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In Telugu Country

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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 his 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, faces only forward, the blinkers of warnings and horned ideology of loud voices—ah, I watched them going, my gaze never wavered.

Sibelan Forrester

In Telugu Country

In your village

riw in tanks and broad rivers

hungry deer feast

on a red lily

frothing 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 lice

of surface ripples, is held up in her thin, lovely arms. He can't see the immaculate kingfisher blues, geruas and gold of her sar; a wife's vermilion drapery along the part of her hair, shining like the red of a split-open pomegranate. There is only the hushed lisping

of her bangles; the smell 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: blushing 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—Newry peaks round the stamen's dark eyes. One of the elder sisters tends the wet banana leaves; another squats in front of the new faith, holding between her leys' 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