

*Nandini Manjrekar*

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I never really knew him, although his words  
 Came to life from Father's shiny long-playing records  
 Every evening in my years of growing up.  
 His signature embossed on the cover of each book  
 In the set of collected works – so many twins in a nautilus shell,  
 Emerging one by one in the long summer evenings.

Mother reading to us, her half-breed brood,  
 Images of love and longing she imagined  
 We would never know, taking us to different places and times,  
 Names that sounded like they came from another country,  
 A language of indefinite approximation.  
 Her voice twilight soft,  
 Holding back a sigh here and a sob there:  
 Wistful sorrow in the last letter of an abandoned wife,  
 The warm lilt in the voice of the man from Kandahar,  
 A dying boy by the window, laughing with his little flower-girl friend,  
 The postmaster coping with the everyday inanities of village life,  
 A young man torn between love and revolution.  
 “Every emotion”, Mother told us,  
 “Every sensation of human existence,  
 The poet captured them all for us:  
 Passion, grief, the changing seasons, the land, the river.”

In the morning, she sang his songs in the kitchen;  
 In the evening, standing by the window.  
 The Arabian Sea swallowing a sun that only ever rose

Over paddy fields, palash trees, blue-green rivers,  
 East and west, west-east in fervent embrace.  
 Lines from his poems and songs her philosophical punctuation:  
 Upset by a son's tantrum, a daughter staying out too late,  
 A husband's indifference, a news story of a young bride  
 Burnt for dowry, a village submerged in a dam-burst...  
 Every emotion.  
 But I in my youth having neither  
 The fortitude of his heroines, nor their histories,  
 Remained a stranger to this poetic sorcery.  
 His garlanded portrait, beautiful face of a patrician poet,  
 The distant look – failed to move me.  
 Romance hedonistic and godless, a body not demure nor strong,  
 Books the stuff of escape, words, not hues of lilac and cerise,  
 But like the copper and steel in which they were noisily cast  
 In dark humid rooms.  
 In the magic of discovery: not the quiver of a lip,  
 The barbet's song, the river's swaying moods.  
 A century later, the cold unmaking of humanity.  
 Steel and copper, grime and dust, the odour of labouring bodies.  
 Everywhere the metallic stench of blood,  
 The crackling of broken glass underfoot,  
 Women's cries for mercy circling dead smokestacks.  
 Starved for words, searching in the poet's gaze  
 A way to speak about loss.  
 The agnostic asks his question, hard and direct,  
 Lyric extinguished by the sword  
 On this evil day:  
 "Canst Thou forgive the outrages of the night?"  
 Sad melodies of uncertain metre, the boatman's cries in the sky,  
 Young girls dancing in the first rain, the widow's silent tears,

Green, brown, coral and gold from a faraway land.  
Memories of evenings, kitchens, youthful transgressions,  
Newspaper stories in inky plaintive notes,  
A palette of moods etched in remembrance.  
History returns  
Searching for every emotion.

**Nandini Manjrekar** is a Professor at the School of Education, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. She lives between this mega city and a smaller one in western India, when she is not traveling elsewhere. Apart from her academic interests, she is interested in music, writing and photography, to which she hopes to give more time in the coming years. Her writing has been published in *Caesurae* and *Hakara*. Currently she has no pets, but would like to have some because she knows they would bring cheer in dark times.