Preface: Definitions of Love and Memory

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Naina Dey (Ed.)

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“Define Love,” you say
I watch the rotating disco light
Throw glitter on the walls
Myriad-coloured heart shapes
Forming and dissolving

In her poem “Love Defined,” Naina Dey posits a multicolored definition of love in terms of “Myriad-coloured heart shapes/ Forming and dissolving.” In her beautiful and sensual collection, *Crimson Corset*, love is indeed defined by a plethora of images of dissolving time, erupted memory, perfumes, gazes, music and metaphors. Similar to Marcel Proust’s famous madeleine that is able to resurrect pages of memory from its simple dunking into a cup of tea, and to, as T.S. Eliot might say, Dey mixes “memory and desire” with cruelty, intensity and joy. In some poems such as “Acid Love,” the victim emerges “like a scalded wound raw, exposed,” and finds “a scalded sun/ Cursing fire/ Twisted, deformed/ By your acid love,” and, at other times, as in the short but powerful “Killing a Man,” which ends with the poet admitting “how easily I kill you each day,” it is the poet who slings a scathing message. Yet, like a passing train, Dey races through varied and illuminating landscapes, filling her poems with fantastical images of “Alladin’s magic lamp,” “Sleeping Gypsy dreams,” “mermaids,” “the princess of the seas.” Bright colours and scents carry the reader off like the floating “paper boat of secrets” that reflect her lovers’ “face/ an azure sky/ Startled by the green rush/ of wild parrots.” Lost loves are painted in strokes of “violets and pomegranates” and in the majestic “Jog Falls, Karnataka,” a rainbow peeks out “like the lopsided tiara in the hair of a reclining nymph.” Menus for memories are written in “an iced coconut for you/ for me a chocochip frappé,” in “Memory,” a simple shopping trip is
concluded by “pockets jingling change/ We settle for kati rolls and false promises” in “Shopping;” disappointment in “Happy Birthday!” is confectioned in “your cheeks bloated with chocolate/ Baked for the wrong day.” Dey’s poetry acts as an awakening of the senses.

Text and Body

For Dey, colours and tastes are synergistically linked to touching and longing – often not for actual flesh but for words, for texts waiting to be written, books wanting to be shared. “My fingers barely touch/ the thin skin of your words,” she writes in “When You Write to Me.” “Your words become your tongue,” she asserts, “Travelling up and up/ Forming rivulets/ where no rivulets are.” Floral images are constructed by and for words: “and I had given you/ in return/ sunflowers, roses, chrysanthemums/ As your words reach out/ with their blind tendrils.” Similarly, in “Erakà,” “My body is a text,” the poet declares, despite her tongue having being “torn out,” and her text “impaled and shred/ down the ages.”

Indeed, while words seem to be written in fire in Dey’s Baedeker to love and memory, silence is a riveting and creative force as well. “Let me write a poem tonight/ let me be alone wrapped in silence/ as I unwrap my heart,” she pleads in “Let Me Write a Poem.” In “Kath Champa,” flowers trigger memories of love “nourished in silence,” and in “Unspoken,” silence is considered a more powerful communication tool for the transmission of truth and depth than the superficial banter of “other lovers/ who chatter away idle hours/ for amusement/ To pass the time.” Silence can replace “words without conviction” with “I cannot tell you/ What I really want to tell you/ My fear of age, loneliness and death.”

Geographies of the Soul

What is so startling about the journey Dey takes us on is that it not only moves us with exotic images of mermaids and grottoes, for example, but ravishing and poetic geographical spaces which
she tries to capture in keepsakes – touristic ones at times such as
the mementoes she finds in the gift shop of the National Gallery
in London – but mostly in sweeping visions of nature such as the
cliffs and wind that roar through the Irish coast in “Inis Mor” for
example where she urges us to wait “to reach/ Where the sea
meets the sky” or the illuminations of Italy as seen through
Michelangelo in “ the heart’s image on stone” of La Pieta, and
of course the astonishing Jog Falls in Karnataka “drenching us
with droplets/ As the Jog rushes through our hair.” Moreover, as
she crisscrosses mythical and metaphorical spaces, she boldly
dips her pen in world religions and mythologies, forging an
ecuminal bond with faiths and cultures. Michelangelo’s “Man
of Nazareth,” is joined in this collection by “Aparajita: the
invincible;” Van Gogh fraternizes with Henri Rousseau, Titian,
Turner and Manet. In “Subaltern,” the poet confronts “the dark
goddess” who answers her with a grin: “Kali grinned and stuck
out her tongue in reply;” literary figures such as Virginia Woolf,
Mary Wollstonecraft and Henrik Ibsen also populate her poems
as does the erakà grass from the Mahabharata and in one of the
most moving poems in the collection perhaps, “Love and the
Holy Book,” chiasmic longing and refined sexuality surge
through the exchange of the lovers’ respective holy books as the
two stand together on a balcony: “You and me/ listening to the
baul with his ektara/ our hearts filled with longing/ I would like
to read your Holy Book someday.” Although she worries that
her wish is “by way of feeble conversation,” the reply comes
from a place of great understanding, “Turning to me/ with lips
and eyes/ of tulips and scented cypresses/you replied/ I would
love to read you.” Once again, reading and words which
sometimes trigger miscommunication, become a link, a bridge
for an exchange as the poet becomes the very book she wishes to
write, the gloss that can enlighten and connect.

Love in the Time of Covid

Finally, Dey’s brilliant collection, while taking us into the
wellsprings of secret and sometimes unspoken emotions, also
lands us firmly into our own immediate contemporary times in
which love not only thrives in the time of the ancient masters but in today’s pandemic with all its confinements and dread. In “Love during Covid 19,” a title that reminds us of course of Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s beloved Love in the time of Cholera, opens with an implosion of the world that is countered by a stolen kiss: “Let me imagine the end of the world/ Monuments falling and you and me/ Running running,” she imagines, “[...]Until we enter a blasted street/To steal a kiss,” only to realize at the end that the reality is defined by social distances and separate desires for “next day’s meal.” Similarly in “Yolk,” the monotony of Covid is barely broken up by “The yolk on my poach/a rising sun/ that bursts inside my mouth” only to reveal something mundane, “the salty blandness/ of another lockdown day.” Yet, within a kaleidoscope of vivid colours, perfumes and intense desires, it is only fitting that a world-wide lockdown be included in this collection as well as Dey is not afraid to confront reality and truth since the quotidian infuses and is at the heart of Dey’s poetry. Even the magical realism and evasion that punctuate many of her poems have a firm root in the everyday.

Quotidien marvels as well as life’s disappointments pepper Dey’s work in a manner that reminds us of Jane Hirshfield’s collection, Come Thief. As Hirshfield writes, daily life and love are part of the inescapable ephemeral nature of our existences. In “Perishable it said,” Hirshfield notes: “Under the wooden table and lifted stones, looking/ Coffee cups, olives, cheeses,/ hunger, sorrow, fears-/ these two worlds would certain vanish without knowing when” (Hirshfield, 15), “How suddenly then,” Hirshfield remarks: “The strange happiness to me,/ like a man with strong hands and strong mouth,/ inside that hour with its perishing perfumes and clashings” (Hirshfield, 15). For Hirshfield as with Dey, words may be latent but the gaze of the heart is potent. As Hirshfield sees it in “The Visible Heat”: “Near even a candle, the visible heat/ So it is with a person in love:/ buying bread, paying a bridge toll./ You too have been

that woman, the one who is looked at and the one who looks./ Each lowers the eyes before it, without knowing why” (Hirshfield, 27). This is what Dey also addresses with such eloquence and perception: the unknown and the unsaid as well as the watched and the watchers take their rightful place in this collection. As her mellifluous title alliteratively alludes to, *Crimson Corset*, as well as such other zephyrs of verse such as the “forbidding forbidden you,” Dey’s composes sweet and delicious music as haunting as the Nazia Hassan song she alludes to, “Aap Jaisa Koi,” like a “silvery tongue running down my bare back.” Dey’s songs are our songs during these difficult times.

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