I Was Wiser Not To Leave

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I Was Wiser Not To Leave

Our canopies are thinning, open more to the neighbor’s chimney and sky and trickles of leftover brimstone, cooling above this Pompeii unburied. We cut back, hoping for greater profit next season.

Business is not bad. You've read Voltaire? That scene on the bones of the earthquake—I hadn't thought of it shaking anyone’s faith, just smiled at its realism. My man too was a little too ready to turn our daughters over to a non-paying crowd. He valued books and their sequestered stories, virtues imagined for the edification of single scholars, not for the delight of a wife in bed. Anyway, I am now bedecked in rings beyond imagination, enriched far beyond that nuclear family that fled, facing only forward, the blinkers of warnings and horned ideology of loud voices — ah, I watched them going, my gaze never wavered.

Craig Williamson

Sibelan Forrester

In Telugu Country

In your village
rich in tanks and broad rivers
hungry deer feast
on a red lily
blossoming in the middle
of the sugarcane:

Do not embrace my body
which has given birth of our son
it would ruin your lovely chest!
— from an old Tamil anthology

Safe from milk, from lethal sweetness
on his chest, he sees his infant son
for the first time. Behind the curtain,
reflected in a brimming bowl of oil,
the strong boy, wriggling, black as a watersnake,
tugged by a swaying tree
of surface ripples,
is held up in her thin, lovely arms. He can't see the immaculate kingfisher blues, geraniums and gold of her sari; a wife's vermilion drape along the part of her hair, shining like the core of a split-open pomegranate. There is only the hushed lisping
of her bangles; the sme of jasmine he'd crush
between his fingers, forcing open
the wet blossoms.

He sees the red hag hanging from the well bucket
like the opulent tongue of the village goddess
emitting her strange, blurring
beyond speech.

But in his chest there is an ache,
far worse than the white acid of her milk
on his bare skin—even seeing it
would steal his manhood—the mother's poison.
It is the ache of her absence—
two hollows dug out by the track of her firm lover's breasts
down his body, her hard black nipples,
in the long embrace when they made
his son.

On the inner courtyard's hard sapphire,
the family arranges itself,
casually—Nowry peaks around the stamen's
dark eyes. One of the elder sisters
leans the wet banana leaves; another squats
in front of the new fire, holding between her legs
hammered silver pots
of rice and sambar. Grandma picks at a dung fire
in the kitchen shadows, combing
its wild orange hair
with a pine switch. Soon they will eat.
The child will be taken away.

Outside, in the loud heat of midday, past the little boys
spinning their tops in the dirt,
at the very edge of the Andhra village,
in Telugu country, the crooked mounds
of red hills rise abrupt
out of the long green paddy.

Steve Hopkins