

**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  
Greet 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 skinscapes, 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.  
*Truth*. *Non-violence*.  
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 sing 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 /



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 /  
dictates 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.

