

India Forgive Me, I Could Not Despise You

BY AMY KRISHNAN

THIS ATTEMPT TO CAPTURE and put to words a thing both elusive and far too great to bear begins reluctantly, even futilely. It is already apparent that one may never do justice to the experience I am about to describe. What I ought to present here, though, is three weeks in time.

India is a place that overwhelms me today because I have spent most my life in denial of its existence. The person I hope to create is the person I am slowly, excruciatingly, becoming. I suppose I should ask to be forgiven because I have not as yet found the courage to go on. Here, simply imagine a spirit at the very margins of revelation. Imagine that the revelation was born out of both enlightenment and despair, euphoria and bitterness. Forgive the writer-poet who was born in spite of cruelty and ambivalence- who had the audacity to fall in love- and did so seeing panic and emptiness everywhere about her.

Arriving in Delhi after a 14-year absence was being suddenly drowned in waves of electric heat, finely carved brown people, mongrels and cattle. The searching, probing hands and eyes kept reaching toward me- appalling. I clung to my luggage as though it were my own untouched flesh that I was desperately trying to save. I arrived in Delhi ill, with a hollow feeling that deepened in my belly until I felt I would faint. When I staggered to the waiting jeep, I was dreaming and weeping dryly. I was finally in the land of my birth, and I had come to it anticipating repulsion and disillusion.

Instead, I found something to live for.

In three weeks I was bombarded with chaos and squalor so infinite that they could have swallowed me whole. Looking, endlessly looking, through the blinding heat, the sweet sad monsoons, I was dizzied by the constant pulse of life around me. Street dogs loped aimlessly by the dozens, swarming through gaunt bodies and dust. Cows stood in the middle of bumper-to-bumper traffic, complacent, chewing noiselessly. Minute green rickshaws swerved dangerously. People slept anywhere they could. There were small giggling children defecating on the ground while parents plotted how to survive.

And I was there simultaneously huge and invisible, absorbing it all from windows and doors. I was touched and loved so often, the sensation never left my glistening hot skin. I fell head over heels in a matter of seconds, and there was no

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turning back.

When I try to imagine what exactly it was that drew me so profoundly to India, the pain I feel is everything that will inevitably become lost in translation. Those sentiments, which are now too deeply ingrained to be anything but utterly vague and abstract, must be left in peace.

What I can relate is walking one night through an open-air market in Madras. My grandmother was walking beside me, crooked and straining with arthritis. She shimmered in her sari and I watched her out of the corner of my eye, slightly afraid, slightly in awe. It was as though we were floating through raw humanity — men shirtless and barefoot in delicately wrapped lungis, women and children with immense kohl-lined eyes. Their very bodies were beautiful to me— wiry and sculpted, burning darker than the sky that hung possessively above them.

My grandmother (whom I call Amma, meaning mother) approached a young fruit vendor with a creased pretty face. She was looking for limes. He spoke to her in Tamil, which I could not understand, but interpreted through the gentle movements of his mouth, hands and eyes. “Amma, let me help you,” he said to her. Initially I was not particularly struck. Only as I ambled away did it dawn on me that he had called her “mother.”

And as fleeting as such a moment might seem, I was moved. I was shaken so that my own brown hands were trembling beneath their eerily blue veins. My rib cage popped hard against my chest, leaving me breathless. You see, I had suddenly, irrevocably understood India, who had revealed herself not only as the wistful thumping in my heart, but as a mother- the sweetest, most unfathomable mother of them all.

My sense of “home” is more ambiguous now than ever. As I write this piece, sitting in one of my homes, it seems fitting to describe the new lens through which my world is perceived. India’s beauty encompasses the pervasive suffering one must come to terms with to remain sane there. Upon arrival, I was a fatalist, a nihilist, a cynic. I was terribly self-indulgent when it came to agitation and despair, but I evolved a bit if nothing else. As a somewhat militant atheist, I found a certain kind of God.

“Welcome home,” someone there had told me, and he was earnest and unassuming. I was startled, because it was the truest thing anyone could have said. And India, whom I no longer despised, became inherent to my salvation.