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Poems

Cyril Dabydeen

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Poems

Abstract

ON A LOCAL TRAIN IN MUMBAI, ANGLO-SAXON ETHNIC, THE TABLA PLAYER

Cyril Dabydeen

ON A LOCAL TRAIN IN MUMBAI

(for Coomi Vevaina)

After taking in Elephanta:
and the *trimurti*
 out on an island
on a sweltering hot day —
 I enter the train
in Mumbai with you, Parsi
scholar, and watch people
huddling,
 all trying to get in,
along with the many tourists.

 The crowd not defeated,
but with an accustomed ease
or frenzy due to their state
of poverty, or what seems like it;
 and two young girls:
eight or nine, with eyes large
 as a cow's,
shabby clothes worn past their knees,
 unique in style ...

And you say in India it's so special
 because of what
has to be learned,
 or endured
as a movie-star handsome youth,
 determined at the back —
plays mournfully on his harmonium,
 the train moving along,
and he sings a bhajan,
 to establish the right mood.

The two girls take their
turn to ask for alms,
 coming to us next —
as I long to stand up
 and listen to the centuries unfolding,
the girls' eyes wider —
 as an entire continent
 opens before me

 Across the Arabian Sea,
Elephanta's images still form,
the train chug-chugs along
 as I record sensations
with affection or simple love
 I can never truly return.

(November 1, 1997)

ANGLO-SAXON ETHNIC

1

He begins with the parable of a remembered place:
 where he is comfortable with style and form,
 rhythms of another country once more,
 always with a will to understand his own.

Absolute, definite, or uncompromising:
 all shapes I come to grips with, taking
 heed that things must change or forever
 remain as they have been for centuries.

With new instincts or desire at the brink
 near the Amazon, not the Thames, I consider
 places yet undiscovered, learning about
 familiar truths we must learn to live by.

2

This rage or desire in foreign places,
 civilisation at one's fingertips, or the effort
 to be what the indigenous peoples often consider
 their own, always with a new sensibility.

Now constrained to being in one place, colonies
 are yet like secrets forming, as I reflect
 on the tribe's own memory and being able to
 understand myself less over the years.

The drama now played out in territories —
 like a burning desire, or being discreet about
 my origins; and it would always be oneness,
 or forever be resigned to a place called heaven

Because of burdens we carry, as we recognise
 who we truly are, or will become in time —
 moving with determined stride or conviction
 because of what was never our own.

THE TABLA PLAYER

(All life is rhythm,

Ustad Alla Rakha)

I played the drum
alone, on the kitchen table —
imagining a far place, my knuckles
cracking hard on stiff board,
fingers and wrist movements.

A far continent, truly,
tracing the Ganges River,
or moving by train
from Madras in the south,
then all the way up
north to Shimla
in the Himalayas.

The tabla player I was meant to be,
instilled in my genes —
and little did I know
being born in South America,
with the Orinoco and other rivers
close by, or regions merely nurturing
a greenhouse effect —
as I kept on playing,

Crossing a new terrain:
a new hemisphere, too,
if you must know. Recalling that time
I'd heard Hemant Kumar, the playback singer —
who, having come to our village
with his troupe of musicians —
the tabla drummers and sitar men,
all active in my imagination.

Memory indeed being
all now in cold Canada,
in this winter, and recalling
the desire to be my best on stage
in Bombay or Calcutta —

still pretending to be a tabla player —
my knuckles grown harder,
 bones brittle,

Because of where I grew up —
 and my mother
wonders what I'd left behind —
 the sounds she yet hears,
her hands clapping —
 before a silent stage.