Classic Poetry Series

Meena Kandasamy

- 50 poems -

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Meena Kandasamy (1984 -)

Meena Kandasamy is an emerging poet, fiction writer, translator and activist. She is based in Chennai.

Her first book, Touch, was published in 2006. Two of her poems have won prizes in all-India poetry competitions. Her poetry has been published in various journals, including The Little Magazine, Kavya Bharati, Indian Horizons, Muse India and the Quarterly Literary Review, Singapore. She edited The Dalit, a bi-monthly alternative English magazine of the Dalit Media Network in its first year of publication from 2001 to 2002.

Kandasamy's translations include the writings and speeches of Thol. Thirumavalavan, leader of Viduthalai Chiruthaigal or the Dalit Panthers of India (Talisman: Extreme Emotions of Dalit Liberation, 2003) and the poetry and fables of Tamil Eelam poet, Kasi Anandan. She is one of the 21 short fiction writers from South Asia featured in an anthology published by Zubaan, New Delhi. At present, she is working on her doctorate on Caste in the Indian Language Classroom.

Kandasamy regards her writing as a process of coming to terms with her identity: her "womanness, Tamilness and low/ outcasteness", labels that she wears with pride. She knew, she says, that "my gender, language and castelessness were not anything that I had to be ashamed of… I wrote poetry very well aware of who I was. But I was also sure of how I wanted to be seen. I wanted to be taken on my own terms… I wanted to be totally bare and intensely exposed to the world through my writings. I wanted it to be my rebellion against the world." It meant, she adds, consciously deciding that she wasn't interested in winning "acceptance, or admiration or awards".

Aware that "the site for all subjugation is (at first) at the level of language", Kandasamy believes that political poetry has the "pressing responsibility to ensure that language is not at the mercy of the oppressors". The ways of the status quo are insidious, however, and Kandasamy realises that a politically conscious poet has to be true to herself in order to be a genuine voice of dissent and resistance.

Her work as the editor of a Dalit magazine and her association with the Dalit Panthers of India (a militant activist Dalit organisation) has further honed her awareness of what it means "to be a woman in a caste-ridden nation". The result: poetry that arises "not out of mere reading, but out of active engagement".

Given her impassioned politics, it is perhaps not surprising that she wrote her first love poem only two years after she started writing her "angry, militant"

verse. The poems in this edition reveal more than militant rage, however. There is fierce and exuberant wit and wordplay which make one look forward to more of Kandasamy's work in the years to come.

Works:

Selected Translations

Talisman: Extreme Emotions of Dalit Liberation. Political essays of Viduthalai Chiruthaigal leader Thol. Thirumavalavan, Samya (Kolkata), 2003.
Uproot Hindutva: The Fiery Voice of the Liberation Panthers,Speeches of Thol. Thirumaavalavan, Samya, Kolkata, 2004.
Point-Blank, Poems of Tamil Eelam poet Kasi Anandan, Kudil, Chennai, 2005.
Fables, Short-stories of Kasi Anandan, Kudil, Chennai, 2005.
30 poems of 18 Tamil Dalit poets for Muse India, Sept-Oct 2006 for a special feature on Tamil Dalit Literature.
Why were women enslaved? Essays of Periyar EV Ramasamy on women's rights, Periyar Self Respect Propaganda Institution, Chennai, August 2007.

Book Chapters

And One Shall Live in Two, Afterword in Tamil Dalit writer P. Sivakami's novel "The Grip of Change," Orient Longman, Chennai, March 2006.
Between Her Legs: Hindutva and Dalit Women in 'Hindutva and Dalits', editor: Anand Teltumbde, Samya, Kolkata, February 2005.

Selected Essays

Slumdog debate: Let's not be in denial of the reality, The New Indian Express, i.witness, January 25, 2009.
Dalits and the Press in India: With Specific Reference to Pandit C. Iyothee Thass and the Tamilian Weekly, Voice of Dalit, 1(2), July–December 2009.
Book. Booker. Booked: Indian Fiction in English, The New Indian Express, i.witness, September 13, 2008
Words Across Borders: Translation As Liberation, The Hindu Literary Review, January 6, 2008.
Heal Thyself, Opinion Column at Culture Vulture, Tehelka, 29 September 2007.
Dangerous Cacophony: Hindutva Consolidation and Conscription in Tamil Nadu through Celebrations, Communalism Combat, Mumbai, Nov–Dec 2004, Vol. 11, pp. 22–34. dangerous-cacophony.pdf
Udderly Fanatic. Boloji, 17 November 2002. (On the atrocity where five Dalits where lynched for skinning a dead cow in Jhajjar, Haryana).
Casteist. Communalist. Racist. And Now, A Nobel Laureate. Po-Co Web, 2002.

Biography

(with M. Nisar) AYYANKALI: A Dalit leader of Organic Protest. Foreword by Kancha Ilaiah, Other Books, Calicut, January 2008, pp. 103.

Poetry

TOUCH. Published by Peacock Books, the poetry imprint of Frog Books, Mumbai in August 2006, ISBN 81-88811-87-4.
(Chapbook) 16 elegant, untitled poems have been hosted as an e-chapbook The Eighth Day of Creation on the poetry website Slow Trains.

Advaita: The Ultimate Question

Non Dualism
Atman Self
Brahman God
Are Equal
And Same.
So I
Untouchable Outcast
Am God.
Will You
Ever Agree?
No Matter
What You
Preach Answer
Me. Through
Your Saints.
One More
Final Question
Can My
Untouchable Atman
And Your
Brahmin Atman
Ever Be
One
?

Meena Kandasamy

Aggression

Ours is a silence
that waits. Endlessly waits.

And then, unable to bear it
any further, it breaks into wails.

But not all suppressed reactions
end in our bemoaning the tragedy.

Sometimes,
the outward signals
of inward struggles takes colossal forms
And the revolution happens because our dreams explode.

Most of the time:

Aggression is the best kind of trouble-shooting.

Meena Kandasamy

Amnesia, Selective

When memory decides
To no longer bear the burdens—
Of pain, or even plain indifference
She has her winsome wicked ways.

Some day, years later,
Life requires you to unearth
Some event long past and you
Set about browsing your brain
Like a desk-full of office files and then—
Come across a resounding emptiness.

Memories drizzle-fragile
Are not to be found. What
Greets you instead, through
Those yellowing sheets of typed matter is
The blank and ugly blotches of dried whitener
So carefully applied, then. It has a fading smell of
Chalk and chlorine: a blend, like memory, that works at
Your throat. You try to scratch it and the faintest hopes are
Betrayed as the caked pieces of the whitener crumble,
Displaying nothing, but toe curling holes where crummy paper and ink once contained you.

Meena Kandasamy

An Angel Meeting Me

and may be we will
almost fall in love...
I will look into his eyes,
and he into mine—
my one single eye,
(the unfortunate other
blinded by a disciplinizing slap)
and we will agree, adjust
that Love can be Blind.
And he, healthy boy
well-fed, white with his rosy cheeks,
will wonder about me,
pity my bony body, those thin ribs
and worry
and feel my twisted ears
and the scars on my hands,
(reminders of the flirtation
of my skin and a cruel cane)
and perhaps lift my skirt...
Before he learns the greater horrors,
I owe him the truth of me—
So, I will say to him:
"I went to school".

Meena Kandasamy

Another Paradise Lost

One sleepy summer afternoon, while helping
myself to a glass of chilled water, I saw a
snake lying curled under the fridge. It could
have been a very poisonous cobra. Very

quickly, I chose my mode of attack: Acid.
Staggering, I reached for the glass bottle
so that I could pour the yellow-green cheap
acid on its slimy body, burning it to death.

"Stop it", the snake hissed in pure Tamil
connecting with me in the language of
my prayer and poetry. "I am an exile."
And I configured mental images of political

refugees. It wriggled out and I saw that
it was balding, almost Rushdie-like, perhaps
with a death sentence too. Controversy was a
crowd pulling catch-phrase, to which I dutifully

succumbed. Acid bottle in hand, I heard the
snake preach to me about living in detachment.
"The perfection of life is when you do not
know the difference between yielding and

resisting." The scrawny being writhed further
and told me of rebirth and reincarnation. Being
a writer I really wanted to take notes. Instead
I began arguing. "Shut up", the snake said to me,

"Karma and the whole stuff that follows it is just
bunkum. You, a crazed agnostic, disagree because
of borrowed ideas." Sharp movements of the red
tongue terrified me. Almost sensing my fear, it

said, "You could never challenge what you do
not comprehend." The snake spoke in circles, in
patterns that could only resemble a snake
swallowing its tail. Whatever. And then it

occurred to me: Speech was the oldest trap,
the charming deceiver, persuasion's weapon
and Satan's first area of expertise. "Stop it",
this time I said the words. "Tell me just your

story. Save the cant and rant for critical times."
My acidic tone gained me a menacing status
and I continued, "You are a mean serpent.
Instigator. Trouble-maker. Sly liar. Undulating

temptation-provider. Unworthy reminder
of the seduction of strength over matter." It

protested in a booming resonant voice, “No, I
am not any of this. I am just an exile, from

paradise. Because of your Catholic upbringing,
you don’t even know about the paradise lost
in Hinduism.” Who bothered for history or
heritage, except shriveling snakes and failed

writers? At least, we both had something in
common. “Look here comrade, my credentials
are different. In heaven, I was an activist. An
avid dissenter. Before the accession to heaven,

long long ago, I was a mighty monarch on earth,
feared and respected. I was Nahusa the Great.
My subjects were happy, the kingdom prosperous.
And I ruled for twelve thousand years, until the day

when I decided that I could take leave of life. In
heaven too, I was venerated. But one question had
plagued me all the years of my long life, and it still
tormented me in heaven. I wanted to know why

caste was there, why people suffered because of
their karmas. I questioned the Gods, and the learned
sages there. I asked them what would happen if an
high-born did manual work just like the low-born.

I worried about the division of labor, this disparity
in dreams and destinies. You could say I was a rebel
pleading for liberty-equality-fraternity. I had a riotous
history of revolution. The Gods plotted against me,

decided that I was trouble. I was cursed to turn into
a vile snake. I was banished from paradise. For sixty
million years, I shall roam the earth, and then I may
return.” This was a different case of the paradise lost.

In this tale, there was no forbidden fruit, no second
fickle-minded woman. Tradition triumphed over reason
and the good were cast away. I let the serpent go,
happy that he had given my hungry mind a story, or

perhaps, a poem to be written on unfair days. I began
to respect snakes — the challengers of hierarchy.
While I gave him the freedom of safe passage
I vowed never to kill serpents. Much later

I realized brutally that this was just another
occupational hazard for choosing a life
where I was to be showing solidarity
with activists and dissenters.

Meena Kandasamy

Apologies for living on

I am living on
because providing apologies is easy

once—

i was making choices
with insanely safe ideas of
fleeing-madly-and-flying-away

i was a helpless girl
against the brutal world of
bottom-patting-and-breast-pinching

i was craving for security
the kind i had only known while
aimlessly-afloat-and-speculating-in-the-womb

now—

i am locked away
a terrified princess waiting
for-death-and-not-any-brave-prince

i don’t dream or think
i just remember and wince
at-voices-of-the-past-smirking-in-sarcasm

once—

i ran away in the darkness
nothing beaconed me more than the
prospect-of-solitude-and-the-caress-of-a-million-stars

i ran into the arms of the ravishing night
nothing pulled me back: not even the memories
of-love-i-had-once-known-&-stolen-kisses-savoured-for-so-long.

i ran until terror stopped my tracks
for, trembling i turned and saw that the moon was
another-immodest-ogler-and-lecherous-stalker.

(First published in Great Works, UK)

Meena Kandasamy

Becoming a Brahmin

Algorithm for converting a Shudra into a Brahmin

Begin.

Step 1: Take a beautiful Shudra girl.
Step 2: Make her marry a Brahmin.
Step 3: Let her give birth to his female child.
Step 4: Let this child marry a Brahmin.
Step 5: Repeat steps 3-4 six times.
Step 6: Display the end product. It is a Brahmin.

End.

Algorithm advocated by Father of the Nation at Tirupur.
Documented by Periyar on 20.09.1947.

Algorithm for converting a Pariah into a Brahmin

Awaiting another Father of the Nation
to produce this algorithm.

(Inconvenience caused due to inadvertent delay
is sincerely regretted.)

[First published in The Little Magazine]

Meena Kandasamy

Blackboard Poems

S P A C E
is a problem unlike your never-ending
paper or the maddening blankness of
your word processor where you can go on
and on in anguish or insanity or boredom
on one-hundred-and-seven degree Fahrenheit afternoons.
(To write the next lines you need to take
the green&goldbrown duster to rub off these eight)

Colour is another confusion you want
to wish away. At sixteen you wouldn't write
OneSingleWord unless it was forty percent
gray letters on a plum background and your
monitor looked like a high class youknowwho.
The font then was Footlight MT Light, 13 pt.
Now, at twenty one, it is Verdana, eight point.
(I have erased again)

NOTHING SEDUCES LIKE YOUR OWN HANDWRITING.
THE WHITE CHALK DANCING ACROSS GLASS GREEN.
Creepers on W's & R's, hats on S, hearts on I's & J's.

(I have erased again)

I don't grudge the colours too. Instead of two hundred
and fifty six fantasies there is the catholic bridal white.
Sometimes, there is yellow, blue, green, purple, red and
orange and the opportunity of giving them names—

Flaky Fullmoon. Bleached & Faded Captain Haddock Suit.
Temple-tank Algae. Crushed Lilac Under Flashlight.
Sherbet Stain. Sawdust Chillidust Cream.

(I have erased again)

There is considerable exertion (let me hazard a guess:
writing takes two hundred calories per hour, erasing
with the duster five hundred, and walking across must
be say, around eighty) . Then, there is chalk-dust allergy
that compels me to sneeze. And the chemical after-effect
that spoils the moody brown skin of any glowing goddess.

And the unbearable sounds
of chalk squeak...
(I have erased again.
The fifth time now.)

But, a poet loves
writing blackboard poems.
(So easy, to imagine, an audience)
Yet, how much she dreads
Impermanence...

Meena Kandasamy

Cinquains

Morning Song

Wet pink
And dusty grey
The sky begins to blush.
Some sleepy careless charm welcomes
Daybreak.

Even Song

Azure
And pink gold hues
The smug sky at twilight
A final flush of fulfilment
Night falls.

Meena Kandasamy

Composition

At that brief time
When you wait
For the audacious cane
To strike your skin,
And the rest of you is flinching
And cringing, with part shame,
And part pain,
Poetry dictates itself
In your mind. Short lines
Rip through, like bullets
From a machine gun.

The poem comes with the
Freshness of a life set free,
Whistling its way,
Painfully, like wind searing
Through the palm fronds.

Then,

The cane thrashes
Your skin, dancing cruelly
And bouncing in wooden joy.
Before you scream,
Or shake, the poetry stops.
And the Muse, is tentatively,
Laid to rest, much before the
Composition is
Complete.

(First published in Sulekha)

Meena Kandasamy

Ekalaivan

This note comes as a consolation:

You can do a lot of things
With your left hand.
Besides, fascist Dronacharyas warrant
Left-handed treatment.

Also,
You don’t need your right thumb,
To pull a trigger or hurl a bomb.

(First published in Indian Literature)

Meena Kandasamy

Evil Spirits

You are possessed.
Witch doctors believe in phantoms,
that cause your illness. But, driving out devils
can be challenging. Spirits are given away—

We are made to sit opposite you,
Force-fed a ‘meal'—bland food mixed
with your hair, nails, spit and pus.
Illegally (despite the government ban) ,
We take your hoard of evil spirits
Barter-system: for having ate your food.

And because ghosts and ghouls
obey your rules, they leave you to come to us.
Is this ‘transference'? An unofficial appeasement.
We become inhabited by the dead,
who ruins our doomed lives. Demons in our
bodies are brutal tenants and frequently,

They suck with their vampire tongues
to drink our anemic blood —
leave their puncture marks, which
can be faintly seen on our black skins;
skins that bear greater scars,
reminders of larger, human cruelty...

Anyway, there isn't a lot of life in our bodies.
We are souls. Wandering souls. Still, once
Ghost-tasted, we rot away. We rot away.
Remember, rotting is a long procedure...
Day by day, we grow coffin cold and slowly
Life creeps out, a lazy earthworm.
At last, we die.

We die.

(First published in Kritya)

Meena Kandasamy

Excerpts from a study guide

Teach him not to seek
Where he has been taught to find. . .

***

Lead him into the land
Of silences—Ignore his words of praise
Where all the perfidy hides. . .

***

Because the climax of a dream
Is its return to reality, let him cling
To your laughter, to your eyes that shine of light. . .

***

Make him study the gilt of gold
Against the wan brown of your skin but let him choose. . .

***

Exhibit your flawless arms
Dearest child of 1984—no vaccination mark
Nothing to remind him of his Maari or small pox. . .

***

Lead him to count the moles
On your skin but force him to begin
With the beauty spot above your lips. . .

***

Talk to him of that summer of chickenpox
That left you almost unscathed, but show him
The unbeautiful gash where metal seared eight-year skin. . .

***

Tell him the history of your Raphunzel hair
That tickled your shins. And of a cruel world that sapped
You, so your hair cannot reach down to cover your shame. . .

***

Press his ears against your skin
And hear him announce—the dance
Is in the bones, the dance is in the blood. . .

***

He shall chart and plot
And map, but shrewd girl
Bring him up to worship you. . .

***

Allow him to memorize all of you
So that, some day, he shall ravish you
Screaming fiery love-words in your mother-tongue. . .

***

He would have
Learnt your lesson, by then. . .

(First published in Sweet Magazine, South Africa)

Meena Kandasamy

Fire

Black satanic fumes
shroud the blank blue skies
in puffing jet black soot;
few flashy cameras record
glimpses of destruction
(for tomorrow's papers) ...

Our huts are burning—
Regular huts in proper rows.
Dry thatches (conspirators-in-crime)
feed the flames as we rush out
shrieking-crying-moaning
open mouthed hysterical curses
and as if in an answer—
when the blazing work is done
Fire engines arrive...

Deliberately late.
These feverish cries continue
in the same shrilly pitch
echo, echo, echo and
finally reach...

Up there.
Reverberate and sound as loud
as snail shells crackling under nailed boots
and perhaps as distinct and defenseless.
This double catastrophe projected in sights
and shrieks evokes...
No response.

Those above are (mostly) :
indifferent bastards.

Meena Kandasamy

For Sale

My school bud, he work hard.
He slog. He make money.
He grow dam rich.

He go to da temple, where
his po' ol' folks ain't allowed.
He buy incense for two bucks
flowers for five, kinda shaggy
coconut for ten bucks.
He also buy a standing place
at da front and da special prayer
in his name all at twenty more.

Priest with ash and holy smoke
come to him, give extra blesses for
a cool crisp fifty my bud gives.

He stand there and stare,
stare hard at the Gawd;
his first time in temple.

Then my jus Blessed bud, he ask me:
Say, ya, how much da "Luxmee" cost?

Meena Kandasamy

Frenzied Light

When you called me
To light up your life
I could never refuse.
But, there are things I ask of you.

Love, I can’t be a candle
For I know it is an ancient lie.
The candle is for the solemn,
And for those who yearn a slow
And settled tenderness. Not for us.
It is for those who can bear to leave
A mass of their waste, the dregs of their glory.
O, it is for the selfish who seek to burn through a medium.

Love, I will promise you a substitute.
I could be that piece of holy camphor
So safely locked away from prying hands.
And dearest, when I burn for you, that single time
Nothing shall remain of me, or of you, except that flash
Of memory. Our blending shall be so sublime, so intense, so total.

Come, consume me,
Devastate me love, if you ever will,
But with a force that I will forever remember.

(First published in Kavya Bharati)

Meena Kandasamy

Fuchsia Shock

My bed smells of textbooks
and it is more than a month or so,
since I dreamt of sunlight and the sky's
embrace. Even a woman's lush vanities —
scarlet silk and shining gold — have been lost
on me. I am snared in a world of aqua, fuchsia,
and lime set dangerously against black and white.

Words tightly wrapped,
and imprisoned in a cluster of
highlighter colours, share my slavery.
Rattling loud, the colorized intrusions
have pickled the past, leaving me to savour
saturation. Oh hell, even my treasured dreams
have been bleached away in shades of three, or five.

Save me, from this
unbearable starkness
of fluorescence; where lines
rehash the pages brutally, moving
with sounds of spectacled scrutiny.
For, all that I can bear to comprehend
is the loss of dare: my sheltered cowardice.
And, the sole comfort I crave, through stifled
tears is stolen love beneath stained glass windows.

Dearest, lavish your love
in slender earthtone shades,
in the colours of skin singing —
to shield our renewed dreams,
and to believe, once more, in absolutes.

(First published in Sulekha)

Meena Kandasamy

How they Prostitute a Poem

It is uniquely easy
For some to sell
Ideals because
Business of absent
Goods is essentially
A sacrosanct but mostly
A flimsy transaction.

Some learn, early on,
To prostitute their verse.
So, in all the waking hours
They scavenge for a simple simile
That matches requirements, fulfills needs.

They barter reality
And every romance
To a blurred triplicate
Carbon-copy World of Hard
Cash and Price Tags and Brand Names.

In this brothel
Of stilled hope and
Stagnated stories, poems
Are born virgin and endowed
With voluptuous figures of firm,
Full breasts and wide hips where men
Prefer to plant their pastime dreams,
Or conceive their seed,
Or merely spite themselves,
Or dabble at domination.

But, the poem, with this
Bogus existence becomes
An adept, untiring prostitute.

Taken
On a starry night,
The poem opens
(dry and drab and dreary:
lacking love and life) like
The paid-for parting
Of the thighs.

(First published in Great Works, UK)

Meena Kandasamy

Hymns of a Hag

I fancy myself being a witch.
Broomstick borne and black as pitch.

Thin, stark-naked and with fire for eyes.
Killing men whom I despise.

Bewailing the woeful life I led.
Casting dark spells, makin' them dead.

Thronging ghettos, to unbend bent backs.
Handing them knives, 'least an axe.

Lot later I fly to temple streets.
Our men firm, I show my feats.

Haunting oppressors to shave their heads.
Cutting all their holy threads.

Experiencing joy as they bleed.
Dance, rejoice my black black deed.

Leave one farewell note, an obscene cue:
'Judgment day is long since due.'

Ultimately, I'll lie in the ditch—
Ne'er give a damn, when called 'Bitch'.

Meena Kandasamy

If Everything Comes Crashing Down

And both of us become strangers onto each other
Do not worry about me.

We will look beyond eyes and run into each other
As usual, for the rest of life.

I do not know what you would
Treasure of me in your mind.

But in billboards planted
Across my fervent heart,
I will celebrate you as the man
Who made me woman.

And there are the small things that I would always remember:
Your affinity to catch colds; my rising fevers on seeing you
Your headaches, your backaches; my avowed helplessness
Your falling asleep while waiting for my reply
Your asking me to remain with you for all of time. . .
All your delicious lies. . .

Over the phone,
the sound of your drinking water,
the soundlessness of your yawn. . .
the camouflage of who you were talking to
the new meanings you gave to worn-out words

Yes, all of this.
And that once,
You called me a goddess.

Meena Kandasamy

Inheritance

Helplessly, silent;
we watched it being seized away, all our lands.
The Government—a fulltime bewitching whore
had promised Jobs. Industrialization. Power, Electric.
Everything went, Nothing came.

Now, landless, uprooted,
unsettled in a resettlement colony
we feast our souls on lucent memories—Of an earlier life.

When memory charts
familiar horizons
I often recollect that
long ago rainy Sunday
in our crowded church,
Fr. Jose reading crisply
"Blessed are the meek
for they shall inherit the earth."

(First published in Sweet Magazine, South Africa)

Meena Kandasamy

Lines Addressed To A Warrior

Lines addressed to a warrior
Posted on June 1, 2008 | Leave a comment
come.
colonise me.

creep into the hollows
of my landscape—my eyes click lock:
no more the drawing of the gates.
set up your home your office
the writing desk and the trading post.
ignore the sand-brown
of my skin—a willing blind
i'll never know black from white.
take me and talk of your finer finish
stunned i yield, so script your stories here.

invade.
this inner-space.

adjust the pace and pulse
of marching armies—and house
your machine guns, its manuals.
populate me with anthems
the songs of wrath and those of war.
draft words that echo
of gunfire, to accompany
my lone dance of submission.
though prose mad and power crazy, you
conquer me, never with malice or manhood.

capture.
every territory.

fill up all my blank skin
to resound with the strike of scimitars,
the sadness of success.
have all your battles lost, or won,
chronicled across my line of down.

Meena Kandasamy

Love and war

Two thousand years ago
our word for love
was the same.

women and men
wrote their songs of love
the intimacies of inside

and they spoke of how
love was tireless
love was a fantasy feast
love was no disease
love was no evil goddess
love was a harshness, in the parting
love was
        'the thing that made a girl's bangles
        slip loose when her lord went away
        grow tight when her lord returned'
love was (they sang)
        'bigger than the earth
        higher than the sky
        unfathomable than the waters.'
love was.

no names were named.
you did not know
        who he was
        or who she was
        or when it was
        or where it was
only
love was.

and there were
the poems of war,
the war poetry
poems on the outside

(and perhaps
because the bards
wore lotuses of gold)

there are
the poems
where the names were named
where the kings were praised
where a bard addressed another
where the guide sang to the patron
where the poet sang to the courtesan
where mothers spoke of tigers in their wombs
where the kingdom was
        'an unfailing harvest of

victorious wars’
where the old women
‘threatened to slash their breasts
if their sons died in battle with backs
turned in fright’
where the end spoke of
‘the blood glowing
in the red center of the battlefield
like the sky before nightfall’

and because it has an end
war was a history.

love never has an end.
love was. and will be.

Meena Kandasamy

Maariamma

We understand
why upper caste Gods
and their ‘good-girl’ much-married, father-fucked,
virgin, vegetarian oh-so-pure Goddesses
borne in their golden chariots
don’t come to our streets.

We know the reasons for their non-entry into slums.
Actually, our poverty would soil their hears
and our labor corrupt their souls.

But Maariamma,
when you are still getting
those roosters and goats,
why have you stopped coming to our doors?

Maari, our girl,
since when did you join their gang?

(First published in The Little Magazine)

Meena Kandasamy

Mascara

The last thing she does
before she gets ready to die
once more, of violation,
she applies the mascara.

Always,
in that last and solemn moment
the call-girl hesitates.

With eye-catching eyes
she stops to shudder.
Maybe, the dyed eyes
mourn her body's sins.

Mascara. . .
it serves to tell her
that long buried
hazy dreams
of a virgin soul
have dark outlines.

Silently she cries.
Her tears are black.
Like her.

Somewhere
Long Ago
in an
untraceable
mangled
matrilineal
family tree
of temple prostitutes,
her solace was sought.

It has happened for centuries. . .
Empty consolations soothe
violated bodies.

Sex clings to her devadasi skin,
assumed superficialities don't wear off,
Deliverance doesn't arrive.
Unknown Legacies of
Love made to Gods
haven't been ceremoniously accounted
as karma.

But still she prays.
Her prayer words
desperately provoke Answers.
Fighting her case,
Providence lost his pride.

Her helplessness doesn’t
Seduce the Gods.
And they too
never learn
the Depth of her Dreams.

She believes—
Cosmetics were
once. . .
War paints.
She awaits their resurrection.

When she dons the mascara
The Heavens have heard her whisper,
Kali, you wear this too. . .

(First published in Indian Horizons)

Meena Kandasamy

Meeting the Prophetess

Leave your books behind.

Since memory,
Like knowledge, is a traitor,
Erase every hoarding of your horrible past.

At last, when you enter her world
Of fraying edges and falling angels
Don’t barter words where touch will do and be the truth.
For once allow her silence to sear, strip your life-layers
Because she who knows the truth will not know the tale.

(First published in Thanalonline)

Meena Kandasamy

Mohandas Karamchand

"Generations to come will scarcely
believe that such a one as this walked
the earth in flesh and blood."
—Albert Einstein

Who? Who? Who?
Mahatma. Sorry no.
Truth. Non-violence.
Stop it. Enough taboo.

That trash is long overdue.
You need a thorough review.
Your tax-free salt stimulated our wounds
We gonna sue you, the Congress shoe.

Gone half-cuckoo, you called us names,
You dubbed us pariahs—"Harijans"
goody-goody guys of a bigot god
Ram Ram Hey Ram—boo.

Don't ever act like a holy saint.
we can see through you, impure you.
Remember, how you dealt with your poor wife.
But, they wrote your books, they made your life.

They stuffed you up, the imposter true.
And sew you up—filled you with virtue
and gave you all that glossy deeds
enough reason we still lick you.

You knew, you bloody well knew,
Caste won't go, they wouldn't let it go.
It haunts us now, the way you do
with a spooky stick, a eerie laugh or two.

But they killed you, the naked you,
your blood with mud was gooey goo.
Sadist fool, you killed your body
many times before this too.

Bapu, bapu, you big fraud, we hate you.

(First published in The Little Magazine)

Meena Kandasamy

Monologue

I speak alone because
I do not know his answers.

And yet, you want to be heard.

I want to tell him that I have
Closed and sealed my skin.

Baby, I told you, love can hurt.

I have exiled my heart.

This is a lonely, lonely world,
Even with a lover.

Since I know the difference
Between believing and being in love

Oh! you know nothing.

I have stopped
My frantic search
For the Buddhas

Only they came to you,
In ones, twos, tens.

When I thought of
Yasodhara, his wife
Left behind alone and
Large with child...

What about the good things, eh?
Recollect them. Remember that
Memory is a mere vending machine...

Meena Kandasamy

Mulligatawny dreams

anaconda. candy. cash. catamaran.
cheroot. coolie. corundum. curry.
ginger. mango. mulligatawny.
patchouli. poppadom. rice.
tatty. teak. vetiver.

i dream of an english
full of the words of my language.

an english in small letters
an english that shall tire a white man’s tongue
an english where small children practice with smooth round
 pebbles in their mouth to the spell the right zha
an english where a pregnant woman is simply stomach-child-lady
an english where the magic of black eyes and brown bodies
   replaces the glamour of eyes in dishwater blue shades
   and the airbrush romance of pink white cherry blossom skins
an english where love means only the strange frenzy
   between a man and his beloved, not between him and his car
an english without the privacy of its many rooms
an english with suffixes for respect
an english with more than thirty six words to call the sea
an english that doesn’t belittle brown or black men and women
an english of tasting with five fingers
an english of talking love with eyes alone

and i dream of an english

where men
of that spiky, crunchy tongue
buy flower-garlands of jasmine
to take home to their coy wives
for the silent demand of a night of wordless whispered love . . .

(First published in Kavya Bharati)

Meena Kandasamy

My Lover Speaks of Rape

Flaming green of a morning that awaits rain
And my lover speaks of rape through silences,
Swallowed words and the shadowed tones
Of voice. Quivering, I fill in his blanks.
Green turns to unsightly teal of hospital beds
And he is softer than feathers, but I fly away
To shield myself from the retch of the burns
Ward, the shrill sounds of dying declarations,
The floral pink-white sad skins of dowry deaths.

Open eyes, open hands, his open all-clear soul . . .

Colorless noon filters in through bluish glass
And coffee keeps him company. She chatters
Away telling her own, every woman's story;
He listens, like for the first time. Tragedy in
Bridal red remains a fresh, flushing bruise across
Brown-yellow skinscapes, vibrant but made
Muted through years of silent, waiting skin.
I am absent. They talk of everyday assault that
Turns blue, violet and black in high-color symphony.

Open eyes, open hands, his open all-clear soul . . .

Blues blend to an unforgiving metropolitan black
And loneliness seems safer than a gentle night
In his arms. I return from the self-defence lessons:
Mistrust is the black-belted, loose white mechanism
Of survival against this groping world and I am
A convert too. Yet, in the way of all life, he could try
And take root, as I resist, and yield later, like the earth.

Open eyes, open hands, his open all-clear soul . . .
Has he learnt to live my life? Has he learnt never to harm?

Meena Kandasamy

Narration

I'll weep to you about
My landlord, and with
My mature gestures—
You will understand:
The torn sari, disheveled hair
Stifled cries and meek submission.
I was not an untouchable then.

I'll curse the skies,
And shout: scream to you
Words that incite wrath and
You will definitely know:
The priest, his lecherous eyes,
Glances that disrobed, defiled.
I was not polluting at four feet.

How can I say
Anything, anything
Against my own man?

How?

So I take shelter in silence
Wear it like a mask.
When alone, I stumble
Into a flood of incoherencies. . .

(First published in Kritya)

Meena Kandasamy

Non-conversations With a Lover

Don’t talk to me
of sudden love. . .

in our land
even the monsoons come—
leisurely, strolling like
decorated temple elephants
(the pomp, the paraphernalia)—
after months of monotonous prayer,
preparations and palpitating waits.

my darling
his silence
(those still shoulders)
but his eyes dance
his eyes dance
(so wild, so wild)

so i think of raging
summer storms—
like uncontrollable tuskers
trampling in mast
(the madness, the lust)—
across the forests of our land. . .

(First published in Thanalonline.com)

Meena Kandasamy

Prayers

In an arid land of arid human minds
Caste, yet again authored a tragedy.
He, disease wrecked, downtrodden,
long-ago skinner of animals, sets out.
Ten days of Typhoid, and a partial recovery.
Enough reason to thank some God.

He drags himself clumsily to a nearby temple.
Sadly, of an Upper-caste God.
Away from the temple, he bends in supplication.
Says his last prayer—Unwelcome Gratefulness.
To a God who (anyway) didn't help him recover.
Innocent Acts of Undulating Faith spurned
Anger. Retaliation.

An irked Rajput surged forth
and smote the untouchable with a iron rod.
He, warrior caste lion couldn't tolerate
Encroachment. At the temple. By a Dalit.
Deathly howls of a feeble-voiced
rent the air, fervently seeking holy intervention.
God, Lifeless as ever—watched grimly with closed eyes.
In resigned submission, the sick man's Life was given away.
Caste—crueler than disease, emotionless, dry, took its toll
Confirming traditional truths: Dalits die, due to devotion.

Unanswered questions remain;
Agony is not always a forgotten memory.

Life teaches: there are different Gods at different temples.
One solitary thought haunts recollection day and night.
Where did this poor man's sixty-five year old soul go?
To Heaven – to join noble martyrs who died for a cause?
Or to Hell—where the Gods reside, making Caste Laws.

(First published in Kritya)

Meena Kandasamy

Returning Home

And you see the two-crows-for-joy-pass that are sitting on
overhead cables and the evening moon,
a mere silvery slice against fluffy translucent sky.

And the remains of your school where you spent your twelve
longest years and lived through everything.

And the bus-stand you had to draw for your art-class in yellow
ochre or asphalt grey and the emptiness that now occupies the
place where a tiny café once stood.

And the tree where they fed you lunch before you learnt to walk
back home. And I thought of my parents.

Brilliant people talking of the intricacies of their life and the corruption of
morals and the bygone days and hunger in their childhood and their deaddear-
departed parents as if to teach you what to talk to your children.

(And you are their child,
so you speak their lines.)
Still returning home,

And there are rusty mammoth girders that outline the sky like
the derelicts of lost dreams and crossed hopes.

And girls so flimsy pretty yet unsafe in the little worlds of lip
gloss and love affairs that you could have smoked them into
oblivion.

And the dry decaying dead leaves crushed with varying noises
and carrying a spent smell that clings to your hair.

And the shy forest noises that violate your fixation over sight
and sound and smell and touch yes touch.

And I thought of my lover.

A primitive man who would invade
your aloneness on insomniac nights
and challenge your assumptions of
love and your sophistications and fill
your ears with the four letter words of
his ancient language that have begun
to sound to you like earth songs to
which your body awakens.

(And you are his love,
so you listen to his lines.)

On the way home, the small
lessons you learn of life. . .
Love, or the promise of love,

its lack of choice.
This large world.
And its littleness.

Meena Kandasamy

Reverence :: Nuisance

In walls of reception counters
and staircases of offices, hospitals, firms
and other ‘secular’ institutions—
pictures of Hindu Gods are painted. . .

so that casual people walking in (or up or down)
fear to spit on the adorned walls.

But still looking around or climbing:
you can always find the work done
a irregular red border underlining the walls
owing so much to betel juice and spit.

And on cheap roadside compound walls
that don’t bear “Stick No Bills” messages or
cinema and political posters—the Gods once again
are advertised. And captioned with legends that read
“Do not Urinate”. And yet, the Gods are covered with
layers of smelly urine—they don’t retaliate.

Tolerance is a very holy concept.
Or like someone said,
the Caste Gods deserve
the treatment they get.

(First published on The Poetry International Web)

Meena Kandasamy

Sage in the Cubicle

Even your tongue,
Craves for the taste of tears. . .

And you are crying again.
Misery is (you always believe) the only genuine
Emotion and sadness, the way of the real world.

She wouldn’t have any of it.
Sage in the cubicle, healer of sorts.
Three years your junior. She makes soul-talk
Sound as prosaic as aeronautical engineering.

At the end,
Her warning:
‘Stop this right now.’

What will you say of your feeling
Living with a sister who terrorizes
Even manic depressions out of your mind?

(First published in Thanalonline)

Meena Kandasamy

Storming in Tea-cups

“a cup of tea is not a cup of tea. . .
when you make it at twilight,
just for him.”

call it a love potion.
liquid dreams.
scented desire.
wishes boiled to a blend.

three cinnamon pods
the dried darjeeling leaves
milk and pearl-white cream
simmering to a syrup to be filtered.

as you sweat in its vapours
and imagine how the tea tastes
against his lips his teeth his tongue
and the pale pink insides of his throat

as you stir in the sugar
and test a spoonful to see
if it stings and soothes and
stimulates the way you intended

as you pour it into his cup
with eyes mirroring supernovas and
study the desirable brown of the tea

an entire shade
that fits exactly
between the desert sand of your skin
and the date palm of his.

almost the color
of your possible child.

(First published in Kavya Bharati)

Meena Kandasamy

Sun in the Mouth

And the truth scorches and singes
the pink open flesh of your mouth
with its pungent yellow taste, so,
speaking the truth is not so easy
with just one tongue, anyway.

Seeing might have been closest
to truth and as Plotinus said
the eye would not be able to see
the sun if it was itself not sun
and so seeing was understanding.

The Egyptians called the eye
with the circle of the iris
with the pupil in the centre
as the sun in the mouth
and that was their truth.

Cyclops must have had little
to see in this vast world and
deprived of the whole truth
and that was his loss, his tragedy.

Even Argus with all his eyes
couldn't escape in the end.
How much truth, how many eyes
of how many senses would it take
to tell the truth to the lord of the third-eye?

A king of a Tamil temple city
raged mad to know the truth
of the scent of a woman's hair.
Since money bought truth
he made ready, a thousand gold coins.

And a poor poet still married to faith
prayed on to Shiva, the lord of struggling
survivors, lord of births and lives and
deaths, lord of poor poets who gave him
a poem to be sung at the king's court.

A savant there picked a mistake like
peeling the scab of a healed wound
and said that the poem was wrong.
He said that any woman's hair
did not have a natural scent.

The lord of dances and grey ash
and cremation grounds came down
to challenge this stubborn man who
extended his truth, even if the woman
was the consort of the lord.

He would not budge even if the lord
threatened to open his third eye,
the eye in the forehead which would
reduce him to bone-white ashes
as light as the wispiest clouds.
The court cowered in fright. . .

But in arrogance the savant said
a mistake is a mistake
even if it was the lord
of the forehead-eye.

O’ saint-bard and master of many wily words
What do you know of truth or love,
or the scent of a woman’s hair?
On the nights of naked sky and
a fragile quarter moon, my lord,
he of the deep blue throat,
he of the rivers in his hair,
he of the third-eye, comes to me.
Before he tears the blankness
of my womb, before he traces
the length of my spine, the curve
of my thighs, before he strokes
my cheeks, he buries his head
in the thousand and one nights
of my long tresses and he says
it smells like the wind-lost voices
of his childhood summers.

Meena Kandasamy

The Flight of Birds

“a poem should be wordless
as the flight of birds.”
—Archibald Macleish, Ars Poetica.

birds don’t sing in their flight

for them flying is a muse
they compose mid-air
weave agnostic verse
sneering haughtily at our absurdity
as they float over our meaningless mosques and churches
and those patrolled international borders
and other disputed sites
where the guns go bang bang bang all the time
they swing over there losing their birdegos
(ego is difficult to retain in mid-flight)
wondering about and watching men plucking out
and quashing the lives of other men and women and
poor helpless children and they
shed a birdtear or two from there
a birdtear that is lost midway due to heat of some explosion
down below some crazy fanatical bomb detonating
killing instantly the people and the city and the forests
and even the pitiable babybirds who are yet to learn to fly

they contemplate of writing poems
about a bird’s egg charring
before even being boiled and scratch their beaks
unsure if this is a metaphor or simile or other poetic device

o the birds have lots and lots and lots to write about
o their writings will never be banned

they borrow freedom
to write poems in the sky
they come back and
pass it on to us
we take the song only
brutally
but at least we take the song

to take the poem
to unscramble the words from the song and to put it back again
as song so spontaneously that it remains the poem and the song
to remember forever this refrain whose melody haunts us
and to hum that refrain which preserves our sanity
perhaps we need to fly
a trifle aimlessly like birds

or because we are humans
six-sensed creatures with massive egos
and massive superegos and massive egos on the ego

and because of possessing gray matter
what doctors call medulla oblongata
we need to feel with our red hearts
than think with some unlocatable mind

we need to look deeper. . .
into ourselves, into eyes
we need to lose ourselves
then, and only then

the poems will come
silent
wordless
as the flight of birds

(First published in Indian Literature)

Meena Kandasamy

The Gods Wake Up

Another worst things with the Gods is that
They sleep most of the time—
(they don't even dream) .
If you happen to go near heaven:
It is a very noisy boring place.
And all that you get to hear there are—
Thirty three million synchronized godly snores.
(The Goddesses snore too) .

The Gods sleep right through the prayers
Performed by the Brahmins—
(maybe they find it boring) .
Births, Marriages, innumerable yagnas,
Brahmins take the center-stage, all the
Gods skip. Also, "Om" is now obsolete—
a kind of recurring mosquito buzz.
(Besides, Om is ©opyrighted) .

At times, the sleeping celestials do stir.
Gods always get excited over funerals—
(they are kind of necrophilic) .
The loud drums lead the dead to eternal sleep,
Ancient noises herald the escaping life.
This deeper music shakes the skies.
That's when the Gods wake up.
(Just to receive the dead.)

Meena Kandasamy

Their Daughters

Paracetamol legends I know
For rising fevers, as pain-relievers—

Of my people—father's father's mother's
Mother, dark lush hair caressing her ankles
Sometimes, sweeping earth, deep-honey skin,
Amber eyes—not beauty alone they say—she
Married a man who murdered thirteen men and one
Lonely summer afternoon her rice-white teeth tore
Through layers of khaki, and golden white skin to spill
The bloodied guts of a British soldier who tried to colonize her. . .

Of my land—uniform blue open skies,
Mad-artist palettes of green lands and lily-filled lakes that
Mirror all—not peace or tranquil alone, he shudders—some
Young woman near my father's home, with a drunken husband
Who never changed; she bore his beatings everyday until on one
Stormy night, in fury, she killed him by stomping his seedbags. . .

We: their daughters.
We: the daughters of their soil.

We, mostly, write.

(First published in Quarterly Literary Review, Singapore)

Meena Kandasamy

Touch

Have you ever tried meditation?
Struggling hard to concentrate,
and keeping your mind as blank
as a whitewashed wall by closing
your eyes, nose, ears; and shutting out
every possible thought. Every thing.
And, the only failure, that ever came,
the only gross betrayal—
was from your own skin.
You will have known this.

Do you still remember,
how, the first distractions arose?
And you blamed skin as a sinner;
how, when your kundalini was rising,
shaken, you felt the cold concrete floor
skin rubbing against skin, your saffron robes,
how, even in a far-off different realm—
your skin anchored you to this earth.
Amidst all that pervading emptiness,
touch retained its sensuality.
You will have known this.

Or if you thought more variedly, about
taste, you would discount it—as the touch
of the tongue. Or, you may recollect
how a gentle touch, a caress changed
your life multifold, and you were never
the person you should have been.
Feeling with your skin, was
perhaps the first of the senses, its
reality always remained with you—
You never got rid of it.
You will have known this.

You will have known almost
every knowledgeable thing about
the charms and the temptations
that touch could hold.

But, you will never have known
that touch – the taboo
to your transcendence,
when crystallized in caste
was a paraphernalia of
undeserving hate.

(First published in Kavya Bharati)

Meena Kandasamy

We Real Hot

We real hot. We
Ne’er rot. We

Know knack. We
Beat back. We

Shock stars. We
Win wars. We

Ne’er late. We
Fuck Fate.

Meena Kandasamy

We Will Rebuild Worlds

We will rebuild / worlds from shattered glass/ and remnants of holocausts.

Once impaled for our faith / and trained to speak in voiceless whispers / we'll implore / you to produce the list / from hallowed memories / of our people disgraced/ as outcastes / degraded / as untouchable at / sixty-four feet / denied a life/ and livelihood and done to death /

in so many ways it would take / an encyclopedia to describe and steven-spielberg / or some-such-guy to produce the special effects for a blockbuster version /

not just the stories of how/ you charred to death forty-four of our men and women and children / because they asked for handfuls of rice/

electrocuted children to instant death because they played in your well / and other ghastly carnages

but the crimes of passion/
our passion/ your crimes

poured poison and pesticide through the ears-nose-mouth/ or hanged them in public / because a man and a woman dared to love/ and you wanted / to teach / other boys and other girls / the lessons of / how to / whom to / when to / where to / continue their caste lines

and we will refresh your mind with other histories / of how you brutally murdered and massacred our peoples / with the smiling promise of / heaven in the next birth / and in this / a peace that / never belonged.

We will wipe away the / sham of your smiles / that appear and / disappear like commercials on prime time tv / smiles that flash across / botoxed faces / smiles that crease / plucked eyebrows / smiles that are pasted and / plastered to your lips/ smiles that sell yourself / smiles that seek to / sell us into soulless worlds.

We will singe the many skins you wear to the world/ the skins you change at work / the skins called castes and / skins called race / the skins you mend once a week / the skin you bought at a sale/ the skin you thought was yours / the filthy rich stinking skin you thought you could retain at bed.

Shorn of style / and a hypocrisy named / sophistication / there would be nothing for you to do but gape at our combat gears.

We will learn/ how to fight/ with the substantial spontaneity/
with which we first learnt / how to love.

So / now/ upon a future time/
there will be a revolution.

It will begin in our red-hot dreams that surge that/ scorch that / scald that sizzle like lava / but never settle down never / pungently solidify.

It will begin / when the song in the sway/ of our hips/ will lead us to dance and sing/ and stand up straight / put up a pretty fight/ redeem and reclaim/ the essence of our

earth.

It will begin / as our naked bodies / held close together / like hands in prayer / against each other/ like hands in prayer / set to defy the dares the /diktats the years the terms / the threats / that set us apart.

It will begin / as we give names to our children and/ give names to our / inward anger and aches and / name ourselves / with words of fury / like forest fires / with the words of wrath / like stealthy wildcat eyes / that scare the cowards/ in power /away.

It will begin / the way thunder rises in our throats and / we will brandish our slogans with a stormy stress and succeed / to chronicle to / convey the last stories / of our lost and scattered lives.

It will begin / when the oppressors will wince/ every time they hear our voices and their sparkly silence will never be taken for a sacrament.

It will begin when never / resting we will scream / until / our uvulas tear away and our breathless words breathe life to the bleeding dead and in the black magic of our momentary silences / you will hear two questions / India, what is the caste of sperm? / India, what is the cost of life? and the rest of our words will rush/ in this silenced earth / like the rage of a river in first flood.

It will begin / that day when / we will pay /
all that it takes / for the dangerous price of love.

Meena Kandasamy

When the God Drank Milk

This was the second time
He spanned the world
So quickly. . . In telecast
miracles that occurred from
Michigan to Manila to Madras
Whether He was in plastic, ceramic,
Fire-burnt clay or stiff black stone
The Elephant-Headed, the Pot-Bellied,
The Remover of Obstacles, Ganesha,
The God had his fill as he sucked
The spoonfuls of creamy milk. . .

I am not willing to listen to
Capillary Action Rationalism
Or any scientific explorations. . .

Instead I am hunting for some
Silly girl’s bizarre secret, to know if
The Son of Shiva had let himself
To be breastfed, to be suckled. . .
And if she, having tasted success
At His having tasted her,
Moved on to younger,
Charming Gods,
With their mouths
Full of white teeth.

[September 21, 1995.]

Meena Kandasamy

Whispered Intimacies

And I got your words
Today.

I will have them painted
Tonight.

Try to choose
Or take them all.

Glitter on innocent
Raspberry lips that plead
For touch, for closer
Communion.

Composition in coffee
Cream blending with bitter
Chocolate worn on business
Days.

Ravenous red, for fiery
Animals in us, tamed,
By love in dying
Languages.

Colourless words, invisible
But everywhere—Love
Reserved for needy
Nights.

Love, remember the rain
And our fading words
On lonely nights
Drenching—Drizzling—
Straying to a steady
Chatter or studied
Silence.

Remember our
Whispered intimacies
Which still linger on lips.

Remember that some words
Which once beheld promise
Now hold our bodies
In motion.

Meena Kandasamy

Why do The Heroes Die?

Unlike in fairy tales, young heroes die.
All the dazzling princes, strong men of might,
Robinhoods and Messiahs that never lie
Are done to death, Evil winning the fight.

Heroes are bled; not just deprived of life
God turns in his throne, the dead in cold graves
And perhaps death ends the lifetimes of strife.
Is slaughter the prize for not being slaves?

Brave men encounter blows, fight their case,
Leave forsaking the world they came to mend.
'Youth may arise and fill this vacant space'
One faint hope; heroes reach the destined end.

Heroes get their Halos. Applause. Praise.
All glories shine brighter with sacrifice.

(First published in Kritya)

Meena Kandasamy

Work is Worship, or so They Said. . .

Six thirty in the a.m.
And you still have not
Gone to bed.

It is three days
Since you have
Combed your hair.

It is a week
Since you had a bath.

And six weeks
Since your dog had hers.

It is three months
Since you popped
The baby pink multi-vitamins.

It is half a year
Since you met your only best friend.

Woe to your scraggyscornfullistless world
Where the moonlit sky exists only in the grand
Lullabies that one of your grandmothers sang.

(First published in Sweet Magazine, South Africa)

Meena Kandasamy

You Don’t Know if You are Yielding or Resisting

it is the last day of the year
and you think about writing
a farewell poem for the year
that was, for the year you
began writing poetry

you think of the tragedies
you know, you even plan
to write about naming your only
daughter (whenever she is born,
anyway) after a suicide-bomber
you try to think of fear and hate
and some devious defence for all
those sins you had painstakingly
planned to do just so that your
poetry has more life and colour
and verve and in the end it might
appear that you have experience

you strive like mad to avoid writing
poems about your unseen lover,
you concede deep within that you
do not know his name or age or what
he murders for a living, yet he weaves
his way into every poem of yours

you want to write that single poem
which is free of him, which does not
carry the stains of his masculine scent
and which doesn’t make you think of
his hairless chest and the deftness of his
fingers on you and god yes god his eyes
you want to write a poem just for yourself,
a poem where you do not cringe
or stand shame-faced at his
worship of himself and how
silently and steadfastly he
has made you worship him

you have always known that
your knowledge of him was
very limited—that expecting
the stranger to caress you when
you cry is an insane idea—
after all when your lover comes
he has no memory about the
days and months and years he has
spent inside your heart and he does
not wish to hear for how long you
have harboured him right between
your breasts

you notice the clock tick away
and again you give up writing
that poem for it always eludes you

then,

you succumb to all your cravings
and write all you can about him
forgetting the shame and the
embarrassment it would cause
somehow it seems better than
not writing anything at all.

Meena Kandasamy