

SAUDADE

POEMS

Rhea Ramakrishnan

"Not perchance,

If I were not thus taught, should I the more
suffer my genial spirits to decay:

For thou art with me, here, upon the banks
of this fair river; thou, my dearest friend,
My dear, dear Friend, and in thy voice I catch
the language of my former heart, and read
My former pleasures in the shooting lights
of thy wild eyes."

William Wordsworth

"Lines Written A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey"

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Rapture

It rained all morning in Mahabalipuram.
It was the soft whisper of rain we could see
through but, nonetheless, drops got stuck
in apostrophes in the creases at the sides
of our eyes. The women selling mangoes
and papaya by the temples draped their saris
above their heads and their fruits,
the mosquitos nested in the spaces
between the rocks. It was raining
or it was nearly raining
and that was the way of things,
I presumed. Even when it had stopped,
and we pulled over to get tea and biscuits
by the side of the road, there were still
dragonflies, droves of them, buzzing in
anticipatory clouds
above our heads.

The Body and Blood

Thursday, we butchered the hen.
 That morning, Nana told me
 to come with her to the pen
 and the other birds -
 cloistered nuns -
 turned their cheeks
 as she lifted the bantam
 and wrung its neck in one stroke
 like running a bow
 across violin strings.

She picked
 the feathers that remained
 from the carcass
 and we put it into boiling water.
 The gore dripped from her fingers,
 from the index finger sliced
 shorter than the others
 in an auto rickshaw accident
 near the railway.

Primitive,
 the way she pressed its thighs
 into the cutting board
 like a Midianite virgin.
 The bird lay prostrate
 and she told me
 I want to teach you something.
 She spread the wings
 the way her father
 had shown her and
 she slit its abdomen
 lengthwise humming
 a church hymn.

I did not tell her

when I saw the bones emerge
 like shining Pagan moons,
 Nana's hair slicked
 to her forehead in the humidity
 the overhead fan moved
 along with the dust and grime.

As I washed the vessels,
 she prayed over the body
 and I crossed myself,
 wetting my forehead
 with tap water,
 in the name of the Father, the Son,
 the Holy Ghost.
 I prayed for the hen –
 that harlot - prayed
 for my grandmother,
 whose eyes
 were shut
 when I was christened.

Dubai, Late June

It's two weeks before Ramadan
 and your closest childhood friend
 is stabbed in Egypt for taking a photograph.
 All of Sharjah is at the supermarket
 buying dried prunes.

I am sitting by the Persian Gulf
 eating falafel and writing you a postcard.
It's still ninety here
past dark you could suffocate in this dry heat.
 An Emirati woman tells me: walk east
 along this coast and get to Muscat,
 west is Saudi.

I trace a line with my toe through the sand,
mapping incomprehensible geographies,
the release of a wave like an exhalation.

Friday we sleep in—
my aunt unplugs every phone in her apartment.
After lunch, I walk through Al Bastakiya
with a scarf over my nose, see a man
lying belly down in the sand, a white dishtowel
over his forehead.

When I hear your voice on the other line
I imagine the cord stretched across the Atlantic,
weighed down by an octave in your tone
I had never heard before,
study, now, the contours of this newly assumed
topology.

I learn the Arabic word for “lost”
and struggle with its pronunciation—
think of that man, his beard
speckled with tiny grains of sand,
how I did not place a hand on his back
to feel the soft hum of breath,
the body’s insistent bidding.
I have never known loss,
only glimpsed it dangerously,
a primordial ocean I cannot traverse.



Photographs Of My Father

In this one
we are standing alongside Dorsey Road
watching planes take off. That morning we were
listening to the radio, you turned up
the volume, asked me “Do you know
who sings this one?”

In another, you are folding
laundry in the living room.
I am reading a book on the couch
and when you put a hand on my shoulder
I shrug it off like a cold, inanimate thing.

And here is the car you bought
packed with cardboard boxes
the day before I left home.
I am sitting on the hood
dragging my fingernails across silver paint.

In this one
I am the madwoman in Lexington Market
asking fishermen and freight train drivers
if they have seen my father—

In these dreams
you are the captain of a barge
and I wait at each port for you,
falling asleep in daylight moments
before you dock,
waking as the scow pulls off—

In this one: we are performing.
I am beating the ground with blunt sticks.
And here: we are reading a manual
on how to summon demons.
And in this one: you are washing your face with
turmeric, praying

to incomprehensible gods.

***My Mother Went to Houston for the
Weekend***

I was coming downstairs
to wash the milk from a cereal bowl—
my father sat on the living room couch
the remote control between his knees
volume low, television screen reflected
onto the window behind him, my likeness
superimposed over the images of women—
flesh curled into flesh
like skins of fruits composting.
He didn't see me at the top of the stairs
until I lifted an arm, made to wrap my fingers
around the railing or to reach
for some unseen forbidden thing.
How strange and fulfilling,
to see my arm emerge from that woman's
pale bare shoulder
like she, on that distant screen,
waited to be called on instead.
He changed the channel
and I walked down the stairs,
rinsed the bowl in the sink,
said *Goodnight Dad*,
and began to walk back up—

Heretics

Nana lays sideways parallel the television,
 blaring God channel her elbow nubbing
 into the space between the sofa cushions
 upper lip curled inward and teeth scraping
 at the lower. I thought of her body rotten,
 wasted, slack fat and rib cage blackened
 turned loose outside her kitchen for the strays.

I couldn't place its beginnings, this rot,
 that sick spot from which it branched
 and took like stains in linen.
 Maybe there is a stone
 in my grandmother's soul, a pebble
 broken off her mother's rock, transferred
 by umbilical cord, passed to my mother, too, and
 then severed, abrupt.

One Sunday, I drove Nana to church,
 she pasted lipstick onto her lips, her teeth
 scraping the lower and I thought
 how I must look in my cutoff shorts,
 leather seats sticking to my thighs in the damp
 east coast heat. *Heretic*,
 she called me to my mother,
 and of course, to her, I am
 intangible, ephemeral. She said to me once,
 There isn't anymore whiskey, I finished it,
 I was lonely. She stood at her bedroom door
 her shoulder bent forward, her fingers
 around the stair rail. In close spaces,
 we held our breath. We couldn't help it.



Paralipsis

The poet defined grace
as that which is uncanny in force.
Were you there for that reading?

In the dark,
you said
just lay there
like that

I wanted to think
of soft, graceful things:
the rocking chair in my childhood home
my mother reupholstered,
the woman at the convenience store
who takes my card
calls me baby

There you go baby

That's it baby

I couldn't kiss you properly
though we kissed in similar dialects.

I saw the image of you
refracted by the panes
of the bay window.

One fraction was winking—
you told me you have your father's eyes.

That night,
I dreamt I was the goddess Isis.
I drowned you in the Nile
only to resurrect you again.

Again, again,
this painful necromancy.

After,

I thought I saw you in parking lots,
in the back row of lecture halls,

when I fell asleep on the New Jersey Turnpike
and woke to warehouses and cranes,

warehouses and cranes, the image of you
refracted
through two layers of laminated glass

ineffable as the Holy Ghost.

Somewhere
between Trenton and Newark you take the aisle
seat.
Your chest rising gives me motion sickness.

I would ask you to leave
but you're drunk, aren't you?
Good, I want to be drunk too.

It's funny,
this reminds me of the Belvedere.
Do you remember holding my hair?

No, I won't bring it up—

I may have conjured these things too.

Reprise

After Mrs. Dalloway

Mid-May, we were standing on the doorstep
and in the light from everybody's windows,
the faint lamps above the doorway,
you put your arms around my waist
lifted me off the ground. My body,
with all its capacities, seemed nothing—
nothing at all.

There, by the steps, were flowers,
lupine and astilbe.

Was it the perennials, the pills
I had taken settling in my stomach
like seeds in soil, you knew.

It could have been Bourton in summer,
the hill, the field behind the library,
we could have been standing
somewhere between death and nothing,
nothing at all. Your eyes
brilliant and unyielding, surprised already
at such sudden strength, comparable
to gods we didn't believe in—

You were looking at me
the way you sometimes looked
at a train passing by,
as if something fascinated you.

Two Letters

We kicked off our shoes on the bank
before turning the canoe over, pushing out
into the fen. You bent your knees
beneath the stern seat and the nose of the canoe
peeled through the lilies like opening a book.

The soil was soft in Vermont.
When we docked at the place you camped
a few weeks back, it struck me
how simple it was to walk the trail
in our bare feet.

I don't know how long we didn't speak
or how you spotted that small toad
alongside the trail weeds
coaxed it into your palm and, slowly,
uncurled your fingers, offering it to me.

I lost the toad.
Later, I would think of it caged by tall grass,
recall that morning, months back, I saw you
in the library pulling a hardbound book
off a shelf. I saw you were crying.
I didn't ask what was wrong.

--

You wrote me two letters,
the first of which is dusted with soft silt.
I have courage now, it said, as if courage
were something you could plant and harvest.
I imagined you with your knees digging
into topsoil while you pushed tiny dents
into the dirt with your thumbs
for dill, cilantro, basil.

The second letter reads,
I want more than anything
for you to be okay.

But Christ what was important to me
was that I tried, I am still trying.
Even into the most frigid winter,
we spent our days scraping at the frozen earth
with fingernails to reap
even one gasping sprout.
We must not burn this one, you said,
though I was inclined to.



We went to an exhibit

at the Phillips Collection,
Van Gogh's *Repetitions*,

my eyes glazed in front of frames,
forearms crossed over belly
in mock admiration.

How could you see
eternity in Marcelle Roulin's eyes?
I can't speak to the pathos of brushstrokes
the way I can your scrawls in the margins
of paperbacks or your silence
while I count my failures.

But in fact, I *liked* the sunflowers,
the apologetic way they wilted,
petals unkempt—
I thought of the curve of your spine
parallel to the sofa, your chest
turned toward the sofa-back; Double-vowels, the
socks you'd worn in the rain
drying over the radiator.

I think there was something dishonest, though,
in the way you looked at the paintings—
the way some people breathe their prayers aloud
for the pulpit to hear the consonance.
You didn't like the sunflowers, did you?

After,
we got cappuccinos,
foam curled into little spears.

Stink Bugs

They came the summer of my graduation,
strange
invasive things of Eastern descent. They'd
known

Portland, Jackson, and Burlington
and none of us could find that thing
heavy enough to crush them.

While we stood in line
for our diplomas we, in our white dresses
the boys impatiently slipping fingers
beneath their collars, I felt them
so viscerally, in branches above our heads,
tiny harbingers keeping vigil. They were
markers,
these insects, they were stakes in the grounds
of my memory.

They crawled like memories do,
they prodded.
When I think of them I am reminded of my
mother,
how she crumpled in a way only strong things
can.

It made me see we were equal forces.

She had given me that, at least,
in the small truths she let press against me.
when I think of stink bugs I am reminded of
the first foreign back

that curved away from my body in bed
the blemishes he allowed me to see
were constellations and
when he stretched his arms
as though it all belonged to him,
I saw planets.

She would have said I wasn't careful, my
mother.

When I was born, she did not christen me,
She allowed me that much the choice

and it could be I was not careful.

Maybe we brought the storm and maybe
it drowned them.

Maybe they were saved, the stink bugs
small, graceless things unsettlingly like
ourselves.

How unable they were to show their
vulnerabilities,

How corporeal they had made our suffering.

Baltimore

Friday morning, early November
 I took the train into the city to meet you
 and we walked alongside the harbor,
 my scarf arced over collarbone in bay-water
 wind.

At the café,
 you said something about Sartre
 that I don't remember,
 thanked me for coming with you,
 though it had been my idea
 and we'd had to stop walking
 whenever the wind died down
 for me to light a cigarette.
 I had been meaning to tell you
 about the woman on the rail I took
 to Camden Yards—

She was old and required a walker
 and that morning there was a delay
 that held us for ten minutes and in that time,
 she wilted over the seat in front of her,
 as though in pain, and said (to me?)
 "I have waited all day to see my son
 on all these trains and it has been long
 and complicated
 and I am tired".
 When she straightened,
 there was a tear on her cheek
 though I think maybe the wind
 made her eyes water.

Maybe this was how Baltimore had always been
 and we'd forgotten. When you walked me back
 to Penn Station, you told a joke
 and I was made to laugh, and then—
 to walk the stiff halted gait I have chosen

to the platform,
a sweetish sickness sinking.

Saudade

I called my mother to ask which tree it was that grew in my neighbor's yard when I was younger, the cul-de-sac by the power lines she'd always hated and she didn't remember which trees, the camellias or the crepe myrtle. She couldn't imagine why I'd think now to ask her that question, why out of seasonal habit, I'd gone that morning to the circle of trees east of the Potomac to find the cherry blossoms hadn't bloomed yet, sat central at the great basin of the park and thought about the old woman getting off the metro, her knees bent painfully beneath her skirt. She cradled between four fingers clenched and a thumb her cane and at the elbow of the other arm a round leather sack. Her wrists formed crescent edges, little half laughs, and she was smiling even as businessmen ambled past with their briefcases, cell phones. *She is going to see the cherry blossoms*, I'd thought then, *like I am*. The light from the sagging sun cut shadow lines across the park. The trees were holding their pale, bare arms up in silent mourning for the loss of every dear, beloved thing.