

Poets

Meena Alexander
Judith Arcana
Jason Guriel

Steven Heighton
Ray Hsu
Tanis MacDonald

Yvonne Murphy
Alicia Ostriker
Russell Thornton

Priscila Uppal
Mark Yakich

Meena Alexander

Fragile Places

The world is a forest on fire
Sankara

Rain blazed over Tiruvella -- the red gorge.
Sankara speak to me:

carry me through the house of silt
the low slung bone,

wind me in raw silk
cry to the gulls on the sea coast.

Hulls, dhows, catamarans
Persian panoplies, Portugese men of war

clusters of jelly fish in the sea's craw,
baptism of spray

the passage rough,
horizon scrawled with stars.

I lay with you at the water's edge
a red rose blossomed in my breast.

Nothing is changed
by the strength of reflection

and everything.
Raw silk in the torn cupboard

of the will. *Two annas for soap*
Three annas for a bundle of matches

grandmother wrote -- *Four annas*
for a rag so she will not hurt her hands

Later I will tie up my notes with string
letters too, neatly knot them.

Grandmother polished her sandals
stepped into the long boat

that drew her to Kaladi
your birthplace.

Her house I inherit
plaster quick with spray

from the monsoon coast
beams dripping salt.

Unable to reconcile those that are scattered
with those bound in fragile places

we turn to where alms
are collected for the poor,

identity pulled apart
on the tongs of war

cities quivering by a slow river
which some call death.

A chance encounter
dissolves the separate things

we make out of our lives,
as if the wreckage of war

concerned us not a jot
and love were a painted concertina

played in underground passages
in the metros of Manhattan, Paris,

Delhi, Kolkata where platform walls
bear a poet's drafts blown big,

words strummed to
bird mouths, pesky wings,

flowers with beaks of gold
inky metamorphoses:

*I have picked at them, tried to redeem them.
They cry as sinners might.*

Who will redeem the real,
cherish fleshly fragments:

jog of hair, splintering mole
jolt of unlikeness

desire that turns us lean,
each rift crammed with sweetness,

arrow roiling the eye
of what ever time there may be left,

the skin of mango and rose
wet with smoke.

Hear me out:
I have come to ground

in my own country,
by the Pamba's edge

in a field of golden rice
where shades gather.

One cries: I lost my leg,
another -- My arm is blown

and here is the hood
of bright hair that was my mother's mother's.

It glistens with gunfire,
please take it from me.

Tongues emblazon
the harpsichord of flesh,

close to a child in a wood house
where a bomb falls,

her arms and legs aflame,
a woman in a kitchen miles away

washing rice, who turns
and stops to write.

Who dares to burn
with the stamp of love?

Words glimmer
then the slow

march to sentences.
Sankara speak to me.

Note:

Sankara, the great philosopher of Advaita Vedanta was born in Kaladi, in what is now Kerala. He believed that the phenomenal world was maya, zone of the unreal. The poet I refer to in the third section is Rabindranath Tagore. The two lines in italics at the close of that section are drawn from his notes on Purabi. Tagore comments on his own deletions: lines crossed out in the manuscript turned into doodles, the genesis of his craft as an artist. Some of these manuscript pages are displayed, blown up, on the walls of the Kolkata Underground