throat. Street vendors put down their baskets, college students put down their books, everyone links arms and they go singing and dancing and clapping down the street. Children rush out into the yard, or up on to the roof, whirling round and around like little dervishes, arms flung wide open, lifting their heads to drink the new rain as it falls.

Delhi

The Raos come to visit when they hear I'm back in India. They have two children since last we met, down south: a girl of seven, a boy of five, whose names—Kavita and Anand—translate to Poetry and Bliss.

Their parents have saved, to read to these children, a story of mine published when I was in college here, about what our concept of divinity seems to a child. Moved and amazed, I tell myself that we Hindus, like heffalumps, have long memories. But the kids themselves are reassuringly themselves.

Poetry says: Did you write it all yourself?

I say yes.

Then she says: Do you collect feathers?

I say no.

So she goes off, hoping to gather some left by a parrot, a pigeon, and two crows, and doesn't succeed.

Bliss, meanwhile, leans out of our second-floor window and spits strategically at intervals to discourage any passing thief who might steal their car, parked below.

— Roots beyond blurred carvings now, and not indigenous to us alone by any means: this rootedness in living, which creates around it the ambulant space of a perspective where I take my oath again on what I have always felt: that I can never be a *Writer*, capital *W*, only me writing, like me breathing or me puking.

And to say that is not to skim the agonized awareness of prices paid—the relentless and irretrievable cost. Odd, inevitable, and no doubt repeated to extinction by now: how, when the sources of being human and being an artist are the same, their practice should have to be so compartmentalized. So damnably difficult bringing the two together; such (perhaps self-defeating) effrontery to demand the kind of totality that some of us do. Wanting fusion, you can become a battleground; trying to live completely, you can die in bits. But the necessity never stops. I have earned myself, strengths and vulnerabilities inextricably allied; it is only from there I can speak.

New York

J. says: “How can I stand up and say another word, if I don't live what I believe?”

I think back, then, on the two-odd years I stayed in this city, the “literary” names known and met. My own naive perfectionism, perhaps, in wanting artists to be custodians of a cultural conscience, aghast at the discrepancy between the quality of their character and the pretensions of their talent . . . a monstrous imbalance, palpable as a cripple’s limp.

Now at the Chelsea (with plaster falling off the ceiling), J. speaks of the difference between “having a value, and pursuing it.”

And by now too I know full well the ways in which art can arise out of a sense of deficiency—for without that mindful, tangible handhold on the human, we are perhaps amorphous creatures who take form when we make form.

Boulder

Our conversations in front of the fire, where one completes a sentence that the other began:

“The inwardness of me—”

“has to become the outwardness of art.”

And speaking of how, when all your pores are open, so much bad can come in with the good:

“The easiest learners . . . ”

“are the ones most harshly taught.”

(Which is perhaps why non-essentials can also build around us?)

Referring to the kind of poets who “don’t leave tips,” J. says: writing is gratuitous when two words/sentences put together can penetrate life, and don’t.

It is not so much the hacks you mind, then, as the intelligent ones who have deliberately vacated themselves to shine up a surface. Yet there are those of us for whom, for better or for worse, the basic problem of art is at what level you take life.

On the boat from Santorini to Crete

Warm sweet wind. Standing on deck at nightfall—feeling utter and uncluttered—we watch the wake from the side of the boat: the way it swirls and spreads, thinning out into a fringe of foam . . . just one line of awareness against the encompassing dark.

(Until another wave, slantwise from the stern, intersects and disperses it.)

Delhi

two months later. Scuttling around, running some errand, I realize for the first time in what seems like centuries that I am not bone-tired. Something is getting put back together. Perhaps a return to familiar, slow, deep rhythms: a kind of physical certitude: the look of the land and the ones I love—light falling over cheekbones and hills in the same language, defining its durability.

Not to deny lacunae, difficulties; but having access now to weld them into a known perspective against which it is possible, briefly, to rest. Meanwhile the wary watcher-in-the-head watches out against lapsing back into any old states of domiciled intelligence.

I don't want to locate myself only by geography (however strongly I acknowledge its power and point), or books, or beliefs. I want to be located in every breath I take.

So, . . . still, . . . and any other guards and prepositions that come my way, being rested and rooted and strangely at peace now is like an extrapolation of that moment on the boat to Crete.

Here's a stillness too requisite, too voluntary, to be merely acquiescent. A living necessity, all too often denied to all too many of us: these moments of poise, balance, between taking in . . . and giving out.

To me it has always been a very specific, though nameless dimension between what is fully received, and how you respond to it, what you *do* with it. Space for physical/mental/emotional impacts to make connection with what is called "the life of the mind." Space that delineates too, I think, the difference between an abeyance and an abdication of intelligence:

Where you can afford to wait, open-eyed, open-pored, and *in* yourself totally—clear of any preoccupations that could blur a direct seeing. From where, having brought your whole unimpeded self to the moment, you can then carry your perception of it beyond the moment and beyond the self.

Started to spell it out—this region of absolute focus—and its place in my own life, for one, that night on the boat to Crete. But we docked and I couldn't follow it through. Now I think a real quest for metaphor (among so many other things) is tied up with it: nothing to do with verbal embellishments; not even merely expressing the abstract in terms of the concrete; but more: *a noting, a tracking down, of process into significance. As with the line of foam on the sea to Crete that night, and its directing me (for one) to our edges of awareness in the dark.*