

Inheritance

I remember how at the junction
of each faceless night and pallid moon,
Amma would recluse in the verandah
watching the gray skies cough clouds.
Mediating memories, her eyes traced
a silhouette on the ethereal horizon of dusk.
As if the sky held out its hand,
asking her to dive into a lap of lapses;
in caves, the darkness of which was
beyond the realm of any other to explore.

He welcomed her into a house
she knew like the back of her hand,
to explore each room in her memory
and savour each memory in their room.
Amma entered a room the day I was born:
cluttered with gifts, laughter and toys.
stored still, perhaps, in a corner of our attic
like a shriveled rose-bouquet on a grave.
She sifted through her sentiments,
one trinket at a time. Cleaning a mess
was her expertise but some clutters,
she knew, are made for preservation.

She entered another, ripe in time for *aarti*
and stirred with hymns the saints to life.
The ones she ascertained bodily and believed
to always hold good their promises.
They did, sometimes. Like that night of *aarti*,
conducted to harness the heavenly light
to shine on my calling to foreign shores
at the nether end of the blasphemous black seas.
Her folded palms whispering anxious prayers,
beseeching hope for my safety
and pleading for the safety
of her hope to kiss my face again.

She knocked on the flooded night she was
sitting next to *Abba*'s bed watching him
sink in the white hospital gown like
a swimmer reaching for the walls. He gasped,
still as handsome as their first spring:
pride curled up in his moustache,
strength at the ledge of his shoulders;
silence resonating in his thundering voice.
She held on to him as if he were the arm
of a man trying to snatch away her purse.

He pointed at twilight, as if repealing allegations
of leaving her to live on her own strife.
His stare hinting the far window of dusk,
the minutes before he knew he would die.
His spent his last moment gazing at her
with a wisdom beyond the consideration of true lovers,
hoping that she could save him, knowing that through her
he would savour life, continuing to culminate
in what he was leaving behind. Alive in the light of her eyes
and for some reason he smiled one last time.

Attentive as anesthetized, her consciousness left
for every rendezvous with her lover on those nights.
Abba dwelled in those moments of twilight
that are found and lost in the blink of an eye.
She savored his touch, one shiver at a time.
A lover that tasted the salt of earth until one day
he filled the space in the soil with his bones.
His silhouette in the sky and her shadow in the verandah
quantified memories from reality in a distance
that would take light-years to measure.

Those nights she would promenade till dawn,
wheezing in sighs, strange and distant
from the *Amma* I had known. What I knew was
that she told no one how it hurt her to inhale.
Removed from the removal of removals,
removed from recognition; she floated
like an empty urn on the Ganges,

estranged from the soot of her own bones.
Each night when her eyes ventured at dusk
they returned in a trajectory of slow motion.
I watched her entire life pour from the skies
in the time she took to turn her gaze to mine,
hoping that someday I would save her.

*Amma – Mother (*Hindi*) * Abba – Father (*Hindi*)

* aarti – Special prayers offered (*Hindi*)

Vineet Kaul