Two Poems

MEENA ALEXANDER

Triptych in a Time of War

I

Why hunch at the screen chipping syllables, chewing up rhyme?
You're no Forugh Farrokhzad, registered 678 in the sun's throat—
counting out jewels in the city street, dead in a car crash, aged thirty-two.

You're older by far, thrice failed your driving test,
never visited a leprosarium or Zahir-al-Doleh cemetery in Teheran
where trees leak snow.

Where she whispers as a child might, smoking burnt out tips,
a slip of a thing dressed in white rags
filled with light—

I did it, I got myself registered,
dressed myself up in an ID with a name.
So long 678 . . . O rattling law!

II

O the bomb is fear's flower
there is no love in the bomb,
only chaos, the sea must swallow.

The flowers of Mesopotamia are tiny, blue edged,
driven under the skin of earth. But where can children hide?
The mouth of the cave is rimmed with red.

Spring brings the golden mustard seed and clouds of war
float over the ziggurat of Ur.
Enheduanna is poised on an alabaster disc.

She has nose breasts hands a poet needs, also
that sweet etcetera, dark flower who sheds blood and eggs and praises
to be sung at twilight into the high hold of heaven.

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MEENA ALEXANDER was born in India and raised there and in Sudan; when she was eighteen, she went to England to study. Her works of poetry include *Illiterate Heart* (TriQuarterly–Northwestern UP, 2002), winner of a PEN Open Book Award, and *Raw Silk* (TriQuarterly–Northwestern UP, 2004), from which these two poems are drawn; she has written a memoir, *Fault Lines* (Feminist, 1993, 2003)—which includes a section on writing poetry after 9/11—and has edited *Indian Love Poems* (Knopf, 2005). She is Distinguished Professor of English at Hunter College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York.

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You remember her and Forugh too who fought against pain.
Their stanzas flicker on the Internet,
you flee a windowless office,

climb the stairs to the eighth floor, enter a high room.
Light spills through sloping glass,
clouds drift and float,

you hear the clatter of knives in the cafeteria.
On an eastern wall the Dove of Tanna,
wings raised, mute blessing in a time of need.

The artist born a year after Forugh, cut up aluminium for the dove's tail
infolding fire, icon of earth struck free of flood waters,
pediment of peace beneath the arrow's flight.

You have come to a high room
in search of language that could tell of love,
of love alone, uncumbered and to search for it, as for justice

even in the guise of what has no words and cannot speak
and must lie down in the dark
hungry and unappeased.

III

Out of the spotted beak of the dove,
out of the olive tree axed into bits,
out of blood a child touches to her lips murmuring words no one else can hear,

out of the eyes of the woman who stands shock still in sunlight
and flings open the door
and Bombay rushes in a tiger that brings her to her knees:

a vividness of island sky and wind,
(she strolls by a slurry wall that held back island waters after catastrophe)
visionary company, electric water, fiery wind

where what is torn and severed slips out of soiled skin,
is seized in simple nakedness,
named and healed.

So turning to little bits of wisdom—do not hurt, do not cut,
love in all the right places and the wrong.
There is no fault in love.

The boughs know this cracking free of winter
in the cemetery where Forugh's body lies,
so too the Dove of Tanna.

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It takes flight from the eastern wall of 365 Fifth Avenue
and settles on the ziggurat of Ur
by a crater where a bomb burst.

Returning to the office without walls
you hear Enheduanna cry
O the ziggurat of Ur is crowned with doves!

You hear her words unfurl on the screen,
bare sound, filled with longing,
syllables of raw silk, this poem.

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Note: The poet Forugh Farrokhzad (1935–67) lived in Teheran and wrote fierce, dazzling poems. The lines in italics in section 1 are taken from her poem "O Bejewelled Land" (Another Birth: Selected Poems of Forugh Farrokhzad, *trans. Hasan Javadi and Susan Sallée [Emeryville: Albany, 1981]). Enheduanna (c. 2300 BCE) is the earliest poet known in recorded history. She lived in Mesopotamia, and her likeness is to be found on an alabaster disc preserved in the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. The creator of* Dove of Tanna *is Frank Stella; the artwork hangs on the eastern wall of the atrium at 365 Fifth Avenue, the location of the Graduate Center, City University of New York.*

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