

Classic Poetry Series

Meena Kandasamy
- 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.

A Poem In Which She Remembers

'We were not lovers, we were love.'—Jeannette Winterson

The woman you once knew
will not own up to her face.

She'll tie her hair in a topknot,
guard its million tangles, skip
kohl that once defined her eyes,
forsake the gypsy jewellery, milk
cigarettes in her mouth, and stop
herself from dancing in the rain.

She'll curse her restless anklets
that break the silence of cruel days,
bury herself under a blanket that
betrays the shame of night hungers,
and sleep herself to a dream
of waking by your side.

She'll write you the daring first lines
of long love-letters she will never
send, struggle to prevent a poem
from forming within her mouth,
and in its place, feed the promises
of your kisses to her eager tongue.

Meena Kandasamy

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 beacons 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

Babies And The Bathwater

On some days of the week
They come up with the lotuses
And greet the first rays of the sun
In all their fresh/flesh/flush pinkness.

Surfacing, as in a pointillist collage,
Speckling the grey-green temple-tank,
They float around like fish-food.
Bloated, just-born, just-dead babies.

In a tight-lipped, time-tested way,
The holy temple removes all traces
Of these floundering ones. Chlorinated,
The bathwater turns pure once more.

□

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

Big Brother: An Epic In Eighteen Episodes

In that Sin City, with its slot machines,
This gaming guy lost all to loaded dice—
His brothers, his bonds, his villas, his wife.

His sanity—untouched by poker dons—
Slipped when he saw his lady leave for work:
A high-heeled item, a stripper queen.

Jailed and exiled, the brothers served their term
plotting slick war that lasted eighteen days
with mafia shootouts on the streets, and then

there were none but the Storyteller and the Slumdog.

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

Celestial Celebrities

because they had established a reputation
of being wild and unrestrained and indiscriminate
when it came to men
because they never bothered
who left sediments in them
because they looked forward to going down
when an opportunity presented itself
because they went dry
when it got muggy and unpleasant
because they froze to frigidity in their beds
when they were in the unlucky lands
of those who had fallen out of favour
because they were rapid in youth
because they mellowed and became maternal
when they met their match
because they followed the jagged, moody course
they chose for themselves
because they loved erosion and erasure
because they threw tantrums and triggered wars
because they lacked secrets and loved catfights
because they held the magic key
to the corridors of power
because they were fond of running off
and running away
the rivers here bear the names
of fallen women exiled to earth
when the heavens found them
too bloody hot to handle
□

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

Dead Woman Walking

i am a dead woman walking asylum corridors,
with faltering step, with felted, flying hair,
with hollowed cheeks that offset bulging eyes,
with welts on my wrists, with creasing skin,
with seizures of speech and song, with a single story
between my sobbing, pendulous breasts.

once i was a wife: beautiful,
married to a merchant: shifty-eyed.
living the life, until he was lost in listless doubt—
of how, what i gave him was more delicious
than whatever, whatever had been given to me.
his mathematics could never explain
the magic of my multiplying love—this miracle—
like materializing mangoes out of thin air,
like dishing out what was never there.

this discrepancy drove him away:
a new job in another city.
he hitched himself to a fresh and formless wife.
of course, as all women do, i found out.

i wept in vain, i wailed, i walked on my head, i went to god.

i sang in praise of dancing dervishes, i made music
for this world to devour on some dejected day.
i shed my beauty, i sacrificed my six senses.
some called me mad, some called me mother
but all of them led me here,
to this land of the living-dead.

□

Meena Kandasamy

Eating Dirt

her famished tongue feasted on dreams
and she catered to its cravings—
green mangoes clay cloying chalk
citrus soap crusty coal raw rice
crushed ice cubes crayons ash
powdered glass pickled garlic
salt sieved rain-scented soil

a son was born, he was fed
and he learnt to feed
soon he was caught eating mud
a son taking after his mother
a son inheriting her tongue

she tied her speechless moon to a millstone
and after some frantic spanking
she saw in his cloudy mouth
the truth of the three worlds—
sand everywhere, everything
turning to sand.

□

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 Rapunzel 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...

Meena Kandasamy

Facing The Music

Your lover was lynched
For one of those readily available reasons.

Too weak for suicide, too mute for murder
You live. Post-traumatically, poetically.
You live as if he has never died.

Shell-shocked, spellbound, your third eye
Clamped shut to keep the nightmare away,
Your blood bears the salt of withheld tears.
Never do you mention that your man—so alive
Even when being set alight—was humbled
Into handfuls of ash and defiant bones.

You turn deaf to face this faulty music,
You sacrifice all sleep to live this fragile dream.
You've sworn to never let him wander out of sight.
You hold him captive in your shattered,
Unwavering world and he, like a flame,
Ceaselessly flickers, so your eyes too dance,
And your moonglow in his ghostly presence
Makes poets sing of how, once upon a time,
Beauty basked in the light of her undying Love.

□

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

Firewalkers

Maari had a one-point goal. Maari had a manic soul.
Maari made her men wage war, with her rapist's blood,
To drench her hair. And then, and then,
As these stories go, Maari with her heart of stone,
Combed her hair with his left thighbone.

Here they are: the dream-chasers, the fire-stampers:
Souls in sweaty soles, the flaming bare feet
Of men and women (and also, those between) .
Here, the blood-splattered, whip-wrapped ones,
flaunting starry, self-flagellation scars.
Hollering here, the flashes of mortified flesh—
steel hooks piercing stretched skin;
skewers drilled through trembling tongues,
sometimes bridging cheeks, sometimes sealing lips.
Here, the hearts beat in answer to hysterical drumming.
Here, the bleeding is blessed.

And here, for Maari, the pain is prayer enough.

Meena Kandasamy

Flesh Finds A Form Of Address

Gathering flowers for another garland,
Anorexic Andal flaunts
Her freshness before Thirumal.

Lying on her back—waiting
To be full, filled and fulfilled—
Mira sings a siren-song
To summon Krishna.

Emerging from the river—
Tying her hair in a top-knot,
Akka Mahadevi rehearses
Crushing Shiva on her pitcher breasts.

The Hindu He-poet too dreams
Of his goddess: Her breasts, to him,
Are golden globes, and
Cone-shaped copper vessels, and
Big as the mount Meru, and
Grown so heavy they threaten
Her slender, creeper-like waist.
Eyes crinkled to a close, he chants
Her praise, he sees lights. He wakes up,
Drool and morning wood in place,
And calls this beautiful goddess,
'Mother.'

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 spectacted 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

Jouissance

An angry philosopher froze
His philandering wife—Passivity
As punishment for promiscuity.
Rendered senseless, set in stone,
She stared in unceasing surprise
As her sagely husband toured
The world with his treatises on
What pleasure meant to women
And a powerpoint presentation
That showed close-up photos
Of her fixed phantom face.

He painstakingly pointed out
The moment of arrival of ecstasy
In the stone-dead statue—
A coming that was a curse.
A coming, he claimed, like that
Of mortified mystics, which
She would never know.

Other women grasped the game.
They knew no man would ever
Let them be, ever set them free.
So, when asked, they answered
With wide-eyed wonder
Yes yes yes o yes yes yes
O yes yes yes yes yes yes

Meena Kandasamy

Lady Justice

You are sad and you start out sluggishly,
Shedding your gypsy skirts and learning
To dress up in gold and Valentino gowns.

You are playing Patience to pass the time
And you believe every feud has to die out
When the fighters die. You wait for that.

You later learn it does not work this way.
Sitting still in a songless court, you watch
Backlogs and bribes and middlemen grow.

You are unfazed by all the hard work that
Sob stories demand and so you dictate your
Judgments by picking out from a tarot deck.

You give the Ten of Swords to the woman
Paraded naked and to the gang-raped girl.
Self-defeating, dangerous if they ever won.

The Five of Pentacles to a labourer duped
Of her lifetime's savings and that old trader
Who wears his losses like a brass talisman.

Finally, you hand out the Three of Swords
For a habeas corpus from a maudlin ex-king
Looking for his kidnapped princess-bride.

Your courtroom turns to an ominous circus.
Two shows everyday, entry free. As the
High Priestess you let hope elope with justice.

The rebellious righteous unite against you.
You are handed a Hanged Man and bathed
In bullets. Your sinuous body is cast in stone,

And, to make sure that you never turn blind
Or bored, or fall asleep, each plaintiff applies
A paste of bloodred chillies on your open eyes.

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.

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

Maariamamma

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 Maariamamma,
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

Martyr

A militant, whom my lines
cannot hold whom my lips
cannot kiss whom my eyes
cannot hide whom my memory
cannot mark with a date
of birth or even death.

No knowledge of her village
laid waste, then displaced and
no mention of her songs
seeking to seize a state and
no sigh of a red star where
she had stashed her dreams.

In this book of martyrs
only that blood-drenched
story in three bold words:
'One Woman Comrade'
to say she died fighting
for the people.

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

Massacre Of The Innocents

indra, chief vedic deity and
inspirational hate-monger.

indra, who went to work
inside diti's womb, afraid
she would mother the other,
the demons...

indra who butchered
her fetus into forty-nine bits,
so that, as the legend goes, they
were reborn as wailing winds.

indra. indra. narindra.
the hindu god of war.

herod merely chopped up male kids
in bethlehem, hitler only gassed
jewish infants in germany, and
the peacekeepers just dipped
tamil babies in boiling tar
in eelam...

but indra indra narendra alone
perfected this science of slaughter,
killing children of the other
before they were even
born.

indra. indra. narendra.
the genocidal god of gods.

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

Moon-Gazers

Fifteen, lost in a room
Full of children learning Hindi poetry
For an approaching exam. In a nasal bass
The teacher speaks of some besotted bird
That watches the moon every moment of the night...

I stand up and ask,
What does that bird do on new moon nights?
Peeved by what she thinks is impudence,
The teacher says the bird watches my face.
The class turns all at once, stares at me.
Ashamed, I shrink, I sit.

Twenty-two, lost in any space,
I restlessly seek the strength
Of his shoulders and I hunt
Like a hungry beast to catch a glimpse
Of my coal-black lover, and I crave to look once more
Into his limitless eyes where I sank and never surfaced.

As I desolately count each passing hour,
I become that moon-gazing bird on new moon nights,
I sing the saddest songs of all time, I never ask questions...

Meena Kandasamy

ancy

She thought she was dying—ants crawled
under her flaking skin, migraines visited her
at mealtimes, her tender-as-tomato breasts
bruised to touch, her heart forgot its steady beat.
Floundering at forty, she twisted safety pins
into spirals, chewed on pencil-ends, tore down
calendars, became a hurricane about the house.
That wetness, with its lunar reek, never came.

Her monthly drip had disappeared.
Her no-money man was back home by then—
ditched and duped by his dancer mistress.
She forgave that bitch, buried the bad blood
between, gave him her anklet of rubies to sell
and begin some business with. He went.
A week later, she received his body bag
With the executioner's seal on the toe tag.

She stormed the palace, flung her other anklet
at the bloody throne. The royals too saw the red.
The king died of shame, the queen died of shock.
On the edge, Ms. Militancy bayed for more blood.
Vending vengeance, she made a bomb
of her left breast and blew up the blasted city.
Long after that land had turned to ashes,
the rest of her plucked breast bled.

Watching that breast sprout back from its roots,
the lone woman learnt to outgrow her loss.
When the scars no longer showed and
the faraway sea could be smelt between her legs,
she dissolved in a mist of aftersmoke.

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

Nailed

Men are afraid of any woman who makes poetry and dangerous portents. Unable to predict when, for what, and for whom she will open her mouth, unable to stitch up her lips, they silence her.

Her pet parrot developed an atrocious fetish for the flesh of sacrificial goats, so, Kulamaayi was bolted within a box and dropped in the Kaveri.

She teased and tormented his celibacy, so Miss Success-Village was thrown into a well by a wandering socialite-godman.

She was inaccessible and unattainable, so, Durga was put in an iron trunk that settled on a riverbed and even the men and women who tried to approach her were informed in a prerecorded voice that she was out of reach and network range and coverage area.

She was an outcast who had all the marks of a fiery orator who would some day run for parliament, so, a nail was driven into her head on the instructions of her brahmin fiancé and her coffin was set adrift in a wailing river.

She was black and bloodthirsty, so, even Kali found herself shut inside her shrine.

They were considerably low-risk, so most other women were locked up at home.

□

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 Kritiya)

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)

Meena Kandasamy

Not That One

Find me another word
that is not so ready. I want
a word that waits and weeps
and hesitates, that knows
of other words I kill, and
grows afraid to take its place.
Find me a word that has heard
of a woman afraid of losing a man
she does not have, find me a word
that flinches at the thought of being
trapped, a word that shows me
stealing time, not men.
Find me a word that is not so safe.
A word for a woman in a forest
to wake up with, a woman who
knows heat and long silences
and sleepless nights, a woman
who works with only words.
Not love, dear poet.
Find me another word. □

Meena Kandasamy

Once My Silence Held You Spellbound

You wouldn't discuss me because my suffering
was not theoretical enough. Enough. Enough.
Enough. Now I am theoretical enough.
I am theatrical enough.

I have learnt all these big big words.
I can use them with abandon.
I can misuse them. I can refuse them.
I can throw them about and one day,
I can throw them out.
I am the renegade who can drop
these multi-syllable monsters
for studied, stylistic effect.
I am the rebel who can drop them altogether.
I invent new ones every passing day.
FYI, OED consults me. Roget's Thesaurus
finds it tough to stay updated.

But because I use these bedeviled words
the way you use me never means
that I have stopped seething in anger
that I have stopped swearing.

Meena Kandasamy

ONE-Eyed

the pot sees just another noisy child
the glass sees an eager and clumsy hand
the water sees a parched throat slaking thirst
but the teacher sees a girl breaking the rule
the doctor sees a case of medical emergency
the school sees a potential embarrassment
the press sees a headline and a photofeature

dhanam sees a world torn in half.
her left eye, lid open but light slapped away,
the price for a taste of that touchable water.
□

Meena Kandasamy

Passion Becomes Piety

the guilt-glazed love lay on andal's breasts,
thick and heavy as him.

frightened with force
and locked away, she conjured him every night.
her emperumaan, her emperor-man.

recklessness on speed-dial, she became
a rape romantic. he, a bodice ripper.

their bootleg shadows
burst out with the sun. people pointed fingers
at parted curtains, a scandal of shape-shifters.

her hair undone, silver-grey lips, skipped meals,
and nightmares of a thousand elephants...

she learned to nurse
every rumour like a love-bite. in her defence,
she said her darling was a deity.

they sent her packing to spend time with him
murder as marriage, execution as consummation.

nothing survived them...
only her poems which celebrated those fucks
he doled out for her frantic devotion.

□

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 Kritiya)

Meena Kandasamy

Princess-in-Exile

Scorned, she sought refuge in spirituality,
and was carried away by a new-age guru
with saffron clothes and caramel words.
Years later, her husband won her back
but by then, she was adept at walkouts,
she had perfected the vanishing act.

□

Meena Kandasamy

Random Access Man

His voice-balloons always came out
Empty as hiccups—He was not a husband
who shared his secrets. He was not a husband
who shared his spoonful either—on
cold nights he played Gandhi
to her waiting wife's body.

Denial aroused desire and
lust rolled on her breasts,
lust rode her hips.

Sure that he would never come
she sent her dickhead husband
on a wild-goose chase—Get me
the testicle of a golden deer,
she said, get me its musk
so we can rouse your manhood.

She picked herself a random man
for that first night of fervour.
This one was all hands and
all heads and he spoke only
in whispers. He taught her
her tongue. First he named
the word for her womb and
the word for her waters and
she devoured every word and
within her another woman
arose, hot and forever
hungry.

By the time she left
this stranger's lap
she had learnt
all about love.
First to last.
Mamasita.

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

Sangharsh Karna Hai

here, the hurried truth:
day after day after day
of battling death and
keeping him at bay
you became the star
taking struggle in her stride
and we became the body
breaking free, we became
the scream cutting loose
from the curse of silence,
we became the protest
that poured like blood
from a wounded night
and learning from you,
we became the flesh
that became the fight.

Meena Kandasamy

Screwtiny

For an affair:

Trust any man who is allergic to children,
Carries a civil war in his eyes, travels a lot
And speaks up when you are subjected
To society's customary stone-throwing—
This hero has a history of scandals.
He keeps secrets like slave-girls.
Trust this man to never let you down,
Or stand you up, even if it involves
Rising from the dead. Amen.

For marriage:

Trust a man only after you have dunked
His head in buckets of freezing water.
Trust all the truth spilling out of him
When you have slipped, like soap on skin,
Rusty pins under his toe-nails. Eyes wide open
Trust him as you take him on an electric dance
That makes his penis sing. Test him to trust him.
Detest him to trust him. Trust a man through faith
In all forms of torture, which is how men trust each other.

Meena Kandasamy

Six hours of chastity

The day dies abruptly.

Nalayani, most chaste of womankind,
Carries the basket-case of a husband
To his favorite prostitute's place.

She sits in a veranda of the brothel and
Someone who saunters in mistakes the devout
Wife to be a mistress of guilt, a woman of night.

She plays along, she pretends to this visiting stranger,
This wayfaring man, who suffers and seeks salvation
By day, but wants to buy a willing woman for the night.

The second seems as different, and as indifferent, and
As she acts out a whore, money is a matter of ritual,
Shining, it appears at her side. Enter the third man.

Spice vendor, smelling of sweat on cinnamon bark,
Six-fingered on each hand. A wife for every finger
On the right, a city to stop at, for fingers on the left.

The next is lean as a knife, he wears black. At eighteen
It is a rite of passage. He twists. He turns. He shuts
His eyes as he thinks he soars and spills. Exit the fourth.

To increase the number of his sins against recoiling skin,
To drown his sorrow and his loss, to fight the knaves
Who make him what he is, in walks the gambler.

“After the fifth man, every woman becomes a temple.”

In the darkest-hour before dawn, the priest enters there,
Enters her, to make love to her leftovers, fidgeting in his
Guilt and cowardice, like the clinking of holy cymbals.

And the sun is born into the arms of a defiled night. . .

Six men, one for every hour of night.

A waiting angel, she picks up her husband,
(Who lies, clay-like and clumsy in his basket)
Not bothered to serve out spite or spew her hate.

Six men, one for every hour of night.
And on the way home, as his weight cuts her
Shoulder blades, she laughs and cries and laughs
Again, at the lightness of her burden, the end of fate.
□

Meena Kandasamy

Speech Comes After Swallowing

after many afternoons on my knees
i pinned him down to lychee
with a woody waft of liquorice.
but centuries into servitude
how does a language taste and
tabulate another mighty one?

does this tongue feel under stubborn flesh,
the haste and hardness of the other?
learn to fight its reflexes against force?
do power yoga, twisting/turning,
twisting/turning, twisting/turning?
does it read and research forbidden
fetishes? wait for the sacred wetness?
or does it grow dry too soon?

pleasure-filled, does it clap to applaud,
squeal in delight, or, take shelter
in open-lipped, vowel-based,
aspirated exclamation?

does it remember the trips it took
across this terrain of shape?
does it dream of choices?

does it matter at all, to these tired tongues,
that in one sucking, long-dead language
semen was named after
the swallowing?

□

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

Straight Talk

Everyone speaks of him.

Hands dancing in air
they gush about the power
of his words his flourishes
of rhetoric his direct approach
his raw reproach his felicity in
ferocious Tamil his three hours in
the sweltering heat rousing
angry young man rally speeches
that make men out of mice and
marauding wildcats out of men
fiery speeches that subvert and
overturn and unseat and revolt
spontaneous speeches that unsettle
states and strongmen and sinister
systems of caste and speeches that
seek to settle scores delivered in
his voice that makes skyscrapers
fall to their knees

He is the greatest orator
in our language today, they say.

I wonder at how easily led people are.

Even I loved his speeches best,
until, one day, seven years ago,
I fell in love with the many registers of his silences.

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

Sunset At Siem Reap

Looking lost between clouds
this sun is not the lone one
I know from home, the big one
who takes up all the evening sky,
the red one who free falls over tenements,
the drama queen who dips in to dirty
waters when done for the day.
The sun I've known is a star.
Here, this paid-to-perform sun
stays still, delays disappearance,
does not sink until you tame it
into your sonnet about tourists
who trap the sunset with their toys.
Packed into a poem on the spot,
Your sun still slowly enters mine and
I too write of foreign, fading light.
Sunset at Siem Reap. A poem
from the comfort of a strange
land, this guilt trip for words
I failed to find at home.

Meena Kandasamy

The Belt-Bomb Girl's Suicide Note

The King had sent captains of the army...
Their sins and their lawlessness, I'll remember
No more. I have blotted out, like a thick cloud,
Your transgressions, and like a cloud, your sins.

My strength is made perfect in weakness,
There is but a step between me and death.
I'll be exalted among the nations,
I'll be exalted in the earth.

I'll never leave you nor forsake you.
Today, you'll be with me in Paradise.
I am the way. Do business till I come.
I am the way. Follow me.

Where there is no tale-bearer, strife ceases.

This is the middle way, this is the eightfold path
This is the way to the end of suffering.

Right view

Right view is the precursor of the entire path.
Right view provides the right practice.
Right view leads to a virtuous life.
Right view comes at the end of the path.
Right view requires you to know
that the dying always look up to the sky
and therefore you must get ready to shell hospitals.

Right intention

Birth is suffering, aging is suffering,
Sickness is suffering, death is suffering,
Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief
and despair are suffering,
Association with the unpleasant is suffering,
Separation from the pleasant is suffering,

Not to get what one wants is suffering.
For the instant cessation of their suffering
Right intention requires the carpet bombing
Of the fleeing masses.□

Right speech

Right speech is about the absence of wrong speech.
Abstain from falsehood, abstain from slander,
Abstain from harsh speech, abstain from idle chatter.
Speech can break lives and start wars,
so its best to pull out of the peace talks.

Right action

Right action means refraining from unwholesome deeds
that occur with the body as their main means
of expression. Do not take life,
Do not take what is not given,
Do not indulge in sexual misconduct.
The celibate Buddha and his monks
never spilled any semen and it is our bounden duty
to make up for that by raping every woman in sight.

Right livelihood

The Buddha mentions five kinds of livelihood
which bring harm to others that must be avoided.
The first tells one to avoid dealing in weapons
so please get India and China to gift those toys.

Right effort

Right effort requires a wholesome form of energy.
Dispelling dullness calls for a special effort
to arouse energy through the visualization
of a brilliant ball of light or reflection on death.
For desire, a remedy of general application
is meditation on impermanence to knock away
the underlying property of clinging.
To get rid of dullness let light into the lives
of your enemies through luminous bombs

and to get rid of their desire for one another
bulldoze their bunkers and this will be the last time
they cling to each other.

Right mindfulness

The first step in right mindfulness involves
the contemplation of the body and the last step
in the mindfulness of the body involves a series
of cemetery meditations which necessitates dreaming
of death and decomposition of the human body.
Meditate on the mass graves in Chemmani and Mullivaikkal.

Right concentration

Right concentration implies seclusion
from sensual pleasures and reining in the unruly mind.
Right concentration is achieved through training
so work hard to estimate the exact amount of napalm
Or white phosphorous for sky-showers
To grant nirvana to the Tamil people,
For blessed are they who get to breathe
The Laughing Buddha's Laughing Gas.

□

□

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

ThisPoemWillProvokeYou

This poem is not a Hindu.
This poem is eager to offend.
This poem is shallow and distorted.
This poem is a non-serious representation of Hinduism.
This poem is a haphazard presentation.
This poem is riddled.
This poem is a heresy.
This poem is a factual inaccuracy.
This poem has missionary zeal.
This poem has a hidden agenda.
This poem denigrates Hindus.
This poem shows them in poor light.
This poem concentrates on the negative aspects of Hinduism.
This poem concentrates on the evil practices of Hinduism.
This poem asserts its moral right to use objectionable words for Gods.
This poem celebrates Krishna's freedom to perch on a naked woman.
This poem flames with the fires of a woman hungry of sex.
This poem supplies sexual connotations.
This poem puts the phallus back into the picture.
This poem makes the shiva lingam the male sexual organ.
This poem does not make the above-mentioned organ erect.
This poem prides itself in its perverse mindset.
This poem shows malice to Hinduism for Untouchability and misogyny.
This poem declares the absence of a Hindu canon.
This poem declares itself the Hindu canon.
This poem follows the monkey.
This poem worships the horse.
This poem supersedes the Vedas and the supreme scriptures.
This poem does not culture the jungle.
This poem jungles the culture.
This poem storms into temples with tanks.
This poem stands corrected: the RSS is BJP's mother.
This poem is not vulnerable.
This poem is Section 153-A proof.
This poem is also idiot-proof.
This poem quotes kar.
This poem considers Ramayana a hetero-normative novel.
This poem breaches Section 295A of the Indian Penile Code.
This poem is pure and total blasphemy.

This poem is a voyeur.
This poem gossips about the sex between Sita and Laxman.
This poem is a witness to the rape of Shurpanaka.
This poem smears Rama for his suspicious mind.
This poem was once forced into suttee.
This poem is now taking her revenge.
This poem is addicted to eating beef.
This poem knows the castes of all the thirty-three million Hindu Gods.
This poem got court summons for switching the castes of Gods.
This poem once dated Karna who was sure he was no test-tube baby.
This poem is not curious about who-was-the-father.
This poem is horizontally flipped.
This poem is a plagiarised version.
This poem is selectively chosen.
This poem is running paternity tests on Hindutva.
This poem saw Godse (of the RSS) kill Gandhi.
This poem is not afraid of being imprisoned.
This poem does not comply to client demands.
This poem is pornographic.
This poem will not tender an unconditional apology.
This poem will not be Penguined.
This poem will not be pulped.

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

Untitled Love

and perhaps,

because we only met in secret
and shielded by darkness,

he hesitates—whenever i ask him
to bring our love to light.

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 Kritiya)

Meena Kandasamy

Why She Writes Of Her Love

~ with submissive indrawn breath on nights that smell of freshcut red, she writes
of a love to which her language denied even words ~

love, he squeeze-spliced into seven types
and threw the two crooked corners away.
ar mapped moods on zones—
meet and mate by mountains, wait within
forests, sulk in pastures, pine away close
to the coast, and desert in deserts. by order.

What came of the margins missing in action?
at first the colonel outlawed unrequited love.
labelled it defected, subnormal, unfit for men
who were men. then at last he crushed
the red-hot rebellion of the rainbow border,
never letting May mix with December, or,
the rich with the poor, or the high with the low.
every mismatch was malady.

Was no country for old men or old women.
sugar daddies and cougars were banished and
the hunchbacked and the handicapped found
themselves in this lacklustre blocklove list.
the rulebook forbade poets to patronize them.
no history—no hyperlinks—no tv—no twitter
no news of this love being refused redemption.
this love, for twisted souls; this love, the lost cause.

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.

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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