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THE DAY WE WENT TO THE SEA

The day we went to the sea
Mothers in Madras were mining
The Marina for missing children.
Thatch flew in the sky, prisoners
Ran free, houses danced like danger
In the wind. I saw a woman hold
The tattered edge of the world
In her hand, look past the temple
Which was still standing, as she was —
Miraculously whole in the debris of gaudy
South Indian sun. When she moved
Her other hand across her brow,
In a single arcing sweep of grace,
It was as if she alone could alter things,
Bring us to the wordless safety of our beds.

THE DELIVERER

OUR LADY OF THE LIGHT CONVENT, KERALA

The sister here is telling my mother
How she came to collect children
Because they were crippled or dark or girls.

Found naked in the streets,
Covered in garbage, stuffed in bags,
Abandoned at their doorstep.

One of them was dug up by a dog,
Thinking the head barely poking above the ground
Was bone or wood, something to chew.

This is the one my mother will bring.

* * *

MILWAUKEE AIRPORT, USA

The parents wait at the gates.
They are American so they know about ceremony
And tradition, about doing things right.

They haven't seen or touched her yet.
Don't know of her fetish for plucking hair off hands,
Or how her mother tried to bury her.

But they are crying.
We couldn't stop crying, my mother said,
Feeling the strangeness of her empty arms.

* * *

This girl grows up on video tapes,
Sees how she's passed from woman
To woman. She returns to twilight corners.

To the day of her birth,

How it happens in some desolate hut
Outside village boundaries

Where mothers go to squeeze out life,
Watch body slither out from body,

Feel for penis or no penis,
Toss the baby to the heap of others,

Trudge home to lie down for their men again.

AT THE RODIN MUSEUM

Rilke is following me everywhere
With his tailor-made suits
And vegetarian smile.

He says because I'm young,
I'm always beginning,
And cannot know love.

He sees how I'm a giant piece
Of glass again, trying
To catch the sun

In remote corners of rooms,
Mountain tops, uncertain
Places of light.

He speaks of the cruelty
Of hospitals, the stillness
Of cathedrals,

Takes me through bodies
And arms and legs
Of such extravagant size,

The ancient sky burrows in
With all the dead words
We carry and cannot use.

He holds up mirrors
From which our reflections fall —
Half-battered existences,

Where we lose ourselves
For the sake of the other,
And the others still to come.

ANOTHER MAN'S WOMAN

*My lover has failed to come to the trysting place,
It is perhaps that his mind is dazed,
Or perhaps that he went to another woman,
Or lured perhaps by festive folk, that he delays,
Or perhaps along the dark fringe
Of the forest he wanders lost*

-- JAYADEVA

If we'd lived in another age,
I'd have been the kind of woman
who refused to cast down her eyes.
The kind of woman
the other maids in town despise
because she forgets to tie up the calves
and split the curds.
You know the kind —
with a tilt in her hips
and hair that slips
continually
from her braids.

But since we live in a world
that's just reflection,
mere illusions of the mind;
perhaps I can be her after all —
the one whose hips defeat the mountains
with their greatness,
whose breasts are heavy,
close and high —
 sandal-pasted;
who walks through moonless nights
with lotus skin and lotus feet
across forbidden boundaries.

I'll be the kind who sallies out
to wait for love
with musk-kissed hair
and navel bared

and dance among the mounds of ash
to command the churning of a storm.
For I have been with you
since you were born
and will stay with you
till you return —
soaked with the lasting dawn.

ODE TO THE WALKING WOMAN

After Alberto Giacometti

Sit —
you must be tired
of walking,
of losing yourself
this way:
a bronzed rib
of exhaustion
thinned out
against the dark.

Sit —
there are still things
to believe in;
like civilizations
and birthing
and love.
And ancestors
who move
like silent tributaries
from red-earthed villages
with history cradled
in their mythical arms.
But listen,
what if they swell
through the gates
of your glistening city?
Will you walk down
to the water's edge,
immerse your feet
so you can feel them
dancing underneath?
Mohenjodaro's brassy girls
with bangled wrists
and cinnabar lips;
turbaned Harappan mothers
standing wide
on terracotta legs;
egg-breasted Artemis —
Inana, Isthara, Cybele,

clutching their bounteous hearts
in the unrepentant dark,
crying: *Daughter,*
where have the granaries
and great baths disappeared?
Won't you resurrect yourself,
make love to the sky,
reclaim the world