

MANA



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 2 (ISSN 2454 -9495)

JANUARY 2018

(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

MEENA ALEXANDER

INDIAN OCEAN BLUES

L'hibiscus qui n'est pas autre chose qu'un oeil éclaté

Aimé Césaire, Corps Perdu



1. Solitaire

I have numbered these pages
And find the ground very uneven.

In springtime I take off my sandals
And run freely.



Except for mud and shards of flint
I do fine.

It's a door I am looking for -- painted white,
Just like those old walls.

2. Dérive

I dream of a shack by the river's edge
And keep walking.
It takes me a day and a night
And still another day.

On West 34th I hear birds Warbling
inside a skyscraper. Murmuring the
name of the goddess I hop over
mounds of waste paper

Black plastic bags have split. I
touch a cairn, ancient
Bewildered stone.
Is this where the buffalo leapt?

Bones, spittle, blue-fish,
Couches with polyester fillings
Waves of sulphur
Where the homeless slept.

North of nowhere,
I hide in Isham woods.

3. Inwood Sita

Sita bathed in sand.
By wildwort



And willowherb
Fire starts—

Dry ground cracks,
Swallows her whole.
Sita- found- in- a- field
Fled to Inwood.

Rama cast her out,
Lava storms cooled her
Dirt cloaked her,
A shimmering stole.

Days later, on Dyckman Street
As cobbles crack
She slips into a manhole,
Waves at me.

4. Shook Silver

I was a child on the Indian Ocean.
Deck-side we dance in a heat- haze,
Toes squirm under silver wings.
Under burlap someone weeps .

Amma peers out of the porthole,
Sari stitched with bits of saffron,
Watch out for flying fish
She cries.

Our boat is bound for Africa.
They have goats and cows just like us,
Also snakes that curl
Under the frangipani tree.



Remember what grandmother said?
If you don't keep that parasol
Over your head
You'll turn into a little black girl.

Where is she now,
Child crossing the livid sea?
Older now,
I must speak to the shadows.

5. Fermata

He rode the waves,
Jungli- man with bits of silver on his eyes
Head poked with horns,
His arms were cut.

Bras Coupé!
I yelled. All amma could see
Buried under a blanket as waves rose
Was my black tousled head.

In dreams I was a child
With hands lopped off.
What had I done?
No one knew.

As the steamer floated to Aden
They shot gulls
From the cliffs
Those Englishmen --

Their bullets flew,
Struck a boy



Herding goats on high
Rocks by the reddening sea.

6. Udistanam

Piercings of sense,
Notes lashing time
Ecstatic self hidden
In the ship's hold

'I' legible
Solely in darkness:
Shot flames,
Anchorage of divinity.

On the South Indian coast
In eighth century heat
Tiruvalla copper plate
Marked the morning hour

Before the sea clamored
And the shadow of the body
Lay twelve feet longer
Than Sita herself,

Littoral burning
With sacred fires -- passage
To a kingdom beyond
The peepul trees.

Where are those refugees
Amma did not want me to see,
Gunny sacks and torn saris
Stitched together with cord?



Breath of my breath, bone
Of my bone, dark god
Of the Nilgiris,
Who will grant them passage?

7. Tarawad

You find this hard to believe:
I am a creature of house and home
Bound by a cord of blood --
Wild grasses blazed, nettles turned

Their stalks to the setting sun.
I was born to a house with red tiled roof,
Courtyard where sunbirds drew Glittering
beaks across mulberry bark,

Pond where koi crawled
Then shot into light, circling
The mouth of the lotus bloom.
House of mist and stone,

Unseen umbilicus
That tethered me
Even as the ocean
Swept on and on.

Going, going, gone!

Someone banged the gavel.
Hearing the house was sold
She lay down in the mango grove
And stopped her eyes with stones,



Crazy girl, inconsolable!
Where is she now?
Where is the path where laburnum
Dropped its liquid gold,

Casurinas flashed green needles into flints?
Jamun and jacaranda trees chopped.
Down into the hole
He went the priest in white robes

Singing praises
To the Lamb of God.

Tor of fragments,
Blunt pinnacle of longing

What becomes of houses torn down?
In the room where she slept

Milk trickles
Syllables swarm, lacking a script

Door jamb stuck to emptiness

Threshold split from walls.

8. Lyric Ego

Muslin and lavender
Under mosquito nets,
Nothing to hold -- just drops of blood
From an ancestral sword.



9. Elemental

*Restore to the imagination
Its correct borders via the ineffable.*

I write this
In my notebook.

Nothing happens.

See what we have done to water?

Even fish brains have Prozac
You whisper.

10. Human Geography

Out of the belly of stone
India pours,
Wild grass is torn
From its roots.

On broken rock
Your face is etched in shadow.
Is this what love does --
Sempiternal marking?

11. Song Lines

One sea
Leads to another
(O mirror drunk with salt)
Also to that dreamless sleep



Where all seas start.
On this North American coast
Birch trees swallow the wind
Ranunculus petals tumble

In the heat of spring.
We shut our eyes to the glare
Stumble into the hole
Where Sita lay:

Eye of heaven, earth's soul.
After the trepidation of rocks
After burst blood vessels
Will fields of saxifrage

And selfheal bloom?
Girls gather in sunlight,
Perch on a fault-mass
Combing out their hair.

12. Dwelling

Where the ground shakes
I set my tent.
We cannot know ourselves ever.
I write this on your sleeve,

Fold the cotton over.
Sweet sunlight—
What swans found
In their last flight.



13. Syncopation

Be fearless with density
You whisper to me
It too is an accumulation of longing,
A sideways swipe at the stars.

We are leaving one
Language for the other,
Always and ever – What
crossing enjoins.

Waves of hope,
Bitter notes plucked from sea foam,
Beauty's tribulation,
Virus of the possible,

Arco of love
Slow fingering of desire,
Our saris packed
Into one battered suitcase

Old leather rinsed
With moonlight as underwater
Continental plates clash
And on a sodden deck

He rises,
Cloaked in amaranth petals
A big man, his wounds
Molten.

What spills



From his lips?
Can Krishna
Hear him calling?

14. Aura

Lost children
Cradle flying fish
In their palms --
Torn metal turns into harps

From Meena Alexander's *Atmospheric Embroidery*, (Hachette, India 2015; new expanded edition forthcoming Tri-Quarterly Books/ Northwestern University Press, 2018)

Note: I had my fifth birthday on the steamer S.S.Jehangir which was taking us from Bombay to Port Sudan. From the age of five to the age of eighteen (when I left for my studies in England) each year I travelled back and forth across the Indian Ocean. Aimé Césaire's *Cahier de Retour au Pays Natal*, and his *Corps Perdu* have been so powerful for me. Time and again, I could hear the waves beat in his lines. One sea, leads to another. In the course of working on my poem I listened to music, including Vijay Iyer's Solo which gave me inspiration, solace, a thread of time to mark my words against. The Ramayana story of Sita cast out by her lordly husband Rama (the earth tore open to give her refuge) was something I grew up with. I imagine Sita in the northern reaches of Manhattan. Two words in Malayalam -- *udisthanam* (foundation) often used to evoke the sacred, *tarawad* (ancestral house). My thanks to Quincy Troupe Black Renaissance/ Renaissance Noire for his friendship and his patience with my writing process as I tried to evoke these scattered geographies.



Meena Alexander was born in Allahabad, India. She was raised in south India and Sudan. She earned a BA at Khartoum University and a PhD at Nottingham University. She is the author of numerous collections of poetry, including *Birthplace with Buried Stones* (2013), PEN Open Book Award–winner *Illiterate Heart* (2002), and *House of a Thousand Doors* (1988). In her poetry, which has been translated into several languages, Alexander explores migration, trauma, and reconciliation. Her prose includes the memoir *Fault Lines* (1993, expanded in 2003), the novels *Manhattan Music* (1997) and *Nampally Road* (1991), the essay collections *Poetics of Dislocation* (2009) and *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience* (1996), as well as the critical studies *Women in Romanticism: Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Shelley* (1989) and *The Poetic Self: Towards a Phenomenology of Romanticism* (1979). She is the editor of *Indian Love Poems* (2005). Her honors include grants and fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, National Endowment for the Humanities, Fulbright Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, National Council for Research on Women, Arts Council of England, and New York Foundation for the Arts, as well as the South Asian Literary Association’s Distinguished Achievement Award in Literature. Alexander has taught at the University of Hyderabad, Columbia University, the City University of New York Graduate Center, and Hunter College.