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Poems

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Poems

Abstract

THE SNOW KALI

AFTER SEEING KOZINTSEV'S 'KING LEAR' IN DELHI

BIRTHDAY POEM

ZOO POEM 2

CALGARY LOVER

CALGARY MORNING

Agha Shahid Ali[★]

THE SNOW KALI

Once again,

the black goddess turns to snow

in my dream:

the sword in her right hand
now glass, the empty blood-bowl
crystalled in her left.

Dream after dream, her red tongue

pales into

the drought of blood in the land
as skulls fall off her gold chain:

From which emptiness will I hang?

Her veins break like ice.

'Only your blood,' she whispers,
'will cure this drought.'

O goddess

paled below fahrenheit: I lift
the sword. Something zero

enters my mouth.

★ In Hindu mythology, Kali, 'the black goddess', is a manifestation of Devi, the Goddess, the essential form. Kali is associated with death and destruction and is depicted with a necklace of skulls. She holds a sword in her right hand and a bowl filled with blood in her left. Human sacrifices have been made to her, even as recently as last year.

AFTER SEEING KOZINTSEV'S 'KING LEAR' IN DELHI

Lear cries out 'You are men of stones'
as Cordelia hangs from a broken wall.

I step out into Chandni Chowk street: once
littered with jasmine-flowers
for the Empress and the royal women
who bought perfumes from Isfahan,
fabrics from Dacca, essence from Kabul,
glass-bangles from Agra.

Beggars now live here in tombs
of unknown nobles and forgotten saints
while hawkers sell combs and mirrors
outside a Sikh temple. Across the street,
a theatre is showing a Bombay spectacular.

I think of Zafar, poet
and Emperor, the last
of the Mughal dynasty, being led
through this street by English soldiers,
his feet in chains, to watch
his sons hanged.

In exile he wrote: 'I spent
half my life in hope, the other half
waiting. I beg for two yards
of my Delhi for burial.'

He lies buried in Rangoon.

BIRTHDAY POEM

Thirty this monsoon,
from the distance of a decade,
from the longer distance of
exile, I see my poems still

resurrecting the dead
who've multiplied like the poor,
my memory a hurried cemetery
whose last space my grandfather occupied

as he played Chopin and monsoon-ragas
with a sapphire needle of rain.
The earth turned at 78 rpm.

But I flipped the rain,
the monsoon warped in the sun.
I slowed the earth down to
33 rpm,
and he cursed the altered definitions of Time
— in Persian, in Urdu, in mouthfuls of Shakespeare.
When the earth stopped,
he wound the gramophone.
But the needle cracked, his stack
of rare voices broken.

Only his voice remained,
grating my memory with advice:

Be a Robin Hood of a man.
Steal from the rich,
give to the poor.
Be dangerous, like a legend.

Thirty this monsoon,

I look at my poems:
No, certainly not the stuff of legends.
Not even of a rumour.
Every rumour about me dies.

Robert Kroetsch

ZOO POEM 2

this is, rather, a prose piece on zoos, their nouns, their verbs: *zoo*

- to ape: Ape. To ape is/to ape, don't monkey
 around. God's fool, the poet. God fools
 the poet. Aping.
- to bear: Arktos, bear. The Great Bear, zodiacal.
 Great Bear Lake. Arcturus, bear-guardian.
 The Arctic. Bear with me. Winter in
 Winnipeg. Bear up.
- to crow: as in nothing to/about. To eat. As the
 crow flies. Crowsnest. STOP (crowing).
- to fox: Dumb like a. Sly as. The page itself,
 (out)foxed. The beer, foxy. To goose/you/
 goose.
- to horse: Around. See under Wooden. Odin. Or
 flogging a dead. Or another colour. A
 gift horse in. Hold. The cart before.
 A dark. The Pale. But you *can*
 make him drink.
- to lion: eyes. Leo. The fifth. At the throat of
 the (lunar) bull. Or into: the mouth of.
 His share. Got. Gate.
- to skunk: You win. I lose. You skunk. (You stink.)

to snake: it, down off the mountain, the tree. The lot. Or, across, or. In the grass. Not Eaton's, Eden. Or the other side/of (Rattlesnake Coulee) Medicine Hat.

to wolf: the wolf-month, January. Don't cry. To keep the/from the door. Or in sheep's clothing. Fenrir, the wolf of Loki, one jaw touching earth, the other, heaven. Don't wolf your food. Please.

CALGARY LOVER

And me,
I shoot roses.

Holding the barrel to each blossom,
I touch the trigger
as if it might be a thorn.

The petals take flight at the whispered
blast.

I protect myself from the tongues
of outraged women

: by wearing a parka
: by growing pineapples
in Pincher Creek
: by hanging a black cape
over the canary's cage
: by sleeping in a highrise
: by eating peanut butter

By waving at graveyards
and pregnant wives.
By talking to passing
pigeons.
By spreading peanut butter
on my left hand.

The children reach up
to the start of the sun.
They lift the earth
beneath them.