

Landscape and Poetry: The Vanishing Self

MEENA ALEXANDER

By deep feeling we make our Ideas dim — & this is what we mean by our Life – ourselves...
Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Notebooks*, Feb-March 1801

I

There are questions that have haunted me for a long time about poetry, what it allows one to remember and what it makes one forget; about history that can bind us to the shared world often in quite difficult ways about the poem and how it enters into but also stands apart from the world. And about the self, insofar as we can speak of the constantly elusive subjectivity that allows us to live and move and have our being in this shared world. And what of landscape? I think of the rocks and stones and trees, the sky and circling clouds in this lovely mountainous place where we are gathered together.

Perhaps one important function of landscape in the poem is to allow the present to irradiate what we feel of the past, so that elements of our lives start to clarify and take shape.

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 one 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?

I think of the Italian poet Eugenio Montale who 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.'

II

It was 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 and indubitably provisional clarity — history is the sun. It will burn us if we get too close. Poetry, the moon with its incandescent glow, utterly ephemeral. I speak here 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?

III

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 sights and sounds and smells and touch and taste that

make up our being in the world, utterly real yet constantly vanishing, available to the poet as a delicate repository, the inscription of *rasa*, ephemeral base from which the translation of the poem takes place.

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.*¹

IV

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. 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.

In my early twenties, living in Hyderabad, I rented a room in an old house that had a magnificent courtyard set with tiles and potted vines with tumbling, fragrant jasmine. My room was on the far side of the courtyard from the main dwelling. One of my windows looked out onto the courtyard with its ancient tulasi plant set in a pedestal. The other window looked out onto a broken Muslim graveyard with its dry neem trees. In between tombstones wild goats grazed. Both house and graveyard were at the edge of Abid road. Where that road crossed another, often there was trouble.

The gate of the house was guarded by a great peepul tree. When it rained the leaves turned a dark green, the color of sea water when the sun vanishes. I wrote a poem called 'Stone Roots'

At the time all I had published were three slim books from two small presses in Calcutta. I had a longing to write better, to make a lyric that would shine with the

truth of the heart. The story of Yang Chu, a Chinese sage who knelt and wept at the cross roads haunted me. By the time the book with the poem in it was published, I was in America. Words like globalization meant nothing to me. From time to time in my new country I read the poem. It reminded me of something I was trying to understand.

Stone Roots

*I am afraid to go out
into the streets of Nampally,
the peepul trees drip.*

*Yang Chu wept at the cross
roads, each chosen road
divided the stone roots.*

*Trees understand the under
water base of stone,
the gravity of exile.*

*(Note: Yang Chu c. 350 B.C.
Legend has it he knelt and
wept at each cross-road
believing that any road
taken would lead to another
that crossed a neighboring
road, endlessly multiplying
the chances of being lost.)*²

V

A year later, I moved to New York City. One summer I spent working on two poems. I set lines on two facing pages in my notebook, pasting them in: the drafts that would become 'Translated Lives' and 'Gold Horizon'. As I moved through the lines, crossing out, adding, fixing a line or image, allowing the breath to flow better, I felt I was inching through a palimpsest of paper, battling with shadow selves, dealing with psychic graffiti – edgy, jagged characters scrawled on a city wall, spawned from lives forced to make up history.

On a draft of 'Translated Lives' I scribbled a note:

Rimbaud's Saison en Enfer is much in my mind and also the condition of these immigrant lives we lead and what it means to write (=to translate) across a border — a trip-wire. How to summon this up and say, 'this is my past, our past: the great challenge as I see it.'

I initialed and dated the note, wanting to fix it in the unstable realm of poetic composition : MA July 15, 1996.

But what does it mean to stumble on a trip-wire, a migratory border? My mind moves to the metamorphosis European sailors feared so much. Traveling east on the waters of the Atlantic some dreamt of an invisible line not far from the Cape of Good Hope. On the other side their bodies would grow dark, sprout horns, oddments of hair, a rare bestiality reserved for those who cross borders.

Spatial transgressions work differently for us now, migrants westwards. The poems we compose, spin themselves out in a cocoon of cold air, inventions born of unvoiced need and our layerings of self make up a dark soil that we can recall best in dreams. It is a kind of imaginative difficulty for which ordinarily we have few words, a condition of spiritual poverty, lives lived in a world without a readily available history. So fragmenting the self into two, three, we invent what we need: a raw theater of sense. We carry the fear of those sailors within us: but changed beyond recognition. What we are in our bodies becomes fierce, raw, fragmented. Our skin becomes a shield. We tremble to touch.

When Rimbaud mused 'Je est un autre' or scribbled thoughts on the 'derèglement' of the senses little did he know the power his lines would exert on us, we who understand however fitfully that desire is always for the Other, the Other who forces us into history. And it is precisely this entry into history that lets us see the condition of our migrancy, our days lived out in the vivid air, cut from the dream of a steadfast home.³

VI

In our family house in Kerala, by a window that looks out onto a sandy courtyard, there's a book shelf. When the monsoon rain is heavy, the window by the bookshelf has to be latched shut, to keep out the rain. The books on this shelf, all poetry, help me to discover what it means to come home. Some were collected by my sister Anna who is a poet and painter, some I brought back from my travels, some belonged to my grandmother Eli. So many poets I treasure, their books on that white painted shelf – Tagore, Kumaran Asan, Whitman, Wordsworth, Mirabai, Milosz, Octavio Paz, Neruda, Akhmatova, Kamala Das, Jayanta Mahapatra, Dom Moraes, Keki Daruwalla .

I find the tattered copy of Milosz's *Collected Poems (1931-87)* and search out the powerful, exquisite, 'Bypassing Rue Descartes. My breath stops when I read the lines,

*There is no capital of the world, neither here nor anywhere else,
And the abolished customs are restored to their small fame
And now I know that the time of human generations is not like the time of the earth.*

How did I come to Milosz? Almost a quarter of a century ago, when I was new in America, I lived briefly in Minnesota and a writer friend introduced me to Milosz's *Native Realm*. Read it, she urged me.

So that is where I began and recognized immediately his eloquence, the voice that touched the timbre and heft of a century where we are forced to shift continents, turn languages on our tongue, till we finally come to recognize the whole earth as our home. There is a native realm, a psychic space that keeps us from harm and he knew that.

Later in a St. Paul bookstore, I found a beat up paperback, a collection of essays by various hands about the experience of immigration. It included an essay by Milosz. Again and again I read that essay. He seemed to be speaking to me very personally, saying – yes there is a way to come as an immigrant to America, come carrying your life in your hands, live out your life here, be a poet.

In my New York City apartment I keep a copy of his *Collected Poems* twin sister to the book that sits in my mother's house. My eyes fall on the line from the poem sequence 'The Separate Notebooks.'

I did not choose California. It was given to me.

I think to myself – it is by grace that I am here. I did not choose this place, it was given to me. Milosz's poetry does its slow, enduring work, enters my inner life. I met his poetry, only after the prose, but once I came upon the poems, a music started to work inside me: a translated tongue, a restless permanence.

One poem he composed directly in English – 'To Raja Rao'. In Hyderabad I had met Raja Rao, spent some hours talking to him. We sat one rainy afternoon on a veranda taking tea and talking. I knew and admired his works, particularly the *Serpent and the Rope*. In those days I had never seen America and wondered how he could live in Texas, what I thought to be the wild west.

In Milosz's poem for Raja Rao there were lines that stuck in me like thorns, a hurt, an irreparable discomfort:

*For years I could not accept
the place I was in.
I felt I should be somewhere else.*

*A city, trees, human voices
lacked the quality of presence.
I would live by the hope of moving on.⁴*

What might it mean to move on? One crossing is irreparable, other crossings are smaller deaths. August 14th 1998 was the day my father died. I am melancholic on that day and often feel in touch with presences beyond our own. My father loved the Bible and would read from the Psalms and also from the New Testament, Corinthians for instance. Milosz died on that very day, six years later. I was filled with emotion. I tried to imagine the poet in Krakow. I needed the ties that bind, other poets who had met him, known him.

I wrote to a poet friend: *I have just returned from India and heard of Milosz's death. He was such a great poet. ... Kerala was filled with monsoon rain.*

On the same day he replied, telling me of a poetry seminar he had taken part in, in Krakow, devoted to Milosz's work. Suddenly the city where the great poet had died, seemed not so very far away. I imagined Krakow filled with chestnut trees. Why chestnut? Was it something I had read in Milosz? I could not be sure. In the days that followed in New York I wrote the elegy 'August 14, 2004'. The whole poem took a day and a half to write. I cut and pasted the pages I had written into my black spiral notebook and tucked it into my bag and took it with me to Skopje. I was traveling there for the Struga Poetry Festival.

The first evening in Skopje a group of us went to have a drink in a restaurant not far from the hotel where we were staying. Across from where we sat was a city square. It was made of concrete and seemed utterly bare. Someone spoke about the earthquake that had destroyed the center of the city.

I would like to see Mother Theresa's house, I said to one of the poets from Skopje and he led us there, pointing out the place where the house once stood. The house, like much of the city had been razed to the ground in the earthquake of 1963. We moved closer and saw the dark metal inserts in concrete that measured out the span of the tiny dwelling where Mother Theresa was born. It was dark and I stepped forward, carefully. In the center of the space lay a mass of skin and bones, a child, her pale hair picked out in the street lights.

A child unhoused, come to where a shelter once stood. She lay there, asleep in the cold air, her thin clothing flapping in the wind. In the days that followed, as we

traveled to Ohrid for our poetry readings, I thought of that girl lying exposed in the night air. I returned to the elegy I had composed. I wanted to give it to someone who knew Milosz, someone in his city. Through the Macedonian PEN Association I got the poet Adam Zagajewski's email address. At Chateau de Lavigny, in Switzerland we had met briefly and I felt he was the right person to send the poem to. Zagajewski was very kind and wrote back: 'Now you have to come to Krakow and see the place!'

I thought of how composing the elegy had returned me to the Bible, in particular the first Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians. I had a vivid image of someone with her face covered in silk. And she or was it he was reading out loud: '*Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy...*'

This came to me with such force because as my grandfather lay dying, people took turns to read from Bible, at his bedside, day and night.

VII

Where and what is home? It is a question I carry with me. And out of it comes the composition of landscape that allows for a fragile yet constantly renewed existence. And so it was with the Shimla cycle that I composed.⁵

At the end of May 2010 I found myself in Shimla, in Rashtrapati Nivas, the vice-regal lodge with its intricate layered balconies and chiseled woodwork. I was 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 felt 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.

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 great fields 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 I might make a journey poem and that 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 mountains to reveal themselves.

I shut my eyes. I imagined a woman poet someone like the medieval Akkamahadevi. Could one imagine her born into our migrant world? I saw her walking down the dusty mountain path, stopping by a stream to drink some water. And all the time the image of her beloved Chenna Mallikarjuna burnt inside. She sat on a stone, she wrote what she could. I thought of Basho, I thought of Akkamahadevi, two figures who could guide me. I saw

them holding hands, walking into the horizon.

I began to write, 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 chewed up, my newest entitled *Poetics of Dislocation* — essays on poetry, migration and memory. Several volumes of my poetry were left unscathed. I try to take courage from this.

But 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.

NOTES

1. Abhinavagupta, *The Dvanyaloka of Anandavardhana with the Locana of Abhinavagupta*, transl. Ingalls, Moussaieff Mason, Patwardhan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990) p. 81
2. This poem was published in *Stone Roots* (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1980)
3. The poems 'Translated Life' and 'Gold Horizon' were published in *Illiterate Heart* (TriQuarterly Books/Northwestern University Press, 2002)
4. The quotations from Milosz' poetry are taken from Czeslaw Milosz, *Collected Poems (1931-87)* (New York: Ecco Press, 1990) pp.383, 349, 226
5. The Shimla poems appear in my book *Birthplace with Buried Stones* (TriQuarterly Books/Northwestern University Press, 2013 – in press)