correspondents at large

Phenomenology of Passage

MEENA ALEXANDER

IN *DICTEE* THERESA CHA, A KOREAN AMERICAN WRITER WHO DIED TRAGICALLY AT THE AGE OF THIRTY-ONE, SHOWS US HOW DWELLING in language can lead us to the truth of a radical instability. On the first page, she sets blocks of text in French and English one above the other, spelling out the terms for spacing and punctuation that a child might not understand. The English paragraph reads:

> Open paragraph It was the first day period She had come from a far period tonight at dinner comma the families would ask comma open quotation marks How was the first day interrogation mark close quotation marks. . . . (1)

What are the hidden rules of a language, in particular the rules of a colonial language? What does it mean to live in language? These are questions with a deep resonance for those of us who search for meaning in our everyday acts of reading and writing.

Cha's predicament touched a nerve.

"I'll never be locked in a cage of script," I wrote in my poem "Illiterate Heart," evoking the way in which the child wanted to keep her mother tongue at the level of speech and sound, pure orality (67).

Perhaps that is where the meaning lies, what the body gives us always somewhat beyond the reach of words. "Language bears the meaning of thought as a footprint signifies the movement and effort of a body," writes Maurice Merleau-Ponty. He thinks of the writer as someone who is able to crystallize a "corporeal or vital situation in language" (82, 101).

In *Dictee* the narrator's longing for her mother and, through the mother, for a mother tongue drives her to the harsh reality of exile, not just in her own life in New York City but also in the deeper past in the life of her mother, who lived in Korea in the era of Japanese colonialism and was sent away to Manchuria to make a living as a teacher. Distance, desire, and the impossibility of returning to a mother tongue can become part of a life lived in a postcolonial world, or rather worlds, for that is what we are born to now.

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[I]

We make sense through a phenomenology of passage.

How to cobble together what we can, using fragments in our grasp, to dismantle illicit taxonomies, the awkward grip of power?

I take inspiration from Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's essential notion of globalectics—a web of literary meaning making unfurled from diverse locations, shifting time and again with the "here" of the reader's cultural present. For Ngũgĩ the reading and writing self is powerfully bound to embodiment. He evokes our passage in and through languages while acknowledging the bruised entanglement of histories: "Globalectics, derived from the shape of the globe, is the mutual containment of hereness and thereness in time and space, where time and space are also in each other. It's the Blakean vision of a world in a grain of sand and eternity in an hour" (60).

Teaching *Dictee* to master's students at Mahatma Gandhi University in Kerala, in the South of India, I found myself facing a group of young people for whom the 1947 Partition of India was something they knew from history books but had no personal connection to. Unlike the students I had taught as a young lecturer in Delhi University, many of whose families had suffered as a result of Partition, these students, in the southernmost state of the subcontinent, had no familial memories of the traumatic breakup of the country. Still, the idea of Partition was not wholly unfamiliar, and they tried to extend themselves in imagination to another Asian country, tried to imagine what Korea had suffered by being split in two.

"But of course the speaker lives in the diaspora," one of the students pointed out. "So many from Kerala have gone to the Gulf and also gone westwards. Like our professor!" There was laughter as she pointed at me. "Think of what Malayalam would sound like then, after all those crossings. And what would English be for us?" Her eloquence was not wasted on me.

For the students in my undergraduate seminar at Hunter College and the doctoral students in my class on postcolonial poetics at the City University of New York's Graduate Center, bolstered as they were by the bulk of the continental United States, the reality of a country partitioned was harder to fathom. But as we continued our discussions, discrepant memories emerged and the stubborn monolingualism of our English department peeled away to reveal the mottled complexities of being in language.

There were students who claimed Spanish as their own, others whose grandparents or parents had come from the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Ireland, Africa, or Asia. Afterward, stepping out onto Thirty-Fourth Street I heard so many voices, so many unknown tongues, blossoming in the afternoon air.

I think back to a fateful September. I was teaching in a seminar room at the Graduate Center. The text was Sadat Hasan Manto's short story "Toba Tek Singh," set in an insane asylum at the time of Partition. When asked if he chooses India or Pakistan—in Manto's fabricated world, the inmates of the madhouse are given this choice—one man knows neither country will do. Very simply, he says, "I wish to live in this tree" (13).

He picks a tree and installs himself in its branches, limbs dangling, sensing in a green cage the only safety he will ever find.

Another mad creature, who speaks in a babble that no one can follow, stands stock-still on his swollen legs, refusing to move, until he falls, flesh on dirt, marking an untouchable zone, a no-man's-land.

Returning a week later to our class, we knew our days and nights had forever altered. Looking south down Fifth Avenue we could still make out plumes of smoke in the distance; it seemed tiny bits of paper still fell through the air, and the scent of burning clung to us.

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[II]

As I sit here writing in New York City I am mindful that it is well over half a century since Indian Independence. Sixty-eight years to be exact. The thought of fugitive sense making takes up residence in my mind. I think of the struggle of writers in India for free artistic expression, the suppression of Perumal Murugan's work, the murder of the freethinking intellectual M. M. Kalburgi.

It is sixty years since the Bandung Conference, a historic meeting of nonaligned nations that in many ways marked an era of decolonization. Shortly after Bandung, as the result of an agreement between Jawaharlal Nehru and Ismāʿīl al-Azharī, my father, a meteorologist, was seconded from India to Sudan. My young life altered dramatically. I turned five on the Indian Ocean.

I remember standing on deck, my back to the little party my mother had arranged, with a few crayons and brightly lit balloons. I just wanted to stare at the waves. Facing the glinting mass of water, I sensed the world that was mine had vanished. I was in an in-between space words could not easily reach.

As a child born into postcolonial India, I grew up with several languages—Malayalam, my mother tongue, the language of the southern state of Kerala, an ancient tongue with a proud literary tradition; Hindi, the language of the North, where I was born, in many ways the language in which I lived and moved, since it was spoken all around me; English, which we sometimes spoke in bits and pieces but which served as a kind of lingua franca though with holes torn into it, holes through which we glimpsed the depths of longing for other tongues.

In Khartoum I studied French and picked up spoken Arabic. I also learned to brood on the intimate violence of the English language I had made my own. Yet it was mine; what else did I have?

The language I use is a river into which many other sonorous streams flow, and as such it has neither the scent nor the taste of the monolingual.

It was 1955 when Richard Wright traveled to Bandung. In *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference*, he writes of the "strange logic" of race (572). He evokes the shame felt by people of color, Asians and Africans, compelled to take up residence in spaces where colonial ontology enforces a terrible psychic dislocation. Postcolonial realities have shifted the burden but not annulled it.

More than three decades later, in Britain, Salman Rushdie, in his explosive novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988), highlighted the body of the migrant other metamorphosing into bestial form under the gaze of the immigration police. Or disappearing, in the case of Mimi Mamoulian, an Armenian actress relegated to voice-overs, her alien body irksome in a white world. She argues, "When I become the voice of a bottle of bubble bath, I am entering Flatland knowingly, understanding what I am doing and why" (261). After such knowledge, one might ask, what forgiveness?

I used to live and work in Hyderabad. At the university, whenever I could, I taught William Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey." It is a poem I love dearly. In slow, rhythmic fashion it allows the reader into the convolutions of memory, the intricate ways in which embodied sensation draws us into the whorls of memory, into the longing for a lost place and an "I" one can never hope to be again.

It was a difficult season. A young Muslim woman had been gang-raped in a police station, and the culprits were none other than the police themselves. Inside the classroom we could hear waves of sound from the street, the cries of passersby. One student rushed in to tell us the news: the incensed townspeople had set the police station on fire. It seemed the better part of wisdom to shut our books,

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enter the streets. Elsewhere I have written of this (*Nampally Road* 54).

Elsewhere I have taught Wordsworth's poem. But I cannot think of the lines "Five years have passed; five summers with the length / Of five long winters!" without the scent of neem leaves and dry earth returning to me, and the feeling of dust raised by our feet as we raced into Nampally Road (lines 1–2).

An awareness was instilled in me early—that the walls of the university were of the flimsiest sort, that literature, while conceived in dream and molten privacy, could not exist without the shared world and its public spaces.

In my childhood I traveled back and forth across the Indian Ocean. I grew up both in Sudan and in India, and I received my BA, with honors, from Khartoum University, where I had entered as a student at the tender age of thirteen. The university had just stopped granting London University degrees and was minting its own graduates. A civil war was raging in the south of the country and the students wanted to debate the "Southern Question" and the possibility of democratic governance for the whole of the country. There was a great deal of hope and excitement that the military dictator who was in power could be removed. The students' union decided to stage Wole Soyinka's play *A Dance of the Forests*. I had a small part behind the scenes, helping to carry in cut branches of neem and palm for use in the play. As I sat in the front row a voice echoed in my ears: "My father said, and his great father / Before him, if you find no rest, go home / And they will know you" (61).

What and where is home? The question remains with me.

Afterward, there was a large demonstration in Khartoum, students were shot, tanks rolled in the streets. And it seemed to us that the voices in the play were close, all too close.

They spoke in the tongues of men and of angels and in the untranslated tongues of those who had gone through hell.

Some years later, back in India, teaching Soyinka's play, I found that the students had an instinctive grasp of what the voices of ancestors might sound like, what it might mean to have a conclave of the living and the dead.

Neither the machinations of vote buying nor the slippery tongues of public officials was alien. The gods who might rectify our lives were not far away, and some even lurked in the banana grove.

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