

# Poets

Meena Alexander  
Judith Arcana  
Jason Guriel

Steven Heighon  
Ray Hsu  
Tanis MacDonald

Yvonne Murphy  
Alicia Ostriker  
Russell Thornton

Priscila Uppal  
Mark Yakich

Meena Alexander

## Raw Silk

I.

Open the door or I'll faint hearing amma's voice –  
Where is the silk from your grandmother's sari?

Raw silk  
brought all the way from Varanasi.

In another life I crouched on the stone floor reading poetry  
– *Le ciel est, par-dessus le toit...*

*cette paisible rumeur-la* that sort of thing  
and the town was literally blazing –

guns, grenades, blisters of smoke  
on market place and mosque.

Through the bars of a white washed school room  
Verlaine peering, above his head a palm tree cradling the sun.

Far from Kerala amma fed me tales --  
After her wedding, years after the Salt March

grandmother coaxed mulberries  
from monsoon soil, clouds ran riot

silkworms coiled under the skin of leaves  
berries dripped free

the courtyard was a sea of blood.  
When grandmother died

the wedding sari with its brocade  
saved from the bonfire Gandhi had ordained.

was wrapped in muslin  
set in a wardrobe, the door locked tight.

II.

Child, its bad enough to be in a desert land  
why mutter poems in a language I can't understand?

How could I say that in the sandstorm  
I heard Verlaine singing,

Rimbaud setting fire to a felucca,  
by the Mahdi's palace

syllables run amuk,  
Gordon's head nodding on a stake

as red dates clustered  
on the bough of immortality,

hence poems I committed to memory  
flute music guiding me through the vertigo of history.

I wept in sorrow I could scarcely bear  
for a mother killed on the street

a girl child pinned to a bed  
as ancient hands cut at her.

and smoke rose from an island in the Nile  
where bricks were baked for insurrection.

Should I cast it all away  
be the girl who can't remember?

Could I have uttered what I didn't know --  
when silk comes out of the silkworm's hole

it is the color of colostrum.  
It was Khartoum and it was not.

O inwardness its own reward  
as the sun rises on the city of God.

III.

Amma there are silkworms  
dancing in the firmament

above your head and mine  
and the mother of worms

doffs her veil  
and darkens her lips

and sets a crown  
of mulberry leaves on my head.

When I open the drawer  
to search for silk

I touch smoke,  
raw silk turned to smoke in the night's throat.