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Poems

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Poems

Abstract
TAMIL MOVIE BOX OFFICE HIT
INDIAN FILM KISS CONTROL
HINDU PILGRIMAGE
IN PRAISE OF HOT WEATHER
AMONG OTHER THINGS
LANDSCAPE WITH CLASSIC FIGURES
FICUS BENJAMINII
SENSE
THE FIRST MORNING
WARRIOR
BEETHOVEN STRASSE, FRANKFURT
THE PIANO

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TAMIL MOVIE BOX OFFICE HIT

Hero, son of factory owner turned reformist meets heroine, daughter of labourer in the same.
Villain, the foreman, has been chasing her around steps, spools and ladders.
It’s love at cafeteria queue.
Heroine goes AWOL with hero to romp around water-falls & muddy buffaloes, singing many hit songs.
Villain, hiding behind a stoned goddess sees everything reports everything to heroine’s father who locks up heroine then confronts the hero with a speech worthy of Lenin or Trotsky or both.
Hero wallows in nightclubs & debauchery drinking imported whisky always with the label turned towards the audience.
Whisky improves his complexion though he bewails his organs are bleeding.
An hour of this later villain is discovered as a true imperialist secretly planning overthrow of the Workers’ Union.
Hero sobered up fast, chases villain by bullock cart, lorry, horse & jeep.
Hero & villain lock hand in hand in combat deliver many blows to each other to the offstage accompaniment of tabla.
At last villain falls with much blood & redundancy.
Hero, heroine, father & the working class quickly gather for a group photograph under framed revolutionaries for the 17th week at the Republic cinema at 10 Rupees for a third class ticket in black market.
INDIAN FILM KISS CONTROL
(Indian censors have recently allowed kissing on the screen)

Depending on the length of the movie
a maximum of kisses is negotiable.
Invariably kisses should best be accompanied
by dialogue how the lips are fated to come together.
The lower class may kiss the upper class
if the movie is for export.
Where a brahmin has to kiss a whore
background music should make it clear
it's a bad habit:
sexual germs passing from mouth to mouth
animated to the tune of sitars
is one way of proving it.
Ass kissing of any manner is strictly prohibited.
Where the scene calls for an ass
a washerman should be riding it.
No French kissing is allowed
we have enough problems with Danish.

We should bear in mind
we cannot let overkissing lead to overpopulating.
The Russians have already kissed off Afghanistan
we must not let them kiss us off too.

HINDU PILGRIMAGE

Up on a nondescript hill a legend
nurters this god as a mortal besieged
by wine & women, who ascended to its crest
hotly pursued by cuckolded husbands,
then vaporized to an even higher sanctuary
leaving his mortality in an imprint of stone.
His mythic antecedents thus established, 
the black god stands dazzling
pilgrims from the high and the lowly,
for who's there that does not need
quick solutions from courtly folly.

The high priest when properly appeased
can expedite the pilgrim’s petition
placing flowers in the ears of the lord,
then reading omens in their withered fall:
to expect the god’s consort to join in the lottery
you need to cough up a special joining fee.

Each year pilgrims trudge up the hill
buttocks pushed into their haunches
like the engines of Volkswagen,
to the technicolor sideshow of professionals
brandishing cracked bowls, mangled limbs.
The steps to climb are massive,
built that way to humble the flesh,
melt excess sin.

You’ll hear the rich chant,
give our husbands that special position,
our daughters movie stars,
our sons virgin brides with money for cars,
in short, give us everything
we’ve given you so far.

Win or lose they all return
each year with renewed fervor,
blessed with chant, camphor,
they’ll either die or recover:
oracular mind has no faith in equity,
compliance is not complicity.
What I like is loss of energy, the feeling of complete incompetence and the desire to do nothing; I enjoy, too, the memory of gardens in the gaudy tropics where hibiscus flowers bloom in the heat and one sits in a public square with its slow fountain and watches the brown young girls in pink frocks, laughing as they walk arm in arm, a hand thrown across the white protuberant teeth. I enjoy inconsequential fantasies that come with the humid breeze.

There seems no sense to inventing ways of survival in hostile environments and the busy seriousness of people in the colder latitudes is really laughable.

In cold weather I dream of pomegranate flowers and have delusions of the fragrance of mango-blossoms, I long to be where I can be lazy, lying in a hammock, listening to a distant flute.

I think that out of such a purposeless waiting for sunsets, the hour when the jasmine exudes its perfume and lovers meet under the mimosas, could come an existence
of a perfectly senseless fertility:
the way it is in the humid tropics —
things just growing in a great confusion,
the earth's species competing blindly,

absorbing the moisture and the heat
for nothing more extraordinary than
existence itself, the vines climbing up
the tall trees to be, somehow, in the sun.

AMONG OTHER THINGS

A failure, one concludes, observing the manner
in which the tulip tree's startlingly perfect blossoms
are torn by the wind, their porcelain appearance —
as if nature took its model from the five grimy
towns of Staffordshire — shattering against
the concrete driveway, an effect
no different from a fine thought being distracted
by the neighbour suddenly turning loud his stereo.

Among other things, one can't suppress the memory
that places one under the shade of mango trees
where one sees how fallen and inedible fruit,
gone putrid with infestations of insects, can still
evoke the comical odours of adolescent passions.
Like the fruitless mulberry tree whose foliage thrives
on being regularly sprayed with insecticide,
one lives on small dosages of diluted, secret poisons.
LANDSCAPE WITH CLASSIC FIGURES

Four big swans,
black arrows,
beat up to
Point Ricardo
in furl-tight
formation,
one skein of
cirrus drifting.

Never a
vertical:
unbroken
blonds and slates
corrode the
retina.
Just here and
there, frail, tall
the surf rods of
Sicilian farmers.

Flaccus, your
olives have
blown small to
smithereens:
bees yawn through
your sockets
broodingly.
Day thickens.
FICUS BENJAMINII

Potted, behind a sofa in Stockholm.
On a Toronto platform, pruned.
Stephan Dom, Vienna, and Ficus Benjaminii
swaying above tribute garlands, safe
in its tub.
Ficus Benjaminii takes something away
it deflects light deep into itself
a shady undercurrent of ripples.
each leaf with its edge of ripples
dreaming of dampness, compost, humid
Queensland summer.

+++
Ficus Benjaminii is mine.
The original tree claims my backyard
children growing up share figtree shade
that foresaw their space four hundred years
and knotted its trunk to a giant’s wrist
sinews two children cannot grip around.
They twitch in dreams for such security
the cubbyhouse ten feet up no sun
a summer room of green benches beyond storms
never drought nothing disturbing spiders
that shall be harmless for life like the work of birds.
At night fruitbats weave charms to net stars with
beetles are brought blindfold chubby slaves
that bump giggling caught in a grandfather tickle
the fig dreaming us there

we toss above damp sheets
and return alone, find the secrets, centuries
knotted in those wrists plunging through compost
under the falling hair of leaves that still ripple
like summer water when the sun slaps loud
outside.

++

In my knuckles there is the remembrance of compost
there are green shoulders of leaves where you leave a shadow.
Stockholm, Vienna, Toronto: there are no spiders.
Ficus Benjamingii, indoors, trimmed for tubs,
we call it Weeping Fig in my country but that
requires growth and so much living, building,
experience before the right to grieve may be granted.
You are correct to refer only to textbook botany.
You have my birth legacy in your potplants, but only
the rootless exile of its name.

B. R. Whiting

SENSE

Dawn with a lunar light,
    Sea and sky silent,
High tide, sand white,
    The harpooner patient —
Seaweed waves aside
    From knife-handed crabs,
Betrays where fish hide
    And the spearman stabs
To disturb the shark form
    Of the boat's dark shade
As the surface is torn
    By the splash that's made.
No word. Near the red rocks
    In the distance, loud,
A sea-eagle shivers and shocks
    The silence, his proud
Stooping explodes in spray,
    Then the hushed air closes —
The leopard eyes of a great ray
    Appear — the spear lunges.
It fights with a strong wing
    And a devil's face,
Jabbing its long sting
    With terrible force,
Tosses the sea white,
    Magnificent, plumed
With spray, its last fight
    Foreseen, foredoomed
By the fine harpoon
    That hoists its prey
And dumps it down
    On the deck to die.
As it arches and flops
    Its torn agony
From its pale belly pops
    A newborn stingray —
The austerity of day recedes,
    We stoop with care,
Smile, give him the sea he needs,
    Laugh at him there,
A perfect small being
    Diving through the clear tide
Of all that we were seeing
    To his future pride —

The sense of a design that has
    No sense in words,
And yet the pattern possesses
    The flight of birds
And the fall of the small ray
    Wavering to confirm
Its shadow's light play
    On the sandbar form.
THE FIRST MORNING

Gulls, cold air, morning
Created for the first time
Innocent of meaning
Without man, word, system —

I saw an albatross trail his wing
Down waves as great as this whole port,
High as houses, walled with rain,
The Antarctic sky storm-shot —

Nets, iridescent oily scum, hulls
Weaving and burning for the first morning,
The new day and the gulls new
Until words come to blur the sign;

All there, the prehistoric light
And again, the individual
New and unique, conjured from the night
To find the words worn thin and dull —

I saw the silver belly of a dolphin
Flash in the spray,
Cross the bows and sound
Down and away;
Waves ran on and remained,
The hull heeled over to: the wind,
Down beyond words it sounded,
A fountain contained in the mind —

The gentle images sing, the gulls
Fulfil the air, their wings reveal
How nearly the individual
Contains the spell,
Signs spelling the wordless fountain
Music ordering forms of light
Around the talisman
Of things united.
The power in the sound
Transcends the port,
Wave and ocean, wing and wind
In the tension of art;
Made new again
The cliché of dust
Spells out the fountain,
Writes albatross,
The waves cry summertime Venus,
Words quicken and combine,
Transition, synthesis:
Singing a rainbow from yesterday's bones.
Frank Mkandalile Chipasula

WARrior

Imitation warrior
in synthetic monkey skins
over a three-piece suit
inevitable overcoat, stick,
homburg hat, dark glassed
and false toothed smiles;
he clutched horse-hair
flywhisk and plastic spears
at conference tables in Whitehall
fighting with words only
begging his masters for a new name,
a flag and a new anthem.

'Out of your people's skins
fashion a flag, their bones a flagpole;
Their laments shall be your anthem;
Rename the country and it shall be.'

That is the recipe of his rule
sincere to the last instruction.

Meanwhile, the settlers massacred
his people with volleys
of bullets, littering their
mangled bodies like trash
all over our country. Over them
he preached non-violence, forgiveness

and the masters, relieved, curled up
in bed and slept without headaches.

Now he prances clumsily among survivors
mourning their kin at his rallies

as he samples the men for export
to the deep dungeons of Joni

on loan and Aid agreements
for the bribe of blood rands.

He demands handclaps
everywhere he turns he confronts

his inflated portraits
nailed and hoisted on flagpoles

whose blood-drenched banners
are birds straining at ropes.

Corrugated mist like fish scales
covers the eyes of the praise
dancers round him dancing for
the war lost to the settlers.

Then the songs shore up his lofty
platform as he leaves his people

at its foot, steeled with spears
and shields praising the deserter.

They hail him Messiah, Saviour
as he fattens on larceny.

— for David, and Derek Walcott —
Kirsten Holst Petersen

BEETHOVEN STRASSE, FRANKFURT

Set in surroundings saturated by history
this town has none.
One day in 1944 wiped it out.
The tourist guide suffered acutely,
boasting about the height of the glass and concrete banks,
in both metres and yards
and arranging them in an international hierarchy
where they overshadowed both New York and Tokyo,
and painfully forcing a sense of history
onto reconstructed old houses,
erected according to original plans and
authentic photographs.

In this sleepy surviving street
large old houses stare blindly at each other
across budding trees and street-car
on cobbled stones,
a yellowing photograph
fixed in the hot windless air,
hiding its burden of guilt
behind lace curtains,
stubbornly asserting the world
that was smashed.

On Sunday Mornings in a nearby town
in cobble-stoned square
by the Gothic cathedral
local choirs capture the past
in well measured four-voiced songs,
and a small girl in national costume
leans back as far as she can go
and sees a solitary bird crossing the church tower,
reflecting its bomber shadow in her upturned eyes,
and the choir singing rises to a crescendo
and drowns the noise of screams under falling brick,
and the still air soothes the tourist guide's pain
at real old windows, hidden away in farm houses
and reset in imitation walls,
and resurrected clocks, still marking time.
And fading photographs.

(EACLALS Conference, 1981)

THE PIANO

It arrived early one summer morning
just before the lilacs,
but definitely after the tulips.
It rolled leisurely up the garden path
on its castor wheels
clad in a woollen blanket
to protect it from apple blossom
and bird droppings.
It didn't stop at the door,
but calmly and deliberately
turned itself on its end
and marched straight into the room
where it installed itself
in the appropriate corner.

With the blanket off
its dark, polished skin
and pearly white teeth
instantly made demands on the room
and us.
Vases, chandeliers and leather bound books
were suddenly missing;
its shiny surface
did not mirror the gold frames
of calm landscapes,
and coffee cups just don't tinkle in this room.
In vain did it try to echo
the firm footsteps of
a proud patriarch
or the muffled voices of hurrying maids.

And whom could we hire
to act the dreamy young girl
or the calm mature matron
to sit on the embroidered stool
with her hands delicately poised
and her back straight and purposeful
and where is the corridor
down which the music floats
past the linen room and the pantry
to meet the peace of mind
of the owner in the library?

Maybe I'll paint it yellow
and stain its teeth red.