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Writing Sample

Meena Kandasamy


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POEMS: Meena Kandasamy

Meena KANDASAMY
Poems
MULLIGATAWNY DREAMS

anaconda. candy. cash. catamaran.
cheroot. coolie. corundum. curry.
ginger. mango. mulligatawny.
patchouli. poppadom. rice.
tatty. teak. vetiver.

i dream of an english
full of the words of my language.

an english in small letters
an english that shall tire a white man’s tongue
an english where small children practice with smooth round pebbles in their mouth to the spell the right zha
an english where a pregnant woman is simply stomach-child-lady
an english where the magic of black eyes and brown bodies replaces the glamour of eyes in dishwater blue shades and the airbrush romance of pink white cherry blossom skins
an english where love means only the strange frenzy between a man and his beloved, not between him and his car
an english without the privacy of its many rooms
an english with suffixes for respect
an english with more than thirty six words to call the sea
an english that doesn’t belittle brown or black men and women
an english of tasting with five fingers
an english of talking love with eyes alone

and i dream of an english

where men
of that spiky, crunchy tongue
buy flower-garlands of jasmine
to take home to their coy wives
for the silent demand of a night of wordless whispered love . . .
THEIR DAUGHTERS

Paracetamol legends I know
For rising fevers, as pain-relievers —

Of my people—father’s father’s mother’s
Mother, dark lush hair caressing her ankles
Sometimes, sweeping earth, deep-honey skin,
Amber eyes—not beauty alone they say—she
Married a man who murdered thirteen men and one
Lonely summer afternoon her rice-white teeth tore
Through layers of khaki, and golden white skin to spill
The bloodied guts of a British soldier who tried to colonize her. . .

Of my land—uniform blue open skies,
Mad-artist palettes of green lands and lily-filled lakes that
Mirror all—not peace or tranquil alone, he shudders—some
Young woman near my father’s home, with a drunken husband
Who never changed; she bore his beatings everyday until on one
Stormy night, in fury, she killed him by stomping his seedbags. . .

We: their daughters.
We: the daughters of their soil.

We, mostly, write.
STORMING IN TEA-CUPS

“a cup of tea is not a cup of tea . . .
when you make it at twilight,
just for him.”

call it a love potion.
liquid dreams.
scented desire.
wishes boiled to a blend.

three cinnamon pods
the dried darjeeling leaves
milk and pearl-white cream
simmering to a syrup to be filtered.

as you sweat in its vapours
and imagine how the tea tastes
against his lips his teeth his tongue
and the pale pink insides of his throat

as you stir in the sugar
and test a spoonful to see
if it stings and soothes and
stimulates the way you intended

as you pour it into his cup
with eyes mirroring supernovas and
study the desirable brown of the tea

an entire shade
that fits exactly
between the desert sand of your skin
and the date palm of his.

almost the color
of your possible child.
AFTERMATH

(to consuming six glasses of orange juice)

the next morning in school during your english exam you take permission to go to the toilet where you throw up all the white and creamy breakfast milk. only it tastes sour and looks like bits of maggoty curd. weeks later, you get to know two things one of which will change your life for ever. first, you scored the highest in the english exam. second, you became a gossip item. you still don’t know what affects you more.

because of your boldness and brashness and bunking classes your ulcerated vomit is taken for morning sickness. the sourness extends when you hear hushed whispers passing around. girls younger than you, point at you and speak such banal secrets. in staff-rooms, and in ungainly corridors teachers chatter of your child, so vividly imagined in the backdrop of your really empty womb. slander is a slaughterhouse.

even best-friends seek answers as the rumours inflame. your anger is mistaken to be toward a crude imagined lover who disowned you. you know the nauseous truth of your thighs: you are virgin. But evidence will not be revenge, for, so many smoky eyes implore you to supplicate, to admit alleged truths. impeaching faces lay down rules: don’t shout or scream, but swallow the shame. next, confess the sin.

sin yes they will shred your innocent life to that yes you may fume or froth or boil or simmer yes you are their staple soup they need you just this way yes your fury takes its toll annihilating you not them yes anger and hatred seethe in your untamed tresses yes you know how gossip chokes even the tethered dreams yes something breaks in you yes dear yes you start the brute search for sleeping pills and chaste suicide ideas.
NON-CONVERSATIONS WITH A LOVER

don’t talk to me
of sudden love. . .

in our land
even the monsoons come—
leisurely, strolling like
decorated temple elephants
(the pomp, the paraphernalia)—
after months of monotonous prayer,
preparations and palpitating waits.

my darling
his silence
(those still shoulders)
but his eyes dance
his eyes dance
(so wild, so wild)

so i think of raging
summer storms—
like uncontrollable tuskers
trampling in mast
(the madness, the lust)—
across the forests of our land. . .
AMNESIA, SELECTIVE

When memory decides
To no longer bear the burdens—
Of pain, or even plain indifference
She has her winsome wicked ways.

Some day, years later,
Life requires you to unearth
Some event long past and you
Set about browsing your brain
Like a desk-full of office files and then—
Come across a resounding emptiness.

Memories drizzle-fragile
Are not to be found. What
Greets you instead, through
Those yellowing sheets of typed matter is
The blank and ugly blotches of dried whitener
So carefully applied, then. It has a fading smell of
Chalk and chlorine: a blend, like memory, that works at
Your throat. You try to scratch it and the faintest hopes are
Betrayed as the caked pieces of the whitener crumble,
Displaying nothing, but toe curling holes where crummy paper and ink once contained you.
HE REPLACES POETRY

Two months into love and today I turn into a whore
Hunting for words, tearing them out from soiled sheets
Of mind or pinching them from the world like removing
Jade-green flecks from tiger’s eyes. . . And poetry refuses
Entry into my mirrored life that is bequeathed to him.

I try the mad-woman’s antics: I have pulled my hair and
Bruised my thin wrists and bit the insides of my cheeks till
They have bled a warm red sourness and I have starved
In arrogance to call the words home to me and thrown up
To clear me of him but he, strong dark man, refuses to budge,

Give way or take leave. My dark nights of savage tears have
Gone in search of needy shores deserting me (with the devil
Of a lover who sleeps half-a-dozen streams apart) and so
Have the words that once made me the sad lone woman
I was, and pretended to be. I am happy now he says and

I nod, like a Tanjore doll in breeze, and reply in cloying tones
This is happiness. I know I do not indulge in lies or delusion but
This is happiness and happiness is a hollow world for fools to
Inhabit, where all the dreams eventually die by coming to life.
Love has smothered me to a gay inertia and I long for a little

Hurt and pain that will let me scream and I wait for offending
Words to row me into worlds where I shall cry wildly for whole
Nights like the lament of lonely, old and greying seas. . . Then
Sadness shall come back with its dancing fairy lights and nail me
To wailing crosses. . . Poetry, in the end, shall replace all of him.
MRS. SUNSHINE

She left him without warning.

She left him because she didn’t fancy
the way he flaunted his fire, his fist
and his million blistering fingers
that were always in heat.

So, she left him with her shadow
as acting spouse, for keeping house.

He went wild.

He went looking for his absconding
angel of tears and caustic tongue, his
angel of bleeding bare bones, his angel
of monthly mood swings. He went
looking over salt seas that shunned
his shine, over cities with skyscrapers
that stared into his eyes and over
obscure lands that chose to look away.

Lovesick, he lost his fiery temper,
his high temperature, his feverish fondness
for flames and furnaces and he became
a man of moderation. Running behind
a woman on the run, he became
a master of masquerade.

He turned romantic. He longed
for the soiled scents of rain
for the solitary shade of trees
for mist that hung heavy like his heart.
He squandered his insufferable splendor.
He turned black. He turned dark.

She returned in a twilight drizzle
and offered a truce before he made
the final offering of himself. She said:

   When the world has closed its eyes
   And as we become the one beast
   With two backs, you can
   Lay your lights in me.

She also whispered:

   For old times sake,
   I will hallucinate
   your halos, your holiness.
MY LOVER SPEAKS OF RAPE

Flaming green of a morning that awaits rain
  And my lover speaks of rape through silences,
  Swallowed words and the shadowed tones
  Of voice. Quivering, I fill in his blanks.
Green turns to unsightly teal of hospital beds
  And he is softer than feathers, but I fly away
  To shield myself from the retch of the burns
  Ward, the shrill sounds of dying declarations,
The floral pink-white sad skins of dowry deaths.

Open eyes, open hands, his open all-clear soul . . .

Colorless noon filters in through bluish glass
  And coffee keeps him company. She chatters
  Away telling her own, every woman’s story;
  He listens, like for the first time. Tragedy in
Bridal red remains a fresh, flushing bruise across
  Brown-yellow skincapes, vibrant but made
  Muted through years of silent, waiting skin.
  I am absent. They talk of everyday assault that
Turns blue, violet and black in high-color symphony.

Open eyes, open hands, his open all-clear soul . . .

Blues blend to an unforgiving metropolitan black
  And loneliness seems safer than a gentle night
  In his arms. I return from the self-defence lessons:
Mistrust is the black-belted, loose white mechanism
  Of survival against this groping world and I am
  A convert too. Yet, in the way of all life, he could try
And take root, as I resist, and yield later, like the earth.

Open eyes, open hands, his open all-clear soul . . .
Has he learnt to live my life? Has he learnt never to harm?
MASCARA

The last thing she does
before she gets ready to die
once more, of violation,
she applies the mascara.

Always,
in that last and solemn moment
the call-girl hesitates.

With eye-catching eyes
she stops to shudder.
Maybe, the dyed eyes
mourn her body’s sins.

Mascara... it serves to tell her
that long buried
hazy dreams
of a virgin soul
have dark outlines.

Silently she cries.
Her tears are black.
Like her.

Somewhere
Long Ago
in an
untraceable
mangled
matrilineal
family tree
of temple prostitutes,
her solace was sought.

*It has happened for centuries...*
“Empty consolations soothe
violated bodies.”

Sex clings to her devadasi skin,
assumed superficialities don’t wear off,
Deliverance doesn’t arrive.
Unknown Legacies of
Love made to Gods
haven’t been ceremoniously accounted
as karma.

But still she prays.
Her prayer words
desperately provoke Answers.
Fighting her case,
Providence lost his pride.
Her helplessness doesn’t
Seduce the Gods.
And they too
never learn
the Depth of her Dreams.

She believes—
Cosmetics were
once. . .
War paints.
She awaits their resurrection.

When she dons the mascara
The Heavens have heard her whisper,
Kali, you wear this too. . .
MOHANDAS KARAMCHAND

(written after reading Sylvia Plath’s Daddy)

“Generations to come will scarcely believe that such a one as this walked the earth in flesh and blood.”

—Albert Einstein

Who? Who? Who?
Mahatma. Sorry no.
Stop it. Enough taboo.

That trash is long overdue.
You need a thorough review.
Your tax-free salt stimulated our wounds
We gonna sue you, the Congress shoe.

Gone half-cuckoo, you called us names,
You dubbed us pariahs—“Harijans”
goody-goody guys of a bigot god
Ram Ram Hey Ram—boo.

Don’t ever act like a holy saint.
we can see through you, impure you.
Remember, how you dealt with your poor wife.
But, they wrote your books, they made your life.

They stuffed you up, the imposter true.
And sew you up—filled you with virtue
and gave you all that glossy deeds
enough reason we still lick you.

You knew, you bloody well knew,
Caste won’t go, they wouldn’t let it go.
It haunts us now, the way you do
with a spooky stick, a eerie laugh or two.

But they killed you, the naked you,
your blood with mud was gooey goo.
Sadist fool, you killed your body
many times before this too.

Bapu, bapu, you big fraud, we hate you.
WE WILL REBUILD WORLDS

We will rebuild / worlds from shattered glass / and remnants of holocausts.

Once impaled for our faith / and trained to speak in voiceless whispers / we’ll implore / you to produce the list / from hallowed memories / of our people disgraced / as outcastes / degraded / as untouchable at / sixty-four feet / denied a life / and livelihood and done to death /

in so many ways it would take / an encyclopedia to describe and steven-spielberg / or some-such-guy to produce the special effects for a blockbuster version /

not just the stories of how / you charred to death forty-four of our men and women and children / because they asked for handfuls of rice /

electrocuted children to instant death because they played in your well / and other ghastly carnages

but the crimes of passion/
our passion/ your crimes

poured poison and pesticide through the ears-nose-mouth/
or hanged them in public / because a man and a woman dared to love

and you wanted / to teach / other boys and other girls / the lessons of / how to / whom to / when to / where to / continue their caste lines

and we will refresh your mind with other histories / of how you brutally murdered and massacred our peoples / with the smiling promise of / heaven in the next birth / and in this / a peace that / never belonged.

We will wipe away the / sham of your smiles / that appear and / disappear like commercials on prime time tv / smiles that flash across / botoxed faces / smiles that crease / plucked eyebrows / smiles that are pasted and / plastered to your lips / smiles that sell yourself / smiles that seek to / sell us into soulless worlds.

We will singe the many skins you wear to the world / the skins you change at work / the skins called castes and / skins called race / the skins you mend once a week / the skin you bought at a sale / the skin you thought was yours / the filthy rich stinking skin you thought you could retain at bed.

Shorn of style / and a hypocrisy named /
POEMS: Meena Kandasamy

sophistication / there would be nothing for you to do but gape at our combat gears.

We will learn/ how to fight/ with the substantial spontaneity/ with which we first learnt / how to love.

So / now/ upon a future time/ there will be a revolution.

It will begin in our red-hot dreams that surge that/ scorch that / scald that sizzle like lava / but never settle down never / pungently solidify.

It will begin / when the song in the sway/ of our hips/ will lead us to dance and sing/ and stand up straight / put up a pretty fight/ redeem and reclaim/ the essence of our earth.

It will begin / as our naked bodies / held close together / like hands in prayer / against each other/ like hands in prayer / set to defy the dares the / diktats the years the terms / the threats / that set us apart.

It will begin / as we give names to our children and/ give names to our / inward anger and aches and / name ourselves / with words of fury / like forest fires / with the words of wrath / like stealthy wildcat eyes / that scare the cowards/ in power / away.

It will begin / the way thunder rises in our throats and / we will brandish our slogans with a stormy stress and succeed / to chronicle to / convey the last stories / of our lost and scattered lives.

It will begin / when the oppressors will wince/ every time they hear our voices and their sparkly silence will never be taken for a sacrament.

It will begin when never / resting we will scream / until / our uvulas tear away and our breathless words breathe life to the bleeding dead and in the black magic of our momentary silences / you will hear two questions / India, what is the caste of sperm? / India, what is the cost of life? and the rest of our words will rush/ in this silenced earth / like the rage of a river in first flood.

It will begin / that day when / we will pay / all that it takes / for the dangerous price of love.