

V E N U S
K H O U R Y – G H A T A

Early Childhood

(an extract)

They colonized the country at nightfall
beat back the trees with rifle-butts
made the fire flee

Our smoke brought tears to their vowels' eyes
their consonants caught fire at the mere sight of a match
We had smoked their green tongue with cannabis
kneaded their white tongue in our bread-boxes
lain their red tongue down in our beds
drowned the blue one in our ink.

Their chilly tongue was hung in our attic in flood season
shaken out over the railings to scatter the last crumbs of silence
dried on our rooftops when it rained in their alphabet.

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She drowned all the cats
and all the vowels
drew a mirror on her wall
the swallows that crossed it left their black cries on it
and the sun left its roundness

She wrung out the cats and the vowels
seated them on chairs
erased her mirror
crawled under the furniture in search of the crumbled alphabet

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Our cries, she used to say
would scratch the moon's windowpanes
and scrape the corners of tombstones which milked the moon

My mother set the long slope of her back against us
to interrogate the walls' dampness
decipher saltpeter's crumbling alphabet
translate the symbols engraved on the city's underside
which she only knew in profile
as she never ventured further than her shopping-bag
rarely crossing the uncertain borders of her lamp
City which sent us its rejected rains
and sometimes a wheezy snow which hooked its flakes into the
 pomegranate-
tree's ears

The planet must be cleaned up!
God must be cleaned up!
my mother cried, tying her apron

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Clouds played no part in this story
their shadows on the roofs were not necessary for the unities of
 time and place
they served as simple landmarks for whoever taught algebra to the
 nightingales

The village was so spindly
you could reach it by leaning a ladder against a patch of sky

The poplar tree was spindly too
will it be the same translated into French
will it answer to a name that perhaps won't suit its branches
used to conversing with an Arab wind
which postponed autumn for a week so they could finish
 inventorying their leaves.

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Here there was once a country
fire withdrew from women's fingers
bread deserted the ploughed furrows
and the cold devoured all children who wore a daffodil on their shoulders

Here there was once a wall
which reproduced itself in prosperous times
became rectangle square but never circle
so as not to humiliate the fountains
which held the copyright to day's roundness.

Here there was once a hunter
who knocked down his house to go into the forest
and verify that his shots pierced the eardrums of the rocks

Here there was once a pebble
which turned into a gravestone at the mere sight of a passer-by

Here there was once an infinitely white night
an infinitely black tree
which pulled its bark up to its chin
when noon lengthened shadows down to the ravine

Here there was once the echo of another echo
and the horns of great cattle which melted when even a wing
passed overhead.

(Translated by Marilyn Hacker)