

The Road to Thottapally

by
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*Sometimes I call myself Renjini,
at other times I choose Usha, shorter
to my breath, easier on my tongue.*

*It depends on what I feel,
who I'm with
or just the time of day.*

*But when I set out on my journey
changing names was not my intent
nor deceit a plan of the mind.*

*Such deviousness was never
a part of me.
All I wanted was a job,
some means to send my mother*

*a hundred rupees or so once in a way.
So when the Village Officer
promised to get me into*

*the Alleppey Government Hospital,
my heart beat faster
than ever I could recall*

*and I was even happier
than when our first calf
was born to Lakshmi,*

*brown, with one ear wrinkled
like a dry jack-leaf. That
was long ago, when I was smaller*

*I
and my mother stronger.
Lakshmi was soon sold off
and her little one taken away too*

*when I was off at school,
rubbing away from my nails
the Cutex we had found
on the sandy path,*

*smearing its crimson promise
onto my green skirt*

*the uniform of our government
school.*

*But when I set out that bright day
my skirt was not green
but of a sheen more exotic,*

*a kind of silk, the clothseller said,
and which the tailor near
the ration shop,
felt, rubbed, sniffed; confirmed its
worth.*

*Into my plastic airbag with its white
aeroplane angled upwards, my
mother
helped me pack two more skirts,*

*not as fashionable, though,
three blouses with puffed sleeves,
two bras, white cotton,*

*a towel with a line of green
as border, and some fine cloth
to absorb the flow on those days*

*when I oughtn't to go to the temple.
My mother saw us off
at the crowd-choked municipal bus
stand*

*at the hour the astrologer said
was auspicious, a harbinger
of good times,
and she cried, of course,*

*not loudly but with quivering mouth
and thin streaks of tears
that coursed down her scale-hard
cheeks.*

*I wept, too, even though I knew
the money I'd soon send would
make her a little happier*

*and give her much to tell
the neighbours.*

*I sat on the Ladies Only side of the
bus
and kept staring at my mother*

*as the mist of dust and exhaust smoke
rose up all round her and hid her
finally from my tear-caged eyes.*

*The Village Officer sat far behind
in the last row, near the huge spare
tyre
and the frayed gunnysacks of copra.*

*Beside me was an old woman with
crinkly hair
burnished like old silver lamps
who said she was getting off too*

*at Haripad. In the white heat of noon
we didn't talk much, lulled
by the shimmer of the freshly
tarred road.*

*But when we reached our stop
she hurried off without
even a goodbye.*

*Perhaps she was afraid of
missing her son.*

*We stopped at the Jena Hotel for tea.
His was strong and dark, mine
sweet and milky. I didn't dare tell*

*him I liked my tea strong
as I always commanded my mother
to make it. The waiter stared at me*

*and so did the potbellied man
who sat on the other side. I looked
out of the window, between sips.*

*The sand on the ridge where
the roadmen
were working was a pale brown,
bleached
in the heat, gritting their sweat-
cooled
armpits.*

*Each bus that swerved by threw up
a nimbus of dust that separated me
from the fuzzy row of passengers,*

*some nodding in sleep,
some peering out of
the windows. Some of the dust floated
over to my glass, settling
on the flotsam of tea. He paid the bill
with money from the waistfold
of his dhoti
and hailed an autorickshaw.*

*We got off just before the Thottapally
spillway
which I recalled the government
proclaim
a boon to the farmers of Kuttanad.*

*The hotel was wooded in green,
immersed in acres of coconut palms,
some bent, some upright,
some swaying.*

*He asked the man behind
the Formica counter*

*for a cottage. A short boy, unsmiling,
in a purple uniform, came*

*and led us beneath the sky of
coconuts
along a muddy track lined with grass
to a cottage with a door painted
white.*

*Let's rest, said the Village Officer
after the boy had left with his tip.
It was dusk and I could tell*

*it was getting darker
because the crows were quieter
outside the cottage, flying back
blackly*

*to nestle among the palm leaves.
When he locked and bolted
the plywood door
I began to cry.*

*I knew what was coming.
I thought of my mother
and the tears on her ageless face*

*and I bit my lip so hard
the tears stung its redness
when they reached the toothmark*

*He hurt me while I cried,
thinking of my mother
through the searing,
as he rode roughshod over the tears*

*that I felt writhing down
like rivers of molten ice.
He finished fast, puffing, out of breath.*

*many pains later.
Don't cry, he said, you'll enjoy it
after a while. All girls do.*

*The bed was narrow, the mattress
foamy,
the sheet a hospital green
like tender coconuts.
I shut my eyes but it hurt all the same.*

There was blood all over the sheet

*and between my thighs, on my
stomach
and on my fingers too.*

*He rose as I turned away, choked.
The wall was stippled with
red reminders of mosquitoes.*

*When I looked again,
he had a bidi between his teeth
and was smiling. He urged me*

*up and from his black suitcase
pulled out a sari fringed with
flowers.*

From now on wear this, he said,

as he pulled away the bedsheet

*and the squelch of washing
drowned the tinny cries of the cicadas
outside, near the paddy fields,
near the loam,*

*in the dark, in the blessed dark
which from that gloaming on
became my accomplice,*

*a confederate so close and familiar
I would burn joss sticks
to welcome him,
the god of my darkness.*

*I didn't get the job finally.
I never even reached Alleppey,
but I found a trade all right;*

*it found me, befriended my doubts.
The Village Officer was only the first
in a long line of men,*

*ceaseless like the waves of Kovalam
where I often go by myself,
in a cab these days.*

*They come and go:
government clerks, rice merchants,
doctors,
car salesmen, drunks, medical reps;*

*but never a Village Officer, not once
in all these years since I set out
on the hot road to Thottapally.*

*Sometimes I feel like a queen,
and then I never fail to call myself
Renjini, the star of the arclights,*

*glittering on the screen,
the maiden of men's dreams.
But men don't dream, do they?*

*All they want lies between my thighs
or on my raisin nipples
or on my lips that often feel like bark*

*scissored with striations
of thickened deaths.
sometimes I feel I'm just spicules
of flesh, effervescent and seething,*

*forming and reforming
on the edge of the sun, forever
on the road to Thottapally.*

*And now as I lean back on my bed,
not far from the waves I so love,
amidst the laughter of the other girls,*

*I wonder where my mother is
at home winnowing paddy
in the shade of the mango tree,*

*or at her sister's, the aunt I never
knew.*

*Or is she no more, dead,
as I too will one day be.*

*Did they cremate her by
the lone tamarind tree at the edge*

of the coconut grove, I wonder?

*Sometimes I wish I could see her.
If only I had a body
to take out of my own, a skin*

*to leave behind when I go
back to the home of my mother
and her single slow groan.*

*Blood and mucilage won't show,
the gelatinous splotches of his semen
won't seep through. And I can always
tell my mother
the discolourations on my skirt
are just the drops of Cutex*

*that I found when I left her side
before I set out that day, long ago,
on the road to Thottapally.*