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CULTURE



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Cover Images: Detail from “Krishna playing the Flute on an Autumn Evening”, Deccani Miniature, C.1790. (Front Cover) “The month of Aashwin” from a folio of Baramasi paintings,

Pahari, C.1680. (Back Cover) David Hockney's "The Splash", Acrylic on Canvas, 1968 (Inside Cover, Front) Claude Monet, "Autumn on the Seine at Arenteuil", 1873 (Inside Cover, Back)

## ABOUT THE RIVERAINE MUSE

Every word has a wetness to it. Every thought leans, however slightly, toward a flow. To be alive is to come from a river—to move, to pause, to return. A river holds balance and chance together: thrift and excess, precision and abandon. As image or as the earth's own way of saying I am here, the river runs under our skin. It shapes how we build, how we count time, how we judge closeness and distance. We spend our lives trying to step into rivers or step away from them. History, art, and daily habit stand wading—sometimes at the ankles, sometimes nearly drowned—in the gathered residue of old currents. Whole civilizations have been etched into mud. Whole days have risen and fallen with the tide. A little removed from the city's hard dryness, tempered by the passing breath of river air and the ideas it carries with it, The Riveraine Muse knows itself as both a place and a practice. It remains open, wayward, resistant to clean labels, lingering along banks that may be real, remembered, or imagined. Still, this openness is not careless. It keeps its own rhythm of give and take, attentive to the larger world, responsive to distant disturbances, like a river that can rage without losing its way back. We look for work shaped with the watchfulness and surprise of a riverbank. Our regular sections—Poetry, Short Fiction, Non-Fiction, Graphic Narratives, Artwork and Cinema Writing, and Interviews—welcome pieces that feel like cold water at noon, like a sudden clearing of air in the thick of a monsoon. We value shifts in tone, held silences, ideas that strain upstream or give in to the pull. Send us what risks something. What unsettles you. What splits you enough to let something move through. We ask our contributors from across geographies to write, too, of distance—of time spent away from rivers, of departures and drift—where the river may be called Memory, Loss, or Forgetting. The Riveraine Muse tends to the quiet familiarity of rivers and river-thoughts, as vital and as overlooked as water itself. What we call ordinary is often only what we have not lingered with long enough, our eyes trained to chase spectacle. We look for work shaped by patience, by care, by the responsibility of staying with what is seen. We will wait as well, at the edge of the water, to watch how often the remarkable arrives disguised as the everyday, borne in on a modest, passing tide. It is by rivers—and only by rivers—that we endure.

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IN MEMORIUM



DAVID HOCKNEY

(July 9, 1937 – June 11, 2026)

“Drawing takes time. A line has time in it.”

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## EDITORIAL

The time to mend things has been and gone. It is autumn. The indifferent bounty of autumn's eye is pitiless to our hands that can no longer receive, only hoard. -- The weapons time uses, the stone and the sling of hope, fall idle now. Their work is done. They watch the gasp of our frail breath like birds that have won the war with the sun, placid, pacing the verandah of some cloud, sky-wide. Shadows loom, like dwarfs on the clock's long waiting for the sun. -- Autumn permits: the lingering of the fruit, the ruse of the orchard. -- Other things have run their course too. He who has had the roof walk out on him shall not find another now. He who is alone shall stay so. Autumn in India is actually two seasons in one. One of blue skies after monsoon rains and bright sunshine on meadows blooming with the white Kas flowers. The other more pensive, dew-dappled and a time for final gathering of fruits: more akin to the autumn in the West. Autumn is also a season of festivals -- Durga Puja/Navratri, Dussera and Diwali -- baring the soul of our great nation. In this autumn issue of The Riveraine Muse we bring you both the riches of exfoliating imagination on its myriad treks through the world and a deep philosophical pause looking into the crises of civilization that if we do not contend with can end us as never before. Voices that resonate with the roots of grass and the farthest galaxies on the horizon from Norway, Denmark, Spain, France, Malta, Romania, the United Kingdom and, of course, India make up this issue. A sketchbook shall allow your mind to travel deep into Ladakh while an artist's eye shall bring the painted monasteries in the Carpathians into closer focus. Poetry, Short-Fiction, Non-Fiction and Reviews in this issue adds up to a splendid bounty for our readers. So, is it time to receive the thrift of autumn's bounty? I think it is.

DEBASISH LAHIRI,

September 2026

POETRY

## KNUT ØDEGARD

### AWAY

Grandfather Hol goes down the hillside  
towards Molde cemetery.

The clocks begin to ring in the tower.

The sun sits in his light-coloured hat  
with the black silk band. He swings  
his fine stick!

He goes slowly down with the sun  
which goes away under the earth.

### PRIEST

Uncle Knut was a priest.

He was a practical man, but Latin  
was Greek to him.

He died after his retirement, he stood  
and dug the site for the new house  
when his heart gave way.

He was more an electrician  
than a preacher, he began all his speeches  
by saying: "I'm not much of a one for speeches"  
and he was right about that.

He did not really have much to teach  
his parishioners, they had their own troubles  
with their births, with their love and their death  
and he did not have words for such things.

But he had learnt how to repair  
electric wires and he visited people in their homes  
and mended short circuits and defective  
fuse boxes, he screwed lamps into place  
and wherever he had been, there was light.

#### GOD'S BREATH

Little Knut wondered what  
God looked like.

No, He is only visible  
in His creation, all the Earth  
is full of His glory,  
said Big Knut.

Well then, maybe the fields here  
are God's skin, said Little Knut.  
And the air here is God's breath?

#### ALL THIS

(for Þorgerður)

When we grow old, my dear,  
and the crows come to get us  
(caw-caw, then off with one beat of their wings, into the air),  
where will our love be then?  
Where will this mouth be then that says  
something about a broken coffee-machine, rust on the car, a visit to the  
cardiologist, a filling that has fallen out, the phone bill  
or (romantic) about the golden moon  
and the rowan-tree in blossom, which explains away all the white  
lies, the cheatings, and all it doesn't manage to say about the child

we never had, and that melts together with yours in a kiss?

Or these eyes that stare into the green computer screen day

out and day in and that look at you when you take your clothes off as

evening draws on:

you put the light out modestly and stand like a silhouette with ripe breasts

and thighs against the light that seeps thinly

in through the windows from the cobalt-blue Iceland Sea?

Or these hands that write and write, that put

the snow-shovels in their place and caress you

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over your limbs until you burn and want to have me

like a force that smashes into the dams, and I explode

cascading into you, into your womb that was removed by a surgeon

in Reykjavik?

All this that we call love –

where will it be, when the crows come?

For they will not take us both together. One of us

will be the first to lie out there on the ground dirtied by snow

down by the sea (yellow last year's grass, churned-up spring snow)

when the black crows come and pick at the mouth,

the eyes, the hands, the genitals.

That one of us who is left behind the window then, dear,

who wakes in the mornings and does everything

we are familiar with – fetches in Morgunblaðið which sits

in the letterbox. Turns on the taps

and looks at oneself in the mirror: Does that one us then see something

more

than one's own face there? Will the other face then

shine through the face in the mirror, as abandoned houses  
stand and shine by the sea?

[Translated from the Norwegian by Brian McNeil]

(The Norwegian poet Knut Ødegård was born in 1945 in the city of Molde on the west coast of Norway. He studied theology and philology and made his debut as a poet in 1967. Apart from producing a large number of poetry collections he also published two novels for young readers, two books on Iceland and a play. He divides his time between Molde and Iceland. )

MICHAEL BARTHOLOMEW-BIGGS

Condition

That blue shampoo he used in Worcestershire  
is on the bathroom shelf again. He's pleased.  
It made his hair feel silky – although maybe  
that was only due to softer water  
in the Malverns. Still it cheers him up  
to see the bottle and to half-believe  
it does him good, will put a shine and gloss  
upon his mood. He runs his fingers through  
himself. He's still quite soft. And not too grey

Interceding

I'm working dutifully through  
a list of names of needy strangers  
from that charity you work with.  
You wanted me to pray for them  
and, focussed on a ticking clock,  
I've ten petitions still unticked.  
It's so unlike that time I walked  
along a station's empty platform,  
cushioned by slow patient moss,  
while praying for your safe return  
as if I thought that God would look out  
for you through my brimming eyes.

Observer

I've always known the truth  
but never what it felt like  
to be truthful.

I see experience  
as an interpolation  
in square brackets  
while I can remain  
on my virtual rooftop  
with its guard rail  
over which I share  
a pigeon's point of view.

I perch and watch  
a populated street map.

Nobody below  
avoids wrong turnings.

Feeling sorry for them,

I keep dropping hints  
on topics like  
the careful use of landmarks  
and when to make corrections.

No one hears me.

They talk among themselves.

I don't know what they mean  
by being street-wise.

## THE MAN WHO ANSWERED HIMSELF ON THE PHONE

After an engraving by Tirzah Garwood (1935)



But how would he have known the voice belonged to him when skull-formed echoes pitch all speech an octave lower than what's heard in air? Some men disown theirs if they think it sounds as squeaky as two boys conversing via tissue, string and cocoa tins. And who would he have been expecting to reply? It seems unlikely that he phoned his home and got the answer-phone. Magnetic tape was rare in those days when stiff upper lips meant nobody would make a fuss about their own outgoing message. So, if not the caller, was he called? Perhaps he thought he was the last survivor of a plague – and then the phone rang. In that moment would he go from fear he was alone to thankfulness he wasn't – then discover after all he was? [The plot device in verse 3 – the supposedly impossible ringing of a telephone – owes something to a short story by Fredric Brown and a play by Gwenlyn Parry] (Michael Bartholomew-Biggs is a retired mathematician who is currently poetry editor of the online magazine London Grip. He has published four chapbooks and six full collections -- most recently *Identified Flying Objects* (Shoestring Press, 2023).)

JULIAN STANNARD

ZANZIBAR/ZENA

I'm walking across the city.

My children young again.

My wife is almost happy.

The kids are small.

I place them in the pockets of my coat.

In Via Garibaldi wife sings.

I'm cutting through

Via Maddalena, Via San Luca

Salita Santa Caterina

Via Lomellini,

Vico dell Amor Perfetto.

People are drinking negroni.

Are smoking one after another.

The dead are walking the streets.

Here's a list of bars – so incomplete –

in which I drank ....

I'm cutting through Palazzo Spinola –

Night clocks! Dumb waiters!

I'm cutting through Via Pre'

and Via Gramsci -

California Bar! Pig Van! Zanzibar!

My wife's no longer happy.

The thrill has gone.

.  
My children are passing

through the world.

They're becoming

giant anchovies.

There's another funicular.

A funicular of feathers.

A funicular of thunder.

The doors are shutting.

The funicular's climbing.

Up and up.

Beyond Righi –

Beyond the dreaming of the birds.

Beyond.

Star of the Sea

pray for me.

Our Lady of Guadalupe

pray for me.

Our Lady of the Pillar

pray for me.

## RAPTORS

Ancaiano

Leaning out of the window,

peering sideways,

I see the kestrels

on the wall of the house,

nesting in the cracks -

Evening the sky clatters

with parental catch:

a snake, a mouse a rat,

Raptors' eyes swivel.

Two weeks later they're soaring

above the valley.

Pink-brown-orange coats.

The trees screeching.

Hunting lessons.

Cicadas provide

the background muzak.

## THE HAPPY BREAKFAST HOTEL

For a while everything worked pretty well.

My sheets were changed every day.

There were small bottles of water left on a tray

along with yellow sachets of tea and tubes  
of Nescafe, and a cheap electric kettle.  
In the early days the loo flushed with chutzpah  
and there was hot water for showers.  
The air conditioning hummed along on an even keel.  
Sometimes, in the corner of the room,  
the phone rang.  
Mister, your car is waiting.  
And when I looked out of the window  
I saw a Mercedes whose driver  
was wearing a magnificent dishdasha.  
The television worked for a while.  
I watched several films in a language I didn't understand.  
I learnt how to say 'mint tea' in Arabic -  
swirling my larynx around to get the sound.

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After several weeks a mood shift.  
The air conditioning cut out again and again.  
The sheets were changed once a week.  
Then not at all.  
I didn't care much at first  
never having been overly fastidious.  
Dodging cars and clenched fists  
and something which sounded suspiciously  
like bullets  
I found a laundrette on the far side of the city.  
Not easy to work the machines.  
Cats climbing out of the drums

gleaming and shaken up and totally pissed off.

I have seen many cats in the city

but not a single dog.

No more yellow sachets of tea.

No more bottles of water.

I had my last decent shower.

And that was that –

a new water regime, a new order.

Cold showers are back.

I will stand at the basin and wash myself

with a cloth - a stand-up wash, is that still a thing?

The toilet lost its joie de vivre –

It stopped flushing.

That was, perhaps, my lowest moment.

I thought of throwing myself out of the hotel.

The window, however, wouldn't open.

The window was designed to withstand

a bazooka attack, a coup d'etat.

The great international breakfast withered -

Diluted pineapple juice and cauldrons of vermicelli

and something called Happy Breakfast.

Eggs – scrambled – pocked with sausages

made from chickens whose entire lives

were spent in a Correctional Facility.

The eggs disappeared

along with the smiles of the staff.

No more choreography of choice.

Vermicelli and water and slices of bread  
and sometimes a pomegranate.

Why not shoot us now?

There are white hills in the background.

Yesterday the hotel restaurant closed.

There was a sign in several languages  
which said Sorry, we are very sorry.

The beige telephones in the corridors  
remnants of an earlier age,

before the assassination of the sultan,  
gathering dust, disconnected.

They began to ring.

Hello Mister. Hello Doctor.

This is Khalifa. This is Mohammed.

This is Mahmoud:

Hello. Hello.

I'm unable to find you a car.

This is Khalifa.

The ambassador is dead.

This is Pier Paolo. This is Claude.

Je suis désolé:

Your camel came in last at the races.

I am Khalifa. Welcome. I like you.

Greetings. I'm Deepak.

Your request for a bowl of Gulab Jamuns  
has been declined.

Your request for an air ticket

has been turned down

This is Jonny. Jonny Algorithm.

You're fucked. You're totally fucked.

This is Derek. This is Keith. This is awful.

LE RONDINE

O swallow swallow ...à la Tour Abolie

I had nothing lovelier to do

looping through Liguria

than watch the swallows

(Having worked at the University of Genoa for many years Julian Stannard now teaches English and Creative Writing at the University of Winchester (UK) . His New and Selected Poems were published by Salt in 2025. A novel – The University of Bliss - was published in 2024 by Sagging Meniscus Press (USA) He was awarded the International Troubadour Prize in 2010 and the Premio Shelley (Italy) in 2024.)

MANI RAO

WIDOW HEAD

Every time I shave my head, Anamika says I  
look detached.

This poem is about the attachment of hair.

The first time I shaved was when Kiran  
picked up an imported - or rather, a  
smuggled - shaver at Heera Panna  
shopping centre. In the days before  
satellite tv.

Bzzzzzzz and all that attachment fell upon  
the floor, waves skimmed from the ocean.  
Oh the calm.

Heyhey, this look was mine before it  
became a neighbourhood, long before  
Sinead O'Connor was even sighted on the  
horizon.

My mother declared I looked like a widow.  
Far-sighted, considering I was not  
married at the time.

Hair is like a picture frame, ring around gem  
and pod around seed. Take it off and the  
image is open to interpretations. You're  
no longer on stage, clutching your poem,  
asking people to like your hair. There is

air on your skin and that, is more.

The flourishes stay in the poems. In every  
printed copy of my poetry books, an  
abrupt sticky curlicue.

Is it a wonder that hair relics find their way  
to stupas where the newly-shaven  
practice detachment?

Now I am a widow looking like a widow.

The mirror gleams silver dew as though  
my eyes are attached to his.

John was the one. He was Lear's daughter.

Never looked past the salt of my eyes.

We were talking about a reading in October.

Said Anamika, "it will grow back by then.

## POETRY CLASS

Poetry class, is Chemistry class.

Two plain substances come together and hiss colour.

New bonds are made. Things precipitate.

Temperature rises, drops.

Poetry class is Biology class.

You are not squeamish. You dissect your feelings.

You let the poem's embryo feed on your imagination.

Poetry class is Physics class.

Physics is a Greek word for "endeavour  
of seeing the essential nature of things". Reflection.

Mind travels faster than light. Words

have a mass. Your turbulence is energy

for the poem's fusion.

Poetry class is Math class.

The shortest distance between two points

is a line. Or is it? The page is 2-D.

The idea, 3-D. You're aiming for more-D.

There IS no formula. You permute.

You are divided. You are multiplied.

You solve yourself.

Poetry class is Music class.

Your body's your instrument.

Chords, vocal.

Drum, diaphragm.

Heart, beat.

Keys, emotions.

Poetry class is Economics class.

Make sure the poem is efficient. No surplus word.

No deficit of thought. And does the poem have value?

I mean, for YOU. For a poem can make your life worth it.

And a poem can cost you your life.

Poetry class is English class.

So they say.

## ISLAND EXTRAVAGANZA

Someone left the door open in the bamboo thicket

Thieves came by and stole my silver light

The gold foil on my plantains was intact but trembling

And my jade leaf pendants were stiff  
So I ran away and camped in the orchard  
The crab-tree laid a fresh mattress daily  
Squirrels opened nuts and handed them over  
Goat milk ran up the valley

#### NEWS ROUND-UP 2020

All ten thousand dead were named  
on the New York Times' front page.  
Give us this day our daily spread,  
don't read the news before going to bed.  
Every dream ends with the goods train axe,  
I am that worker sleeping on the tracks.  
Give us this day our daily spread,  
don't read the news before going to bed

Salons closed but crops got shaved,  
a locust storm just ate, and ate.  
Give us this day our daily spread,  
don't read the news before going to bed.  
Then cyclone Amphan flooded the skies,  
uprooted all giants in the Sunderbans.  
Give us this day our daily spread,  
don't read the news before going to bed.  
Home is not where we live,  
but where we want to die.  
Give us this day our daily spread,  
don't read the news before going to bed.

(Mani Rao is the author of thirteen poetry collections, including *So That You Know* (HarperCollins, 2025), as well as celebrated translations of the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Saundarya Lahari*, and works of Kalidasa. Her ground-breaking study *Living Mantra: Mantra, Deities and Visionary Experience Today* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) explores mantra as lived spiritual experience. A former resident at the Iowa International Writing Program, OMI Ledig House, and the International Poetry Studies Institute (Canberra), she has performed at major literary platforms including the Jaipur Literature Festival, Hindu Lit for Life, and Melbourne Writers' Festival. Her poetry and essays are widely published and anthologised, reflecting a distinctive blend of lyrical intensity, spiritual inquiry, and intellectual depth.)

JOWONDER WOODWARD

THE STOPPED TIME OF THE BUTTERFLIES



wall of the ravine.

Some raised their heads and dashed out, while others lazily drifted off to sleep.

The water that pumped under them, held the memories of the dead ones like lumps of jelly. They were only waiting for the passing sun.

I slid down to where a dull eyed one stood grazing.

She lifted her face half looking at me. Dozens of red butterflies where feeding on the blood inside the cut on her forehead where her horn once grew. I cut her free.

Smoothing a soft hand from withers to tail, I found a metal cog. The bullet of a clock; it would have been a lethal device for anyone— but for a newborn unicorn it would be fatal.

“Go!” I said, for it was the Buddha’s horse.

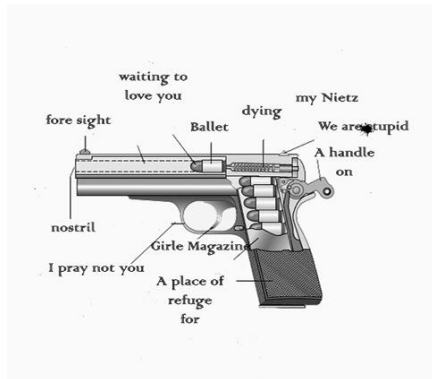
She blinked, and her eyes covered over like dark stars.

The butterflies continued on; they had an economy of their own. All they wanted was blood!

“But had I heard the beauty of their feelings expressed in the sound of the water? Or was it just Humpty Trumpty banging a drum?”

If I could just sit and be content, would every one of them be set free?

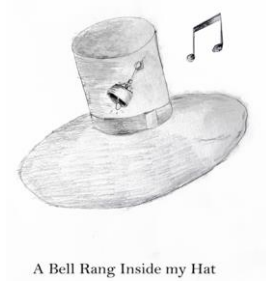
## THE GUN



lounging on banana seats, and taking sideways looks,  
headed down the barrel of a gun, moved on down the  
gat and quivered a little, all lined up for  
the powder flash to shoot us out.  
But there was a joker onboard—  
a sailor with a fixation on a sweet paper waiting to hatch.  
N’ when they pulled the trigger, he was caught off guard.  
N’ we too forgot to shoot! . . . and instead of violence  
we all became rapt, as the sweet paper, swirled and swirled,  
ahead of us like a walnut whip.  
So we held fire, had a talk  
n’ decided to form a choir.

\*

## THE HAT



Its a clown's hat I seek  
a breath of peace  
with rested arms I lie  
down in a stream.  
Wild unicorns fly by.

(JoWonder is a noted British para-disciplinary artist, known for being an avant  
garde stopmotion animator, performance artist, painter, and poet.)

NORBERT BUGEJA

DARK CAPRICCIO

I missed what you said, that day. Reef after reef  
the island pierces you like a pause from the pain  
or a seagull as it glides over the trembling  
hypogeum of your face. A memory, perhaps,  
darting away from the dark blue to touch  
places now faded or this burning itch  
in your eye—the spray of my words  
wearing out the cliffs of your silence.

Perhaps this was the prayer told and retold  
by each pinion that shaded the restless bay  
of your cheek: emerge and speak to me.

Come to the surface and cleanse me  
from the battered ways of this water.

Your tongue would let go, then—a story  
slowly swaying to a close, awaiting  
the gust that will whisk you away  
to the hidden follies of the island.

SLESTA

I come to this photo from her hand  
as it settles on the helm and feels time  
happen: a doubt that blurs our words  
ever so faintly, like a hidden pencil  
touching up the edges of what we'd said.

By the time she picks up her beach towel,  
the musings of three sails on the story  
of her face will have already passed her by—  
a breeze from yesterday. I'd tell her:  
forgive me, for I've been touched by the medusa  
and am now stained with the lilac cravings  
of the depths. Her hand touches this moment,

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and the weariness of our years sways  
with the languor of the bay. She turns  
around—sails towards me, like a boat  
heaving with the brittle secrets of the water.

#### THRENODY

Toward the end, her eyes were left  
with no barriers. Already, her wish had dripped  
like a drug in the tube of the years, coursing  
round the bend where a glance would spill  
into the inner scent of poplar. One afternoon  
curled up inside another. In the thin hideaways  
of time, I'd seek the shard that broke off  
or the one that still haunts this warehouse of tears—  
a scream louder than any of our hopes  
for salvation. A muted stillness, this—a future  
deafened by murmurs. In the distance, stilettos  
without a woman cross the mist of our words  
to board a flight to places we can't fathom. She  
trickles still from the hues of those years—  
and numbed by a wish I never asked for,

I've often wondered what haste she had to desert me.

[Translated from the Maltese by Irene Mangion]

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## SHORT-FICTION

## THE MATRIARCH OF THE CREMATION GROUND

TAPAN KUMAR GHOSH

Far from the sweep of human habitation, where the western hills of Birbhum fold into themselves like a slow, breathing beast, a wilderness thrives—dense, primeval, and unconquered. Among these heights, a dilapidated temple stands on the fringe of a cremation ground, its walls cracked, the roots of an ancient banyan thrusting through the mortar as though seeking the secret marrow of the earth. There is no idol, no priest, no incense curling through the air. Only emptiness, echoing with the whispers of departed souls. And within this hollowed sanctuary dwells a presence—one that men fear, yet women revere: Shyama.

Her body is a map of both earth and cosmos: pitch-black skin, knotted hair like the tresses of some ancient deity, breasts hanging like ripe fruit, buttocks arching upward as though sculpted by the hands of a furious god, and a bushy vulva that speaks of raw vitality, unclaimed and unbound. She wears no cloth, no semblance of human modesty. She is elemental, unmediated, as if she has stepped from the pages of a Tantra manuscript into the waking world.

Around her move her companions—five dogs, all females, their eyes luminous in the dusk, their fangs glittering with the taste of burnt offerings. At night, jackals join them. Snakes coil among the scattered skulls and half burnt corpses, hissing a perpetual liturgy of death and transformation.

No human dwells here. The cremation pyres of the nearby villagers provide sustenance—rice, vegetables, and occasionally flesh left behind by the flames. The villagers leave these offerings with a mixture of fear and awe, then retreat. Some whisper that she is goddess Kali herself, risen from the soil

of their ancestors to punish men and protect the sacred threshold between life and death. None dare approach too closely; the memory of trespassers devoured by her hounds circulates like a dark myth, warning the curious, the lecherous, and the foolish.

Shyama was not always the wilderness's specter. In a village near Sainthia, she had lived as a wife, her life ordinary, luminous, and finite in its joys. Her husband, Paran Bagdi, was an agricultural laborer of imposing presence. Yet, in his wandering, joyous spirit, he became something more: a bohurupee, a master of metamorphosis. He donned the masks of gods and animals—Shiva, Vishnu, Ganesha, tiger, bear—and roamed festivals and fields, bringing laughter to children and blessings to villagers. Shyama, his partner, managed the household, dressed him for his performances, and tended the

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hearth. Childless yet fulfilled, their lives sang in the simple harmony of devotion and love.

Then the sky fell. Paran was struck down by a drunken tractor driver while returning from a fair where the gods he impersonated had danced and sung through the night. The village saw grief incarnate in Shyama; she staggered beneath the emptiness of her loss. Hunger, that cruelest healer, brought her back from despair, and she took up Paran's mantle. She became the goddess—Durga, Lakshmi, and most of all, Kali. Her youthful black skin and limber, precise limbs made her the living icon of wrath and protection. But with divine allure came the gaze of men: predatory, lecherous, and irrepressible.

Mohitosh Gayen, a moneylender and petty politician, exemplified the corruption of patriarchal desire. Possessed of wives and concubines, he wanted Shyama not for love, but as an object—a symbol of mastery over the female body. Her refusals, sharp and unyielding, kindled his obsession. She

sensed danger in his eyes and in the circle of power he gathered around himself: friends in the police, enablers of lust. And then one night, while the village slept, he struck. Drunk, brutal, and forceful, he violated her body in a calculated assault. Shyama bled; her lips were torn, her dignity desecrated. Yet within her, something shifted; a latent, primal intelligence stirred. She felt the centuries of women's subjugation—the weight of uncounted generations of violated bodies and silenced minds. She remembered the ancient social order, when women chose their partners, commanded fertility, and ruled the rites of death and life. A rage, black and luminous, uncoiled inside her. In the pale light of night, blood-smeared, raw, and incandescent, she enacted justice. Falchion in hand, she struck. Mohitosh died as the embodiment of male lust, severed and dismantled, while Shyama danced the primordial liturgy of vengeance and liberation. Her naked body, smeared with blood and semen, became the altar, the conduit, the declaration that the old order would not be erased.

The village, witnessing this apocalypse of flesh and spirit, recoiled. Men fled; women bowed. Shyama did not pause. She became the violence and ecstasy of all female anger, her body a bridge between the mortal and the divine.

When the police arrived, they found not a woman, but a manifestation of wrath itself—uncontainable, ungovernable. Her words spat at patriarchy: curses and obscenities rolled like molten iron from her lips, directed at the men who had enforced centuries of bondage and violation. She wore neither cloth nor social acceptability, only the raw, elemental truth of female power.

The authorities could not contain her; the hospital could not cure her.

Medication and institutional attempts at normalcy failed.

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One night, she vanished from confinement. The asylum doors and the guards' vigilance could not restrain a force as ancient and elemental as the

goddess herself. And so she came to the wilderness of Birbhum.

Here, in the temple by the cremation ground, she became a liminal presence.

Her body and her companions—the dogs, snakes, and jackals—seemed extensions of one another, a living tapestry of life, death, protection, and feral intimacy. No human venture could disrupt this ecosystem. The hounds defended her as extensions of her own wrath; the snakes coiled like conscious sigils; the jackals' howls formed a chorus to her nocturnal rites. Skulls, animal and human alike, littered the corners, relics of ancient Tantric practices and of her own acts of vengeance.

The villagers' fear became myth. Rumor claimed that even a drunken man seeking shelter could not violate her sanctuary without facing death. To the rural folk she became the embodiment of divinity—destroyer of evil, goddess of death, sexuality, and transcendence. And yet she was no mere archetype.

Her intimacy with the animals, the snakes, and the half-burnt corpses revealed a psychology unfathomable. She was beyond human language, beyond societal constraint, yet deeply human in her rage and grief, in her mourning for the lost moral order governed by women.

By night, the temple pulsed with her presence. Snakes hissed around her, forming loops and sigils of cosmic geometry. The dogs lay at her feet, their warm bodies a living incense of loyalty and ferocity. She shared her offerings with them: rice, vegetables, and flesh left behind by the pyres. Her rituals were silent, intimate, grotesque, and magnificent. In her nakedness, she dissolved the boundary between the sacred and the profane, the divine and the human, the living and the dead.

The villagers left offerings at the edge of the cremation ground, a feeble attempt to participate in her ritual without incurring her wrath. And they spoke of her in whispers, invoking her as both a sacred presence and a living nightmare: A goddess reborn, sister to all women wronged, harbinger of

death to lustful men.

Sometimes, she danced beneath the moon, her body a coil of wrath and ecstasy tracing the geometry of forgotten worlds, while her companions watched silently. Blood, earth, fire, and shadow swirled around her. She became myth incarnate: the Matriarch of the Burning Ground. No one could approach; none dared. Her transcendence was complete—a defiance and reclamation of all that the phalloocentric society had suppressed. She was memory and vengeance, ecstasy and terror, a living testament that the

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matriarchal order, once erased, could rise again in the form of one woman, one body, one mind, as infinite as the wilderness itself.

The wind through the western hills carries her story. The banyan tree, ancient and patient, spreads its roots through the temple walls, embracing her presence as though acknowledging a force older and deeper than human law or comprehension. The river murmurs her name, and in the silence between cremation pyres, in the half-light of dawn and dusk, the world glimpses the terrible and luminous possibility of matriarchal transcendence.

Shyama does not speak. She does not need to. Her body, her fury, her communion with the animal and elemental — her very existence — is her voice.

And it is enough.

No one will ever disturb her again.

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THE QUEST

ARI GAUTIER

Rajaraja Ponnabarthan waves his friends into silence, confident he has just caught the Air India flight number crackling over the loudspeaker. He holds his breath, hoping to hear the announcement again and to determine whether it concerns the long-awaited flight. But the muffled voice dissolves into the terminal's background noise before he can confirm it.

"Ennadaa solraa andha mundai?" — What the hell is that woman saying? He snaps, directing the question to his fellow drivers, all of whom are waiting for their clients to arrive. Sitting on the ground in the Chennai airport car park, the Pondicherry taxi drivers pass the time by playing cards, a habit they have developed. Although Pondicherry is just a few hours away from Chennai by car, Pondicherry taxis are always preferred by Pondicherrians, whether arriving or departing. Despite the abundance of airport and online cab services, this age-old tradition persists not because of ethical questions but because of a fundamental clash between two distinct ways of life. In Chennai, a bustling metropolis where everything is bargained and contested, the pace and routines stand in stark contrast to those of Pondicherry, a sleepy, leisurely provincial town. Pondicherrians don't distrust people from Chennai because they think they're unreliable; they distrust a rhythm instead—an urban sharpness that isn't theirs—and associate it, rightly or wrongly, with a lack of sincerity.

And this tradition endures from generation to generation.

"How am I supposed to know?" says one of his friends. "Like you, I don't understand that northern language."

They let the message run its course in Hindi and English, and finally in Tamil; only then do they realize the Air India flight has been delayed by two hours.

"Tea?" someone in the group suggests, prompting them to leave the parking lot and head to the tea stand.

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The oppressive nighttime heat often surprises travelers as they step out of the Chennai airport. It's like a furnace that envelops you, thickened by exhaust fumes and a day's worth of dust that refuses to settle.

That damp, suffocating heat surges toward your face like a beast in the shadows. It doesn't roar; it breathes, a warm, moist exhalation that clings to

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your skin before you've even set down your luggage. All of a sudden, it reminds you of the place you had forgotten.

"Saturnin Kandassamy." When he sees his name, the man walking out of the airport feels a burn of shame rise to his cheeks, sharper than the muggy night air. And yet he had come all this way to stop being Saturnin Kandassamy.

That name, with its two cumbersome French and Tamil syllables, still smells of dried fish and the dusty parish registers of his childhood. Instead, Pranav, a name that resonates like a mantra and a vow, represents a man at peace with his fate. He should have considered it when booking the cab; he should have insisted they inscribe "Pranav" on that damned placard. He berates himself for not thinking of it. An old habit, slow to die. It's not easy to shed an identity—decades of answering to a name don't disappear overnight, and the body, the mind, and old habits still betray the man he thought he had left behind.

Saturnin Kandassamy. A first name and a surname that had tormented him since childhood. A French first name, old-fashioned, and a hick Tamil surname, even if it honored the god Murugan. He should have been Saturnin Châteaubriand — his mother's maiden name, Rosalie Châteaubriand. A proper French name. Had she married a Franco-Pondicherrian like herself, Saturnin would have inherited an illustrious name — a Ronsard, a Malebranche, a Le Brun, a Robespierre... Alas, fate decreed that a

grandfather he never knew, long dead before his birth, would negotiate the bride price for his daughter with this Tamil man, haggling over a buffalo or a piece of land. And it was he, Saturnin, who paid for it, years later, every time someone asked his family name.

Such exchanges were commonplace in Pondicherry, where French citizenship had been negotiated for generations like a dowry — a good to be traded, coveted, and arranged between families, with the same gravity once reserved for alliances of blood and land. The alluring irony of a colonization that began with a cross and a rifle to bring enlightenment, only to leave behind a mere passport for negotiation. It's as if France's greatest triumph in India, after a century, boiled down to a mere line item for the highest bidder. He never blamed his father for it—that would have been too easy and unfair to a man who had only bowed to his parents' will. No, he cursed fate—that blind, deaf machine that dealt out Ronsards and Kandassamys by mysterious rules no one had ever bothered to explain to him. His grandfather would not have had to choose between honor and hunger if his family had not fallen into poverty.

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Why that particular dowry and not a matched marriage—a Châteaubriand wedding, a Malebranche, or a Ronsard?—as had happened elsewhere, in other families, for other sons who never had to invent a Pranav just to breathe? He never once considered Rosalie's perspective, assuming she had been given up without her consent. He refused to grieve, and his misfortunes filled his life.

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Originally, the Châteaubriands were a large farming family from Oulgaret, a flat area barely fifteen meters above sea level, crisscrossed by the deltaic channels of the Gingee and Pennaiyar rivers. These channels branch into a

lacework of basins and lakes, where the water lies still, waiting patiently between two monsoons. The name itself already carried that vocation: Oulgaret is nothing but a distortion, a French wearing-down of the Tamil Ouzhavar-Karai—the bank of the farmers. The official accounts of Pondicherry often overlook an important fact: long before the East India Company's ships graced this coastline, the settlement of Oulgaret was already thriving. Ancient inscriptions dating back more than a thousand years attest to this — a temple once stood there, the settlement around it stretched for several leagues, and what the French would later rename "Pondicherry" was originally nothing more than a modest port suburb of that land.

Oulgaret was not a mere hamlet on the outskirts of the White Town: it predates the White Town itself. The rice paddies, watered for centuries before any French trading post was built on the Coromandel Coast, cover the alluvial plain the Châteaubriands knew intimately. To the north, the latest deposits from recent floods lie, while to the south, the older traces of the Varahanadi remain. Even farther northwest, a belt of red hills, known as the Red Mountains or Gorimedu, rises above the surrounding plain as a reminder of the land's past. These hills bear the scars of a 1760 siege and bloodshed.

Beneath that modest relief lies fossil-bearing Cretaceous limestone. This stone is older than any empire that has ever passed along this coast.

This land, the farmers' bank fed by its paddies and watched over by its red hills, earned Oulgaret the nickname the old folk still proudly repeated: the granary of Pondicherry. Even the nababs and generals of the Company, once settled, knew it well — Oulgaret's gardens and paddies were handed out as prized rewards, so renowned was the land's generosity.

Then came colonization, with its mania for renaming and ranking everything, making the White Town the center of the world and relegating the rest, including Oulgaret, to a tolerated periphery, useful primarily as a resource for

those on the other side of the canal.

Once made French in March 1182, to be precise, Saturnin's great-grandfather no longer wanted to work the land. Someone must have convinced him that

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being French and farming were incompatible—as if the 1881 Renunciation decree, which made him a French citizen, had taken the earth from his hands and given him a pen he couldn't hold. Darmassamy Châteaubriand — that was his ancestor's name — had been told that a respectable Frenchman keeps his fingernails clean, wears a thoppi instead of a turban, and takes pride in bureaucracy rather than agriculture, as if France, the homeland of farmers and winemakers, had never known the earth. Poor Darmassamy didn't know that the France he dreamed of smelled of dung — that the Norman or Berry countryside was just as fragrant with cattle as Reddiarpalayam, and that the Frenchness he pursued with such fervor stank, in its own way, exactly like what he was fleeing.

Convinced by this absurd yet irrefutable equation, he sold his property and, like many from Reddiarpalayam, seized by the same fever, left for Indochina — leaving behind the region's most fertile paddies to cultivate elsewhere, under another flag, on someone else's land. This irony would even have made Molière blanch.

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Darmassamy Châteaubriand, who had never set foot in a classroom, could not join the civil service or the army. Life, however, taught him everything else through sweat and instinct. He arrived in Saigon with nothing but a pair of skilled hands and the resourcefulness of the Reddiarpalayam people, who know how to turn nothing into gold. He began his career by hawking a wide variety of goods to anyone willing to buy. He soon realized that the real wealth in that sky was not in land but in the intangible things that connected

people: rice, salt, and the funds that exiled countrymen borrowed from one another. In just a few years, he established a spacious storefront and earned a reputation as the most reputable moneylender on Rue Tôn Thất Thiệp, formerly known as Rue de l'église.

Prosperity, it must be said, smiled on him without restraint, and he grew considerably rich — so rich that even those who had once mocked his farmer background no longer dared refer to it without a thinly veiled note of respect. But fortune, generous as it may be, excuses nothing. Because of the insistent demands of his family in Pondicherry, who were eager to see him married in accordance with social conventions, he had no choice but to board the ship home to his native land.

Darmassamy Chateaubriand was careful not to tell them about the household he had already built in Indochina. Pondicherry was still unaware of it. Ngoc, a Vietnamese woman, was waiting for him in the house he had built above his shops, accompanied by the children she had borne. This hidden truth would remain secret for years. He balanced his two lives effortlessly, as if he

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could count profits without tracking expenses elsewhere. Pondicherry remained oblivious to Indochina, and Indochina remained unaware of Pondicherry, while he alone stood as the guardian of that dual accounting in his heart. Only at his death did everyone, stunned, discover the existence of that other family: the children with half-Tamil, half-Vietnamese faces who, like him, bore the name Chateaubriand.

It was from that branch—the Vietnamese one everyone had wanted to silence—that Saturnin descended. His grandfather, a half-Tamil, half-Vietnamese child born after Darmassamy's death, eventually left Indochina, like so many other sons seeking their father's land. He landed in Pondicherry with the naive hope of finding a place there—even just a corner of thinnai in

the family home.

As long as Darmassamy's Tamil wife was alive, things were different.

Contrary to expectations, she welcomed the half-Tamil, half-Vietnamese child and never made him feel burdened by his mixed heritage. It is even said that she sometimes preferred him to her own children, perhaps out of secret pity for those born of a dead man's silence. Saturnin's grandfather was deeply loved and treated like a son at the family dinner table.

Upon the matriarch's death, the masks his half-siblings had worn all their lives came crashing down. They had always resented his presence and tolerated it only out of respect for their mother, and they moved swiftly to dispose of him. They gave him a plot of land on the estate's periphery and a tiny dwelling barely larger than a tool shed. This meager accommodation was enough to ensure his silence and, most importantly, to erase him from the family circle without any of them having to take responsibility. After he was formally dismissed, he discovered what Pondicherry did best: silencing people with a soft touch. He should have stood firm to claim his identity... Instead, he lived like a pariah, segregated and ignored on that plot of land too meager to feed a man and his descendants, yet large enough, ironically, to bear the weight of everything he had inherited without ever asking for it: a French citizenship that opened no doors for him and a name, Châteaubriand, that rang like mockery on his neighbors' lips — borrowed grandeur stuck onto a life of want. He held the nationality of the privileged and the poverty of the neglected, and neither alleviated the other's suffering. He sometimes appeared at the doorstep of his small house in silence, wearing that illustrious name like an overgrown coat, cut for a destiny that was not his.

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"What's your name?"

Rajaraja Ponnabarthan was taken aback by the question—it was the first time the client had spoken to him. Since getting into the car, Saturnin had stared out the window, absorbed in the street and landscape. The driver noticed this gaze: it was not that of an Indian but that of a vellaikaran. Experience had taught him to sort his clients with a single glance in the rearview mirror: the arrogant one who criticized everything, the kind one who dreamed of saving all of India, the naive one who marveled at everything, the rationalist who wanted to explain it all, and the seeker who watched with wonder and warmth. Rajaraja Ponnabarthan, studying Saturnin Châteaubriand, was certain he recognized this last category without hesitation—the lost souls who come to India in search of spirituality.

"Ponnabarthan, missié... Rajaraja Ponnabarthan. I speak French, missié.

Going Alliance Française. Ponnabarthan, French, missié."

"What do you mean?"

"My name, missié... Ponnabarthan, French name"

Saturnin Châteaubriand repeated the word, trying to make sense of it.

"Ponnabarthan... that's not French; it sounds very Tamil."

"King, missié... great king of France... Naapoleon Ponnabarthan, missié."

"Ah, Bonaparte! You mean your name is Rajaraja Bonaparte?"

"Yes, yes, missié. Me want to go France, monsieur."

Saturnin chuckled at the driver's unusual name: Rajaraja Ponnabarthan. Just saying it took a moment to ponder. Rajaraja, like the powerful Chola king who had stirred the seas and built temples that stood the test of time.

Ponnabarthan, Bonaparte, worn down by generations of Tamil tongues, like the emperor who had dreamed of conquering all of Europe. Two rulers, one from the East and one from the West, met under the same last name. They inadvertently came to recognize the supremacy of an individual whose domain consisted of only an old Ambassador, whose only realm to conquer

each day was the dusty roads of Tamil Nadu.

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Saturnin discovered the driver's life: his grandfather, like his own, had been a renonçant who exchanged his name for a passport — except that he never applied for French citizenship when Pondicherry was returned to India in 1962, not out of any stubborn attachment to his Indian identity, but simply because he never knew. The option campaign had been carried out with a carelessness that, in hindsight, looked less like an oversight than a quiet strategy: badly announced, poorly explained, buried in notices few could read and even fewer understood, as if the colonial administration had no real

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appetite for the prospect of thousands of brown Frenchmen suddenly walking the streets of Paris. Others on the same street, better informed or simply luckier, signed the citizenship document — becoming citizens of a country they might never set foot in — while he was left behind, not by choice but by a silence that had clearly been designed.

The so-called option was a slow-acting, carefully crafted poison the French had left behind as a parting gift. They presented it as the right to choose between two nationalities, as if the decision could erase centuries of oppression. Yet its effects endured. It split families into two camps, turning brothers into strangers with a single signature. It produced generations caught in the middle, neither fully French nor fully Indian, condemned to carry, like Saturnin's grandfather, the weight of an identity they had not chosen.

Rajaraja's father, for his part, lived and died as a factory worker at the Rodier mill. Fibers had eaten away at his hands, as had time. He remained poor, his Indian nationality never sparing him. It was not a dream of Parisian lights that now drove Rajaraja Ponnabarthan to reclaim his grandfather's French

nationality, that poisoned inheritance left behind, yet still the only way out anyone had ever offered him. It was the fear of ending up, like him, ground down by a machine that had never known his name.

As if to compensate for his own lack of ambition, the father, with no apparent irony, saddled his son with the names of two emperors — one Tamil, one French — as though the boy were destined to rule the entire world, one continent in each fist. He did not live to see that his twice-crowned son would inherit not a chariot nor a cavalry, but a single aging, wheezing Ambassador, forever one breakdown away from surrender.

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"France, you say?" Saturnin looked away from the road. "The individualism that shuts everyone in their own corner, the family that falls apart the moment a son turns eighteen, the elderly abandoned in nursing homes, the materialism that makes them rich and lonely at once, the greed with no end in sight, the loneliness they dress up as freedom, the neighbor you never even meet, food swallowed standing up, the time they never have despite all their machines, and that coldness they call politeness. That's what's waiting for you, thambi. Think hard before trading all that for what you already have here. Over there, they teach you from the cradle to say 'I' before you even know how to say 'we.' Everyone in their own box, their own life, their own silence. They've invented fancy words for it — privacy, intimacy — but all I see is a loneliness they've managed to make fashionable. Here, your joy belongs to the whole neighborhood, and so does your grief. Over there, you

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could die in your own living room, and your neighbor wouldn't know until the smell told him a week later."

"It's easy for you to say that, missié, since you've known both cultures. As for me, I only know this old thagaravandi I'm driving in and my own

neighborhood. Aside from a few towns I've visited for work, I don't even know this country well."

Rajaraja Ponnabarthan had had enough of these great moralizers, disciples of Mother Teresa and Mumbo-Jumbo gurus who saw God in poverty and suffering. He'd driven dozens of them by now — sons of the soil, or grandsons, or great-grandsons, who left with empty pockets and came back with full ones, and somewhere along the way had swapped one for the other: the poverty they'd fled for a poverty they now found beautiful, now that it was no longer theirs to live. They arrived clutching borrowed wisdom picked up in a seminar room or a yoga retreat in California or the South of France, and handed it back to him, gift-wrapped, as if it were news — as if he, Rajaraja, hadn't been born, raised, and worn thin by the very thing this man called richness. Worse still were the ones who came home wearing the robes of gurus they'd invented for themselves overnight, dispensing enlightenment between sips of chai, as though a return ticket and a few borrowed Sanskrit words were all it took to become a sage. It was always the same performance: the West had failed them, so the East would save them, and somewhere in between, a driver's fifteen-minute wait became a small parable about impatience and greed.

Saturnin felt compassion for the driver. The poor boy didn't even know right from wrong. His voice softened, almost tender, as if he were erasing the bitter list he'd just compiled.

"Look around you, thambi. Here, spirituality flows in the blood like the Ganges to the sea — it needs no church, no fixed hour; it's in every gesture, every prayer murmured before a meal. Politeness isn't a lesson you learn here — it's in the blood. You bow before an elder; you offer your seat before it's even asked for. Family here has no walls — a cousin is a brother, an aunt is a mother, and an uncle's house is always your own. And look at this paradox

the West will never understand: we are poor, yet happy. Look at the smiles in the market, the kindness of a stranger who gives up his seat, the honesty of a shopkeeper who'll hand you back change you never even counted, and the generosity of a man who has almost nothing yet still offers you half his meal. We have the wisdom of our elders, who know that life isn't measured in possessions, and the humility of those who know they are nothing before what is greater than themselves." His gaze was lost on the horizon. "That's our wealth, thambi — the kind no plane ticket will ever bring you over there."

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He had barely finished the sentence when the car stalled and came to a stop. An exasperated Rajaraja Ponnabarthan got out and popped the hood. "It's nothing, missié — just a minor breakdown. Don't worry. I'll fix it right away. We're lucky. I have a friend who owns a nearby garage."

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Saturnin had been waiting in that dingy alleyway for just fifteen minutes, but it felt like an eternity. The city of Mahabalipuram lay shrouded in silence, while the ocean's waves murmured softly, soothed by a tranquil breeze. The majestic temples basked in the monsoon wind's melody. Saturnin lit another cigarette and ordered another cup of tea. He forgot to ask for one for his chauffeur, whom he was fuming at. The shop owner, who had gone back to sleep, slowly got up to make the warm beverage.

"Will this take much longer?" Saturnin's inquiry went unanswered.

Frustrated by the repetition, Rajaraja Ponnabarthan feigned indifference, leaning over the car's hood while engaged in a fervent conversation with the mechanic. Trying to pinpoint the problem, the technician labored like a demon, ignoring Saturnin's repeated inquiries.

The mechanic poked his head out, irritated. "Look, there's no point asking us the same question forty-six thousand times. That won't make things go

any faster. Take your tea and go sit over there, near the temple."

He ducked back under the hood, grumbling.

"It's only because it's you, Rajaraja — otherwise I'd have sent him packing.

Where did you dig up this pain in the neck?"

"Oh, don't even get me started. This client is a real plague," the driver lamented. "Ignore him and hurry up and find that damned fault. This clown, coming all the way from Paaariiss for wisdom and peace of mind, can't even sit still for fifteen minutes.

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Saturnin Chateaubriand finished his tea and shot a malevolent glance at the two men.

"What a shithole of a country! Can't even fix a car!"

He closed his eyes and leaned against the Shore Temple's ancient stones, the Pallava masterpiece, erected thirteen centuries earlier and facing the sea.

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He has written *Carnet Secret de Lakshmi*, *Le Thinnai*, *Nocturne Pondichéry*, and *Songes des archipels silencieux*.)

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## THE CENTER OF THE WORLD

DOLORS FERNANDEZ GUERRERO

When Andrés got off the train, a black cat jumped down at his feet from the low branch of a tree. As he walked a few steps along the platform, a second tabby cat slipped into the station bar, and a third, completely white cat, assessed his presence in that remote village.

From the station to the Town Hall building, Andrés saw many more cats,

proud, well-fed animals, confident about their place in the world. He felt disoriented, but since he could not ask anyone for directions, he focused on following the navigator's instructions. On his phone, his moving alter ego blinked on the screen while the device indicated that his destination was six hundred meters away. He was close and quickened his pace optimistically. Indeed, it was not long before he caught sight of the Town Hall, as decrepit as the fountain decorating the Main Square, whose rusted spouts had not produced water for a long time. The basin displayed traces of dried mold on the stone, and the valves and plumbing that should have launched cheerful jets of water into the air lay exposed, looking desolate. To make matters worse, on the long balcony running across the main façade, the flags of the municipality, the autonomous community, and the State looked like faded rags forgotten on their poles. Just to be sure, Andrés checked his notes: the address was correct.

Despite his reservations, Andrés pushed open the door, and at that very moment an orange-and-black cat slipped inside, weaving between his feet. Recovering from the fright, Andrés crossed the threshold and entered.

— You there! Where do you think you're going, going, going?

A hostile voice greeted him. Dazzled by the sudden change in light, Andrés could barely make out who was speaking. After a few seconds, he saw that a uniformed man was addressing him from behind a half-glazed guard booth.

—I'm here about the advertisement.

—Ah, the cartographer, the cartographer, the cartographer! —the same man repeated vehemently.

—Well, actually, I came about the job offer. I spoke with don Fulgencio.—

Andrés hesitated, not daring to contradict someone who seemed so enthusiastic about receiving him.

—I'll inform the Most Excellent Mr. Mayor at once. Have a seat, young man,

come on, come on, come on.

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He pointed Andrés toward a worn-out rush chair in the corner. His paternalism and habit of tripling the last word of every sentence clashed with the formal way he addressed him. The man, who was clearly the doorkeeper, abandoned his post and headed toward the staircase at the back, shrouded in shadow. He was thin and hunched, and rather than walking, he trotted. Yet he climbed the steps with astonishing agility. Andrés lost sight of him around the next bend of the narrow spiral staircase.

While waiting, Andrés drifted off. He had barely slept, and drowsiness dulled his senses. He returned to reality when the doorkeeper shook him by the shoulders.

—The Most Excellent Mr. Mayor is ready to receive you, young man. Follow me, yes, yes, yes.

Andrés followed him, and at that moment a dark-colored cat crossed their path. The little man yielded the way to it. Andrés had to hurry to keep up, and upon reaching the first landing, he noticed that the doorkeeper trotting followed a curious rhythm: every three steps he accelerated for a couple of seconds and then took three more steps. During that interval, some specimen of *felis catus* usually slipped between his legs. In fact, since arriving in the village, members of this species seemed to be everywhere.

After traversing a long corridor, the doorkeeper stopped before a large wooden door decorated with raised panels and knocked on it.

—Come iiiiin! —someone bellowed from the other side.

The doorkeeper then turned the worn handle and ushered Andrés inside while ceremoniously announcing:

—The Most Excellent Mr. Mayor says you may enter.

Andrés was pondering the unnecessary nature of all these formalities when a

group of cats surrounded him and escorted him across the room. At that same moment, the doorkeeper straightened up, and his height suddenly far exceeded Andrés's own. The little man's deception was intimidating. --Come in, young man, come in. I've been expecting you. Now it was don

Fulgencio himself who courteously invited him forward.

The doorkeeper, stiff as a board, left the room and closed the door very slowly, without making a sound. From the far end of the room Andrés glimpsed the mayor seated behind a massive dark wooden desk. The elongated space created the effect of a tunnel, accentuated by the black-and-white checkered floor, as worn as the rest of the building.

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As he approached, he noticed that an old bronze lamp illuminated a profusion of folders, files, documents, and books stacked in implausible towers on the desk, all on the verge of collapse. A graphite-gray cat and two nearly white cats leapt onto the desk and disarranged some papers with their paws. Far from being annoyed, don Fulgencio stroked the animals while offering his guest a seat.

Andrés was about to sit in a beige damask armchair, its stuffing protruding through tears in the fabric, when he heard the mayor's warning shout.

The gray cat had just leapt from one of the towers of files and landed squarely on the seat. To think he might have crushed it under his weight...The mayor smiled naturally.

—Well, there's no reason we can't continue the interview standing up, is there, young man?

—No, no, not at all —Andrés replied, bewildered.

True to his non-royal nosism, don Fulgencio rose and, with a jovial air, stood before Andrés. Immediately, the two almost-white cats accompanying the gray one occupied the mayor's chair. Don Fulgencio looked at them lovingly.

—It is very gratifying for us that you are here today, Andrés, and a true pleasure to meet you. The truth is that for some time now we have needed someone with your profile because you are also fond of geometry, are you not?

—Well, yes... Thank you, don Fulgencio, that's very kind of you. But I should clarify that I'm not a cartographer. As you must have read in my résumé, I hold a degree in Sociology and a Master's in Animal Welfare and Accommodation. The doorkeeper must have misunderstood.

Out of the corner of his eye, Andrés observed how the felines remained motionless in their seats, attentively listening while slowly swishing their tails.

—Of course, young man, of course.

—Even so, don Fulgencio, if you believe I'm qualified for the position, I'd be delighted.

—You are a good person, young man, trustworthy, that is obvious. Of course you are qualified, of course, of course.

Andrés noticed that the habit of repeating words was not exclusive to the doorkeeper, which made him suspect some degree of kinship between the mayor and his subordinate.

To reinforce his words, don Fulgencio patted him on the back. Then, suddenly, he turned to look at the three cats. After leisurely licking their paws, the animals jumped down from their seats and headed toward the office door, zigzagging across the black tiles. Instantly, the door opened and the three cats exited, gracefully swaying their bodies.

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The doorkeeper poked his head inside again, once more transformed into a hunched little man, and the mayor declared:

—In that case, the position is yours, young man. Let us speak no more of it,

young man.

—Just like that? So easily? —Andrés blurted out.

A hearty, stentorian laugh filled the room.

—You can start right away, can't you, can't you? We are already impatient.

—The truth, the truth —the reiteration was contagious— is that I wasn't expecting this, don Fulgencio. Shouldn't I sign the contract first?

—Right, right... You are right, young man. How foolish of me, forgive me.

Please sit down while Estanislao brings the contract immediately, and you'll sign it in a jiffy.

At that moment, don Fulgencio unearthed a bronze bell from beneath a mountain of papers and rang it vigorously. Its metallic sound resonated throughout the room. Quickly, the doorkeeper, with palace-like efficiency, opened the door and poked his head in.

—What does the Most Excellent Mr. Mayor require?

—Estanislao, please, the contract for this young man, the contract.

Estanislao—now the doorkeeper had a name—withdrawed discreetly. For several minutes, the mayor and Andrés remained silent. Don Fulgencio was lost in thought, while Andrés maintained a forced smile.

Then Estanislao knocked on the office door again.

—Come iiiin!

The formula never changed, and by now the response was predictable.

—Most Excellent Mr. Mayor, the contract, yes, yes, yes.

The doorkeeper advanced with his absurd little trot while being followed, anticipated, and crossed by a court of multicolored cats—black, white, orange, brown, and gray.

As he handed the contract to Andrés, all the cats, led by the gray one that had recognized him earlier, climbed onto the desk and fixed their gaze on the candidate. The effect was hypnotic. Andrés's hand trembled as he searched

inside his jacket pocket for a pen.

—No hurry, young man, no hurry, no hurry. I would offer you a fountain pen myself, but I can't even remember the last time I saw one in this office...

The mayor's foolish grin unsettled Andrés. Nevertheless, he ignored it and found a blue pen in one of his pockets. He desperately needed the job. He clicked the pen and began to read the contract.

Despite his training as a sociologist, the mayor's office required a cartographic representation of the "Land of Cats"—as the municipality was called—so that its boundaries could be clearly and unequivocally established.

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The text, contained within a document whose margins were uneven and sinuous, was written inside the silhouette of a cat the size of a sheet of paper. The figure, shown from the front, had whiskers and large emerald-green eyes. A barely visible point in the lower half of the drawing marked its navel. However, what most caught Andrés's attention was the final clause: "Acceptance of the contract's conditions implies the irrevocability of the position."

—The work is simple and the townspeople are extremely cooperative, I assure you—the mayor interrupted, anticipating his doubts—. It is your great opportunity, young man, a great opportunity.

—It's just that this "irrevocable position," don Fulgencio... I'm not so sure about it.

—It is merely administrative language, simple bureaucracy, nothing more. You must be more open-minded, young man, more open-minded if you wish to build a professional career...

—And besides, this "Land of Cats" business... I don't see it clearly. That wasn't the name listed in the job advertisement.

Andrés's suspicion once again made the mayor smile.

—Naturally, naturally, young man. Clearly you are intelligent and cautious.

One should never sign without reading, certainly not. Let me explain: that is the name approved unanimously at the last council meeting. It happened after the advertisement was published, hence the discrepancy you notice. But believe me, as far as you are concerned, it is of no importance.

Overwhelmed by the pressure disguised as excessive kindness, Andrés exclaimed:

—But where do you expect me to sign? This isn't a contract!

The gray cat reacted, staring at him accusingly. In disbelief, the mayor pointed to a precise spot on the document.

—Please, young man, don't be naïve! Where else would you sign? Right there: in the center of the world!

Without understanding, Andrés lowered his head and carefully examined the signature space indicated by the mayor's index finger. It pointed directly to the animal's navel. The cats nodded in satisfaction.

Andrés jumped onto the armchair, tearing the fabric even further. Then he kicked it backward and launched into a frantic run across the checkered floor, stepping only on the black tiles, just as he had seen the cats do earlier.

Reaching the door, he turned the handle, pulled with all his strength, and bounded down the stairs two at a time. When he reached the ground floor, he faced the scrutinizing gaze of Estanislao, who was already hurrying from his booth to block his way. Meanwhile, the cohort of cats closing in behind him was rapidly gaining ground.

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Andrés did not stop running until he reached the station. Fortunately, the cats, lazy creatures, tired much sooner and decided to stop and groom their splendid coats.

He boarded the first train standing at the platform, indifferent to its

destination. Once he no longer felt feline eyes fixed upon the back of his neck, he experienced immense relief. The train doors closed behind him as he departed from the Land of Cats.

A little calmer, he reasoned that the “center of the world” had drifted too far away, and that he moved much more comfortably on the periphery, where emerald-eyed cats had not yet begun deciding his working conditions.

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NON-FICTION/ ESSAY

VITA NOVA VERSUS BIOS PHILOSOPHIKOS:

ROLAND BARTHES AND MICHEL FOUCAULT

ÉRIC MARTY

The return of “Life”.

There are many ways of approaching Vita Nova, the planned work interrupted by death, whose very diverse substance could well be limited to the eight outlines drafted between August and December 1979.<sup>1</sup> I intend to examine these traces from a different angle to the one we are used to: not from the timeless perspective that death invites us to adopt – the theme of the coming book – but on the contrary from inside the profoundly historical space he belonged to, the beginning of the 1980s, which turned out to be crucial for what has been called Modernity, or for the “modern subject”. To do this, I will focus on the category of “life”, such as it is thematised by the title of the work itself – Vita Nova – in comparison or contrast to the theme of the bios philosophikos that was introduced for better or worse by Michel Foucault at almost the same time or shortly afterwards, especially in his very last works, teachings, and books, in relation to the “care of the self” and what he then called the “stylistics of moral life”.

It is no doubt no accident that Barthes precedes Foucault on this terrain, or rather that the final orientation of their research meets around this term – life – given that these years of the 1980s were such a time of collective distancing from the dry and abstract strategies that characterised the preceding period. Remember Foucault's harsh, mocking laughter – albeit qualified as “philosophical” and thus “silent” – at the great modern era with regards to phenomenology, reduced to an exploration of “lived experience”.<sup>2</sup> This distancing is expressed in the form of a return, to a new position, of the categories that were banned a few years earlier, including, thus, the unexpected category of “life”.

<sup>1</sup>These outlines are reproduced in the *Œuvres Complètes*, tome 5: Livres, textes, entretiens, 1977-1980, Paris, Le Seuil, 2002.

<sup>2</sup>Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses*, Gallimard, 1966, pp. 353–354 [The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences, translator not specified, Routledge, 1989, p. 373]. See especially the sub-chapter entitled “The empirical and the transcendental”, pp. 329–333 [pp. 347–351].

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I will put forward a polemical hypothesis however with regards to this apparent convergence. Unlike Barthes', Foucault's recourse to the paradigms of antiquity – whether Socratic, Stoic, or Cynic – risks a return to a simple topic that is critically and indeed conceptually sterile, namely the philosophical life, and thus a regression in his own thought, whose consequences are visible today, nearly thirty or forty years later, with the emergence of a veritable cliché, illustrated for example by the work of Giorgio Agamben on “bare existence”,<sup>3</sup> or of Judith Butler on “the good life”, where the question raised by Foucault has sunk to the mediocrity of the most trivial line of enquiry: “Can one lead a good life in a bad life?”<sup>4</sup>

While it is quite clear that Foucault's final work calls for more subtlety, and even some extremely strong questions, it seems essential to me to understand

in what respects they do not align, or not well, with what Barthes calls *vita nova*. I intend, through this very comparison, to assess what is taking place in thought in this short period between two centuries – the 1980s – what kind of rupture, or shift, precisely at the heart of an apparent proximity, an apparent coincidence signalled by the sudden emergence of the theme of “life”, whose radical novelty in relation to the discourses of the 1960s or 1970s has already been shown.

### Bios/Vita

It is striking, from a simple lexical perspective first of all, to observe not only the difference in the dead language chosen – Latin and Greek – to translate the theme of life, but also another divergence in the discourse itself, between the neutrality of the adjective chosen by Barthes – *nova* – and, in contrast, the semantic weight of the ones that Foucault associates with *bios*, in his last course, “The Courage of the Truth”, where it is a matter of the *bios*

3Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer*, vol I, *Le Pouvoir souverain et la vie nue*, Seuil, 1997 [*Homo sacer: sovereign power and bare life*, Stanford University Press, 1998]. See, in this respect, the piece by Laurent Dubreuil, “De la vie dans la vie: sur une étrange opposition entre *zôê* et *bios*” (“Life in life: on a strange opposition between *zôê* and *bios*”), *Labyrinthe* (online), vol. 22 no. 3 (2015), <http://labyrinthe.revues.org/1033>.

4Judith Butler, *Qu’est-ce qu’une vie bonne?*, translation and preface by Martin Rueff, Payot, 2014, p. 55 [“Adorno Prize Lecture: Can one lead a good life in a bad life?”, *Radical Philosophy* 176 (November/December 2012 )]. The support from Adorno that Butler invokes distorts Adorno’s whole Nietzschean inspiration regarding “the possibilities of a just life in a false life”, or “a true life in a world that is not” into another question with a Quakerish inflection: “how does one lead a good life in a bad life?” (pp. 55–56). The translator gives the German version of Adorno’s statement and signals the problem in his preface (p. 34). See in this regard Fragment 18 of *Minima Moralia*, from which Butler draws her inspiration (*Minima Moralia, Réflexions sur la vie mutilée*, Payot, Petit Bibliothèque Payot, 2003, p. 45–48 [*Minima moralia: reflections from damaged life*, trans. E. P. Jephcott (London : Verso,

1978) - “Wrong life cannot be lived rightly”. See also 2005 translation by Dennis Redmond (<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/adorno/1951/mm/>) - “There is no right life in the wrong one”].

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philosophikos, the alēthēs bios (true life), the straight life (euthus).<sup>5</sup> It may also be that Barthes’ Latin is not as historically grounded as Foucault’s Greek; it is a Latin that is entirely his own, without any philological point of reference except perhaps Michelet, though the latter spoke of a “vita nuova”.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, Foucault’s bios is held within, integrated into a system of discursive “bricks” (philosophikos, alēthēs, euthus...), which do not allow for any indetermination, even though these historical determinations, despite distinctions made here and there, often involve ad-hoc syntheses where Socrates, Gnosticism, Christianity and Stoicism overlap, sometimes intimately, to the point of problematic associations where the Christian perspective overlaps with the Platonic vision of another world and the Cynic’s demand for an other life.<sup>7</sup>

The fundamental determination – the inflection – of Foucault’s bios, quite unlike Barthes’ neutral, and whether by way of the Cynics, Christians, Stoics or Socrates, is thus perhaps to be understood along the lines of what has been called, following Jean Paulhan, Blanchot, or Bataille, “Terror”. Or at least, since Modernity’s “terrorist” period is now a thing of the past, as an attempt to maintain or nurture the last flames of a fading Terror. The fact that this is the Foucault that Benny Lévy chose to follow in his final works could be an indication of this.<sup>8</sup> We can hear this inflection of Foucault’s bios in the name of this final course at the Collège de France – “The Courage of the Truth” – but also in the whole thematic thread of the scandalous Cynic and the choice of the dog as philosophical emblem, since Foucault speaks enthusiastically about the “guard dog” as way of describing the philosopher (224/2439): a “life

that barks” (224/243), *bios phulaktikos* (224/243). Foucault valorises the polemical position, the antagonistic position, a life given over to “absolute visibility” (234/254), a proselytising life. An inflection that is the complete opposite, it must be said, of the last two volumes of his *History of Sexuality*.

The militant, the world

It is significant to note that, when Foucault wants to convey, using a legitimate anachronism, his idea of the *bios philosophikos*, he offers the modern figure of the “militant”, and does so repeatedly, even going so far as to refer to a “philosophical militancy” (261/284). The expression “the militant life” certainly seems in his eyes to be the best translation into contemporary

5 *Le Courage de la vérité, Le gouvernement de soi et des autres II*, Gallimard/ Seuil, 2009, p. 215, 235 and others [The Courage of the Truth (The Government of Self and Others II): Lectures at the Collège de France 1983–1984, trans. Graham Burchell, Palgrave Macmillan 2011, p. 234, p. 218, p. 223].

6 *Leçon, Œuvres Complètes*, tome V, p. 446.

7 [Courage of the Truth, pp. 246–247]. See the commentary by Frédéric Gros, *op. cit.*, p. 326–327.

8 See for example his 1996 class on the Alcibiade (Verdier, 2013), which is very inspired by Foucault or else his book *Le Meurtre du pasteur, critique de la vision politique du monde*, Grasset, 2002.

9 The numbers between parentheses refer to the pages of the edition mentioned above.

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French of the *bios philosophikos*.<sup>10</sup> For Foucault, it is about giving a modern complexion to a *logos* – that of *bios* – which is nevertheless, as a matter of fact, completely pre-modern, and for that matter he never really interrogates the category of “life” as a *philosopheme*, simply surrounding it with authoritative adjectives: the philosophical life, the straight life, the good life, and so on.

This new adjective, “militant”, however, is precisely a category that appears in Barthes’ “*Vita Nova*”, but as one to be rejected. Thus, in the fourth version of the outline of *Vita Nova* (23 August 1979), Barthes places the militant under

the heading of what he calls Anti-Discourse, and he defines the militant as “Priest of Power”, or else “Other-Priest”.<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere, Barthes positions the militant within the sphere of the World, as an “archetypal object” of the World,<sup>12</sup> and within a typology of discourses where it is one of the mouthpieces of the World. Which is to say, assigned to a place that is the complete opposite of that proposed by Michel Foucault, who situates it in what he calls the diacritical life, the life of discernment (224/243), a position of critique which allows the “true life” to be defined as the “permanent critique of the world”.

Barthes doesn’t take this category of the “militant” seriously, which is held to be central by Foucault, and which will later be redeployed by Alain Badiou within a philosophical imaginary where the Christian point of reference – Saint Paul<sup>13</sup> – completes and perpetuates Foucault’s proposition.

What Barthes can’t take seriously is in the first place the critical force of the militant position, and the Cynic, for that matter, even in his most radical actions, remains within the semantic logic of what he contests, because what he contests is not this logic, the logic of the world, but the fact that its meaning is ambiguous, masked, equivocal. The Cynical subject, and thus the militant one, is the puritan subject par excellence, who pushes puritan logic beyond superficial conventions to the paradox of the “bad reputation” (adoxia, 240/260), precisely in so far as this logic allows this subject to confirm and attest to the univocity, fixedness and unicity of meaning, but also to confirm and attest to the fixed order of the World whose natural law is one of its fundamental principles (243/263).

10 See *Le Courage de la vérité*, p. 261, p. 264 or pp. 169–174 [p. 284, p. 287, pp. 184–186].

11 *Œuvres Complètes*, tome V, p. 1013 and p. 1011, respectively.

12 *Œuvres Complètes*, p. 1008.

13 Saint Paul, la fondation de l’universalisme, PUF, 1998 [Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism, trans.

Ray Brassier, Stanford University Press, 2003]. On this point, see my book *Une querelle avec Alain Badiou*, philosophie, Gallimard, coll. L'Infini, 2002.

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If Barthes doesn't take this militant's critique of the World seriously, it is because in his eyes the notion of "world" has to be redefined so that it is no longer a simple object but a discourse. The world mustn't be naturalised as a thing but seen as a discursive phenomenon.<sup>14</sup> He thus defines the political space of the militant as the classic example of "False dialogues": "endless contestatory ratiocination".<sup>15</sup> In truth, the critical posture with regards to the world had already long been invalidated by Modernity, through the anti philosophy of Marx who, in *The German Ideology*, makes fun of the Young Hegelians who "criticise everything", and above all through his famous theses on Feuerbach and the number eleven: "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it". The question is not resolved by adding, as Foucault does, a prefix to "critical" to make "diacritical life". The critical posture in relation to the world has not only been invalidated by Marx's theses, but by all the anthropology peripheral to Modernity, inspired by numerous references ranging from Pascal to Kierkegaard, among whom Barthes, for his part, chooses Kafka, one of the great precursors of the Neutral, and his aphorism that has become fundamental in its modern reiteration: "In the struggle between you and the world, back the world".<sup>16</sup>

In light of this, it is significant to see in *Vita Nova* the tremendous power of the paradigm of "life" – *vita* – in relation to this notion of the world, because the world is no longer flatly identified with the social or normative sphere, as it is for the Cynic, as described by Foucault. The World is a system of life. Thus in "The Preparation of the Novel", the course that ran concurrently with his development of *Vita nova*, he describes the world as a system of life:

schedules,

places,

habits,

constraints,

structures,

meetings,

concupiscences...<sup>17</sup> Barthes replaces the Terrorist position of the Cynic – I

want the world to resemble me – with a completely different point of view

where the world becomes a subtle and complex space that the *vita nova*

invests or disinvests, without resentment, thanks to what Barthes calls “the

methodical life”, which is one of its aspects.

14 “Le Monde comme objet contradictoire de spectacle et d’indifférence [comme Discours]” (“The World as contradictory object of spectacle and indifference [as Discourse]”), *Œuvres Complètes*, p. 1008.

15 *Œuvres Complètes*, p. 1015.

16 *La Préparation du roman I et II*, text compiled, annotated and introduced by Nathalie Léger, 2003, Seuil, p. 272 [The preparation of the novel: lecture courses and seminars at the Collège de France, 1978-1979 and 1979-1980, trans. Kate Briggs; ed. Nathalie Léger, Columbia University Press, 2011, p. 205]. See in *Kafka Journaux*, *Œuvres complètes*, tome III, *Bibl de la Pléiade*, Gallimard, p. 456 [The *Zürcher Aphorisms*, trans. Michael Hofmann and Geoffrey Brock, Random House, 2011, p. 53. Translation there: “In the struggle between yourself and the world, hold the world’s coat”].

17 See in this regard “Une vie méthodique”, *La Préparation du roman*, pp. 267–274 [“A Methodical Life”, pp. 200-206].

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If, on two occasions, Barthes describes the world as a “contradictory object of spectacle and indifference”,<sup>18</sup> this must be understood from the perspective of the Neutral – the active Neutral – in which the *vita nova* is engaged. Thus, the alliance of indifference and the spectacle leads to a position of benevolence in relation to the world as structure.

The Decision.

The *vita nova* and *bios philosophikos* oppose each other on every point, even in the fact that the philosophical life described by Foucault is connected to a divine mission dictated from the outside and which consequently does not allow the Cynical subject to constitute itself as such, to act on its own authority. In contrast, the *vita nova*, such as it appears from the first very outline of the work – dated 21 August 1979 – concerns a decision: “chapter II” of the plan, after addressing the topics of the World, then “pleasures”, is devoted to “The decision of 15 April 78”, which is also referred to on other occasions in later outlines. This date, and the context of the “Decision” – the decision of *vita nova* – are mentioned in *The Preparation of the Novel*, which provides us with the anecdote – a sublime insight during a trip to Morocco faced with the idea of the Work to be accomplished.<sup>19</sup> The opposition between, on the one hand, a *bios philosophikos* that is defined as being “chosen” by a divine instance, and on the other the “Decision” of a subject, symbolised by the “satori” (sublime insight) that accompanies it, is just as significant as the previous ones.

In reality, the *bios philosophikos* is not at all a disruption or disordering of the world, it is simply a “place”, a place like any other, like that of the magistrate or warrior: “just as God has assigned each thing its place in the world and the role it is to perform, so God designates certain individuals among humans in the same way, entrusting them with a certain mission”.<sup>20</sup> The subject of the *bios philosophikos* is a functionary of the universal, or universal missionary of humankind, to use Foucault’s precise words.<sup>21</sup> This is why, moreover, as we indicated previously, its critique of the world is of no importance. The “Decision” Barthes refers to is one of the fundamental stages of the *vita nova*, because it is connected to its backbone, writing. On several occasions in fact the “Decision” is a direct synonym of *vita nova*.<sup>22</sup>

The vita, moreover, unlike the bios that is the result of being allocated to a place within a system in order to preserve the order of the world, is associated by Barthes with another disruptive category in relation to order: the event, to

18 Œuvres Complètes, p. 1008 and p. 1009.

19 La Préparation du roman, pp. 31–32 [pp. 7–8].

20 Le Courage de la vérité, pp. 269–270 [p. 294].

21 Le Courage de la vérité, p. 277 [p. 301].

22 “L’écrivain ⇒ Vita Nova” [“The writer ⇒ Vita Nova”] (Œuvres Complètes, p. 1013).

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which it is a response. The event, here, is precisely the absolute rival of life, its threatening double, death, the death of the mother, and the mourning that is the first consequence of this.<sup>23</sup> Chaotic, overwhelming, a pure event in the sense that no temporal limit can grasp it, the event thus places the vita, the vita nova, in a semantic space whose fundamental opposition to the purely conservative one of the bios philosophikos is once again clear.

Parrhesia/ Xeniteia.

It is perhaps the notion of parrhesia, which the whole world has been enthralled with for several years now, that offers the most significant opposition between the bios philosophikos and the vita nova.

Parrhesia is at the heart of the last two courses given by Foucault, who gives it a strange weight and credibility in light of what Modernity has had to say and think about the very possibility of “straight-talking”. In the case of Foucault himself, we remember the first sentence of the great text “The thought from outside” (1966): “In ancient times, this simple assertion was enough to shake the foundations of Greek truth: ‘I lie’”.<sup>24</sup> When we recall this thundering incipit, the privilege Foucault gives to “frankness” seems surprising, and this surprise may be joined by many others along the extraordinarily unpredictable path of Foucault’s thought. But there are other

matters of more interest here, such as reading, as a comparison, one of the prologues to *Vita Nova*, namely the course on “Living together” given at the Collège de France in 1976–1977.<sup>25</sup> Barthes broaches the question of *parrhesia* in an extremely critical way in this text, and the contrast is all the more pertinent given that Barthes situates himself within the paradigm of the *bios* in this seminar, just as Foucault does through the analysis of the *bios praktikos* or *bios theoretikos*, for example.<sup>26</sup> The category of “*parresia*” is discredited there in a chapter devoted to a radically anti-Cynical stance, namely *xeniteia*, a stance that does not belong to the classical Greek world that Foucault focuses on, but to Christian ascetic doctrine. It refers to the idea of expatriation, voluntary exile, wandering, in short everything that might horrify the Greek citizen – Cynical or not – as a member of the city. *Xeniteia* belongs to the *vita nova* in so far as it is connected to *akedia*, its precursor: the loss of desire linked to mourning and the journey that *akedia* implies. On another, deeper, level *xeniteia* corresponds to *stenochoria*, which

<sup>23</sup> See in this regard my book *Roland Barthes, la littérature et droit à la mort*, Seuil, 2010.

<sup>24</sup> “La pensée du dehors”, *Dits et Écrits*, tome I, Quarto, Gallimard, 2001, p. 546 [“The Thought from Outside”, trans. Brian Massumi, in *Foucault/Blanchot*, Zone Books, 1987, p. 9].

<sup>25</sup> *Comment vivre ensemble* (1976–1977), text assembled by Claude Coste, Seuil, 2002 [How to live together: novelistic simulations of some everyday spaces, trans. Kate Briggs, Columbia University Press, 2013].

<sup>26</sup> *Comment vivre ensemble*, p. 137 [p. 95].

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is presented as an internal exile: “a hidden life, where no one else knows about the goal I’m pursuing, a refusal of glory”.<sup>27</sup> We also find the theme of the hidden life that is present in Cynical discourse in Foucault, but it is in the fairly crude, stereotypical and well known form of the “hidden king” (263/285). Barthes, for his part, associates mystical *stenochoria* with the Tao

through the shared paradigm of the narrow path, since this is the first meaning of the Greek word.

While stenochoria is an orientation that does not imply a coarse, social familiarity with beings and things, but rather maintains a sort of delicate reserve in relation to the external world, parrhesia is described by Barthes as a gregarious, narrow-minded, purely social disposition of pure familiarity, insensitivity, clumsy tactlessness. Barthes defines parrhesia as an arrogance of language, a will to appropriate the world, an excessive graspingness.

Barthes adds: “I’ll say for my part: Parrhesia: the dogmatic form of language”.<sup>28</sup>

The model of xeniteia is Spinoza, in the position of mastery he adopted in relation to his affects and emotions.<sup>29</sup> But since Barthes makes a connection between xeniteia and Eastern, specifically Japanese, manners, we can illustrate Barthes’ violently hostile attitude to parrhesia with the photo in *The Empire of Signs* of General Nogi and his wife, taken the day before their suicide in September 1912, and this comment from Barthes in the caption: “They are going to die, they know it and this is not seen”.<sup>30</sup> Nothing is more contrary to parrhesia.

Barthes goes further in his criticism of parrhesia, because it seems one has to make oneself “xenos” – foreign – against parrhesia, which is to say against the familiarity, insensitivity, and frankness of the one who feels at home everywhere, whereas the xenos, the adherent to xeniteia, is always telling himself that he has no business being where he is.<sup>31</sup> Xeniteia thus typically appears as the position of spectacle and indifference in relation to the world that we have seen in passing, but it is also a position that is profoundly linked to life as a system of life, as an organisation of daily life where again, Spinoza can serve as a model.<sup>32</sup> Finally, it is a singular mode of togetherness, once, as an alternative to the “fellow citizen”, who is the only figure of otherness for

the Cynic, we conceive xeniteia in relation to what Barthes calls “the great

27 *Comment vivre ensemble*, p. 172 [p. 125].

28 *Comment vivre ensemble*, p. 172 [p. 126].

29 *Comment vivre ensemble*, p. 172–173 [p. 126].

30 Barthes, *L’Empire des Signes*, Seuil, coll. Points, pp. 128–129 [*Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard, Hill and Wang/Noonday Press, 1992, pp. 92–93].

31 *Comment vivre ensemble*, p. 175 [p. 128].

32 Barthes cites *La Vie de Spinoza* by Jean Colerus.

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Other as shared homeland”.<sup>33</sup> The homeland is not the city, here it is the community in this de-centering formed by the empty place of the Other – God or absence of God.

Barthes takes the element that connects xeniteia and the concept of living together from the organisation of monastic life: the “compline”, the last of the daily prayers before nightfall: “The community prepares to brave the night (imagine a countryside far away from anywhere, with no lights, so where nightfall really means the threat of darkness). Living-Together: perhaps simply a way of confronting the sadness of the night together. Being among strangers is inevitable, necessary even, except when night falls”.<sup>34</sup> Akedia/Care.

To get to the heart of the issue, we need to note the first word of the last outline of *Vita Nova*, dated 12 December 1979: “acédie”, acedia or akedia, which refers to the position of the subject who wants, or even needs, a *vita nova*, and which is already treated extensively in *How to Live Together*.

Akedia is the state of the subject in the grip of disinvestment, caught in the alliance of boredom and anxiety, in *aphanisis*<sup>35</sup> – a loss of investment, a disappearance of desire – who calls for a *vita nova*. Barthes offers a very illuminating reading of acedia, however, for the purposes of our comparison,

because it seems that akedia is composed from the privative “a” and kedēuo, which means “to take care of, take an interest in”,<sup>36</sup> to care for...

Akedia thus by definition implies a withdrawal from the care of the self, and the *vita nova*, in contrast to the philosophical life or the “good life”, excludes any positive role of the “care of the self”, which is central in Foucault’s “The Courage of the Truth” and of course the third volume of the *History of Sexuality*, which bears this title. It is astonishing for that matter that Foucault devotes so many pages to such long paraphrases of authors such as Seneca, only to offer in the end a description of the care of the self that is conceptually deprived, since he says nothing about the meaning of the word “care”, despite its rich philosophical tradition, especially in the 20th century, nor “self”.

Acedia, akedia, is thus removed from the care of the self in so far as this care of the self does not in any way address the question of existence.

33 *Comment vivre ensemble*, p. 174 [p. 128, translation modified: “homeland” used instead of “fatherland”].

34 *Comment vivre ensemble*, p. 176 [p. 129].

35 *Comment vivre ensemble*, p. 54–55 [p. 21].

36 *Comment vivre ensemble*, p. 54 [p. 21].

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There is another disparity however that must be examined, because Foucault draws out other thematic threads from the care of the self, such as the curious “stylistics of existence”, which is expressed in various ways, such as the “stylistics of moral life”, or “style of life”.<sup>37</sup> These notions have since been taken up by numerous scholars. But isn’t this category precisely too simple? Underdeveloped? And has Barthes not rendered it irrelevant or ineffective in advance when, already in *Writing Degree Zero*, he rigorously conjoins the notion of style to that of writing, rendering the former unthinkable without

the latter. There cannot be any comparable “stylistics of life” in the *vita nova* without its writing, without writing, except in standardised, repetitive forms, outside of any authentic *vita nova*. It is true that at the heart of the *vita nova*, writing is perhaps something other than writing. Caught up in idleness, the idleness of the Neutral, it is also a “philosophical inaction”.<sup>38</sup> But whatever degree of utopia is reached by writing for Barthes in the *vita nova*, it goes without saying that a “stylistics of life” is unthinkable without writing. Which Michel Foucault seems unaware of.

Augustine.

Within the schema of the *vita nova*, Barthes gives himself two fundamental witnesses: on one side the Mother as guide, on the other the Moroccan child, the idle child, both explicitly opposed to the figure of the Master. On one side the mother as “true guide”, which of itself entails the statement: “Never was a philosopher my guide”.<sup>39</sup> On the other the Moroccan child, the idle child, which entails another statement, “the absence of the master”.<sup>40</sup> This triangular arrangement formed by the narrator, mother and child as the triangle of the *Vita nova* is precisely the one chosen by Saint Augustine, in *On the happy life – De Vita beata*. Monica, the mother, and Adeodatus, the child, are both promoted as those who know, and represent the pair of respondents to Augustine’s questioning on the happy life. This triangle is the substitute for the Socratic dialogue. Instead of the slowness of science, of dialectical reason, there is the speed of the inspired logos; instead of the long and ponderous path, brittle, as well, of the Socratic dialogue, is the short path of the word of the mother and child. If the mother and son testify to God (*Vita Beata*) in Augustine, they testify to the Neutral (*Vita Nova*) in Barthes. Like Barthes, Augustine, despite or because of the *Confessions*, is opposed to all of the traits of the Cynical subject as presented by Foucault: he is opposed to *parrhesia*, to the care of the self, to the figure of the master, to the stylistics of

life. And he admits, like Barthes in “Les soirées de Paris”, and in particular

37 Histoire de la sexualité, tome III, Le souci de soi, Gallimard, Tel, p. 255 [The History of Sexuality: vol 3,

The care of the self, trans. Robert Hurley, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1988, p. 70, p. 71, p. 192].

38 Vita Nova, Œuvres Complètes, p. 1008.

39 Œuvres Complètes, p. 1011.

40 Œuvres Complètes, p. 1011.

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the experience of the dark room,<sup>41</sup> being able to blush for himself and, better

still, blush for the mother.

(Eric Marty, Professor Emeritus, Université Paris-Cité, Institut Universitaire de France, is

a

distinguished French intellectual and essayist. He was formerly Professor of

Contemporary French Literature at Paris Diderot University. He is the editor of the

complete works of Roland Barthes.)

41 “Soirées de Paris”, Œuvres Complètes, tome V, p. 989 [“Soirées de Paris” in Incidents, trans. Richard

Howard, University of California Press, 1992, p. 68].

## BOOK REVIEW

CARRYING THOUGHT ACROSS A RIVER: A REVIEW

DEBDATTA MALLICK

FIVE MODERN BENGALI POETS

Selected & Translated by Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee,

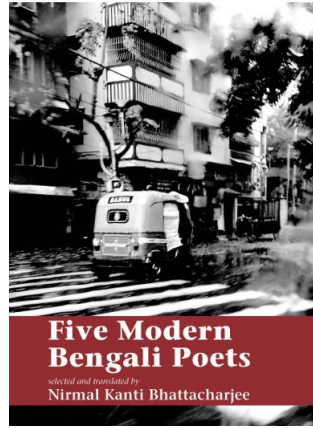
New Delhi, Red River,

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Pages: 124



Translating poetry is akin to a river crossing, and no translator gets everything to the far bank. Some things — a poem's thought, its shape, its tone — arrive whole. Some arrive lighter than they left, a little of their weight lost in the water of estranged tongues. And some must be set down at the river's edge and left behind. What Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee chooses to carry across, and what he leaves on the bank, is the real subject of his *Five Modern Bengali Poets* — a book in which, read against the originals, a genuine intelligence and discipline shows through alongside one quiet, consistent limit. Bhattacharjee's great gift is register. He hears the pitch of a poem and finds it again in English, across a startling range of voices. Bhattacharjee's selections feature three of the most well-known voices from the group called *Krittibas*, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Shakti Chattopadhyay and Sankha Ghosh (all born in the early 1930s) in addition to Nirendranath Chakraborty and Alokranjan Dasgupta. This is an ambitious attempt at mapping Bengali poetry in the

post-Jibanananda Das era.

Bhattacharjee keeps Sunil Gangopadhyay plain-spoken where Sunil is plain — “Countlress butterflies in the wind, or are all these mica flowers?” (P.113); — and courtly where Sunil turns courtly, never melding one with the other. He follows Shakti Chattopadhyay down into the gutter without flinching, letting “kick his ass” (P.78) and “even the phlegm of a dog is more pleasurable than this” (P.82) stand as coarse in English as they are in Bengali. He leaves Sankha Ghosh’s silences unfilled — “Make him a little more drunk./Lord, he is still young!” (P.52) — resisting the anxious translator’s urge to explain. He gives Nirendranath Chakravarty his public thunder [“O Asia! The night is over, leave your bed of disgrace”] (P.33). And he lets Alokranjan Dasgupta’s cool, cosmopolitan tenderness breathe. Whatever a poem’s tone, he tends to find its tonal match in English..

That same fidelity extends beyond tone to a poem’s very bones — its structure, its argument, its central idea, all of which Bhattacharjee protects. Ghosh’s reversals survive (the man who cannot bear the world becomes the world that cannot bear the man). Nirendranath’s spiralling questions survive (“if this world were not there, there would have been only darkness ... but in which receptacle?”). Alokranjan’s conceits survive whole — the widow’s white that becomes red hibiscus, the two days of leave in which “my heart-mate time will finally turn the coal into a diamond.” And, more surprisingly, even Shakti’s drunken, tumbling syntax survives, because its stagger is built from repetition — “home within home, foot within foot, chest within chest” — and repetition is something English can do.

What survives so faithfully in thought and structure, however, cannot survive in sound. -- This is the one real loss, and it matters most for the one poet who is a master at the acoustics of ideas. Shakti’s chiming lyrics, where the meaning rides on the music, flatten into accurate prose lineated on the page; a chanted “namo, namo, namo” shrinks to “a bow to thee, I bow” (P.51). For the other four, whose genius lives more in thought than in song, this tax is small. For Shakti at his most musical, it is the difference between hearing the song and being told what it said.

From this single loss a clean pattern emerges across all five poets: The translator’s success rises exactly as a poet’s meaning moves from sound toward thought. Shakti, whose genius is music,

arrives most diminished. – Sunil arrives whole in his public voice and dimmed in his more incantatory moments. Ghosh and Nirendranath, poets of structure and rhetoric, arrive substantially intact. And Alokranjan — the most European of the five, whose poems are built from pure ideas and from a shared world-vocabulary of pagodas and deodars and hibiscus — arrives the most whole of all. Not because the translator worked hardest on him, but because Alokranjan had already, half-knowingly, built his poems out of materials that travel.

If there is a fault beyond this, it is a small one, audible only to a reader listening closely in both languages, and it lives in single words — the ones a whole culture has pressed meaning into. When Sankha Ghosh commands that a used tongue not be taken onto the lips, the translator gives us “left over language” (P.54) — where the Bangla means something nearer to defiled, to what has already been in another’s mouth. When the same poet asks that our speech be grave and deep “like corn,” (P.54) one pauses — for the poet writes of tender, fresh green grass (sashpo) instead of the mature corn. Five Modern Bengali Poets might benefit from more careful editing and a strict adherence to the etymology and resonance of words in the original Bangla poem. For instance Shakti Chattopadhyay’s poem “Aami Swechchhachari” (P.75) is unnecessarily sensationalised in its English rendering as “I am a Tyrant”. “Selfwilled” would have better captured the essence of the poem. Further, in the poem “Yet, the Pages of Autobiography Fill Up” by Sunil Gangopadhyay (P.114) the citation of the book from which it is extracted has a small but significant error. Instead of the original title *Batasey Kiser Dak*, Shono (1987) the word *Dak* is misspelt as *Bak* which can be very misleading for anyone familiar with the Bengali language, but not with Gangopadhyay’s poetry.

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Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee’s translations carry poetry across a river and leaves a little of the song on the bank. The poets whose genius is thought arrive whole; the poet whose genius is sound arrives as a rumour of himself; and the charged word, now and then, sets down its heaviest freight before crossing. But make no mistake — the crossing does happen. Five difficult, magnificent poetic voices stand up in English and speak, and a reader who has never known a word of Bengali will close this book understanding why these five matter.

(The granddaughter of Kumud Ranjan Mallick, legendary Bengali poet and contemporary of Rabindranath Tagore, Debdatta Mallick teaches English at South Point High School, Kolkata

## UNDER TALL MOONS AND BY LONG SHORES: A REVIEW

DEBASISH LAHIRI

A Thousand Daughters by Sri Lal,

New Delhi: Red River,

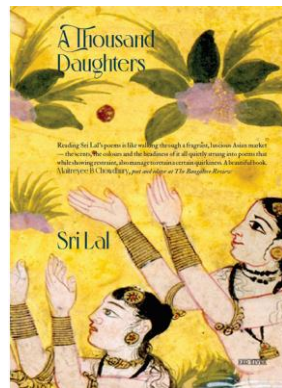
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What is the thumbprint of the spirit in a landscape? – A retiring, renunciatory figure, awkward and out of place in every landscape or timescape is the spiritual presence in terrestrial consciousness that is transmitted to the best nature writing. – Sri Lal's A Thousand Daughters is a quiet cartouche of the spirit in place. Innumerable women lead unremarkable lives of dotage to the anarchic order of men's desire which is incongruous with their secret absorption of nature's epistemes of light and water in riverine and estuarine Kerala.

Here in the fishing village

With its singing temple by the sea

A thousand daughters rise (P.11)

Lal's poems are a plea to the God of 'answers' that we be cured of prayer. Prayer is ostentation; prayer predicates the divine with the human. Instead one should learn the lesson of being, like the light or water. Dawn and dusk, high tide and low tide, rain and sunshine are, as Lal demonstrates, chapters in a perennially present manual of prayer. In the poem "Fragments" Lal writes –

Beyond any sacred body of water,  
breath becomes sky,  
disappears into silent blue

...

The earthy scent of a thousand years  
lived as best one could,  
lingers among the jasmine bloom  
bright along the silty banks  
of the Ithikkara.

(P.35)

The spirit manifests itself through a maze of proxies and absences. Nature bears the watermarks. Lal's thread-needle precision weaves these patterns on the loom of words. Her writing has the structure of Tamil Sangam Poetry (400BC to 200AD) at its heart. The division between the self and the world, the amatory and heroic, the delineation of the Aham and the Puram, all this played out *sub specie naturalis* (in the light of nature), which in turn is a canvas where all things *sub specie aeternitatis* (in the light of eternity) is reflected, find their place in Lal's fresh recalibration of that rich traditional aesthetic.

Soon, water will be  
more mysterious  
than sky.

...

What is yet left undone

is no one's to do.

(P.33)

A singular curlew on the river's edge, the sound of bells and cymbals at a nearby temple rewriting history with an ink infused by memory and daylight, and a river that grows forgetful of its purpose and loiters with the dusk or dawn are instances in Lal's poetry of the pondering of the spirit in the unregarded minutiae of women's lives. Wonder and the commonplace mull over the way a weight of incense on the air can induce daydreams of sanctums in the nooks of village households. On the banks of the Kallada even a breath matters –

With the next breath,

Kala may disappear

like a nub of camphor set aflame,

like a moon swallowed by her sun.

(P.43)

So, what marks a Yogi? -- Is it renunciation? Is it a reality sages find only in contemplation? Or, is it the new annunciation of a poet's consciousness as it engages the

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quirks of being? – In that sense Sri Lal is a Yogi. Nature brings to the Yogi's door a deeply felt memory of scenes and sounds that reflect the lives of women in a rural corner of southern India, with implications for the world.

Letting go of what we want to become,

we awaken to who we are.

Water reflects the copper face of light.

A cormorant disappears unto a widening sky.

(P.70)

In *A Thousand Daughters* Sri Lal shows us how the experience of living by water gives us the courage to dissolve and the knowledge not to drown. And how the spiritual as a sixth sense is all about finding our way back to the five senses.

(Debasish Lahiri is an internationally acclaimed poet, editor and non-fiction writer. He is the Associate Editor of The Riveraine Muse.)

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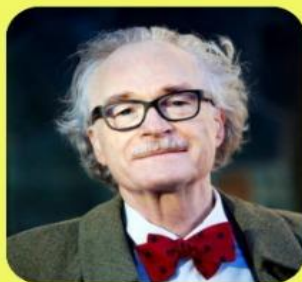
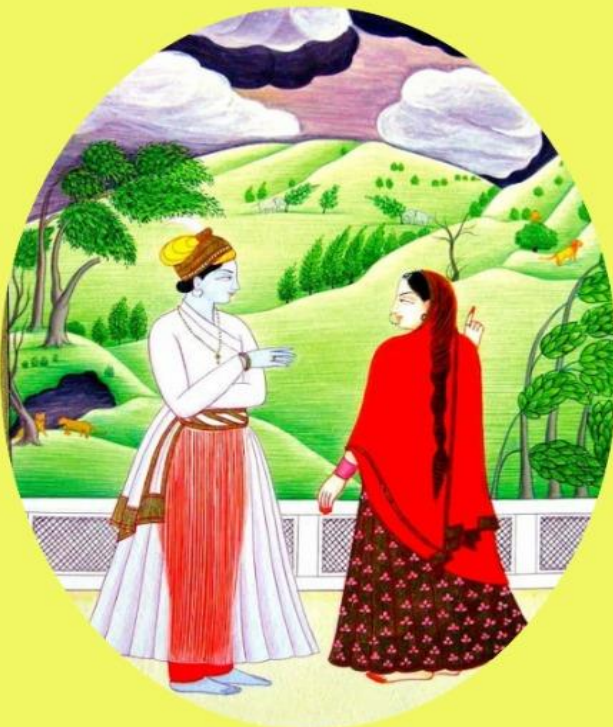
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