

Arundhathi Subramaniam

Bio

Arundhathi Subramaniam is the author of thirteen books of poetry and prose, most recently the poetry volume, *Love Without a Story*. Widely translated and anthologized, she is the winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award (conferred by India's apex literary institution), the inaugural Khushwant Singh Poetry Prize, the Il Ceppo Award in Italy, among several others. Her book *When God is a Traveller*, was the Season Choice of the Poetry Book Society, shortlisted for the TS Eliot Prize. She has worked over the years as curator, critic and poetry editor, and divides her time between Mumbai, Chennai and New York.

Another Way to Stop Waiting

He says he wants to tattoo her name on his body,
roll senseless on the ground--
a fallen plantain
green-leaved and bloody,
tear off his clothes, writhe
like a gazelle with a gunshot,
sing Rafi from the rooftops.

He knows he's being medieval and dramatic
and he's being true.

He remembers her face on the pillow--
wild moon in a thicket
of lotus stems,

her mouth a lightning quiver
of petulance
and mulled wine.

He unearths a to-do list
she made him in a cafe in the clouds
where point number six was
'Love Me'.

Why didn't he love her?

He needed time.

He needs more now
to finish the theatre of loss.

It is ritual
and it is necessary.

Where the heart becomes a place--

the great capital city of the body--
he must pace
its fissuring alleyways, shuffle
past its shanty roofs, the satellite dish antennae,
inhale the whiskybreath and the splintering doom.

He knows, too, that he must haunt
the silver pines
of the higher forests,
 stain the wings of geese
 with loveburn.

He must feel the pain of living inside time.

And when he's done
he'll be in the coffee shop
outside the theatre,
writing another script
(or perhaps the same one).

Even now,
eyes bloodshot, unshaved,
he knows the malarial night
is followed
by the scorching espresso,
the tepid newspaper,

 and the long,
 blessed
unwaiting.

And Suddenly it's Evening

[after Salvatore Quasimodo]

Above your head,
 Grownups talk
of deleted bus stops

and pasteurized street names
 and how they cycled to school
across lathering rivers of paddy

long replaced
 by the municipal corporation
and the city improvement trust colony.

You snooze fitfully,
 and now you must be grownup
because the Grownups

now have grandsons
 who vigorously trim
hedge funds in Atlanta,

and you think back often
 on an Irani café
that once hung precariously

over a cracked ceramic sea
 where you sipped a man's dark,
endless mouth,

while your nieces call to tell you
 that they're climbing mountains
and counseling the dying.

When roofs fly away
 and the wind blows--
 cold, blinding, fire-blue--

will you remember
 (the way swimmers never forget how to swim
and lovers never forget how to drown)

what it takes to live without
 ancestors, gods, shamans,
grownups,

just a pulsating density,
 headless,
under a blood-orange sky?

The World Breaks

When I want to speak of what counts
I return to the fact

that there is always a woman in a yellow sari
outside the Taj Mahal.

I suppose I want to say
that life can suddenly turn simple

when you accept that it's bloody hard.
I want to say

that when I went down in a submarine
and saw fish shivering past,

their gazes incurious, wetly amoral,
against the foaming detergent

of an ocean floor, I found that it's even okay
not to have questions

about our true element,
that overwater,

we will always be
out of our depth,

and the man in the gabardine suit
will always

(like the rest of us)
be a spy,

which makes it as simple
as buying the groceries, house-sitting the cat,

and being the medicine,
unique and unlabeled,

for someone at the other end of the line.
The world breaks,

eggshells, china cups, countries, bones, and all,
and still,

the woman in a yellow sari
outside the Taj Mahal.