

*FROM AN INTRODUCTION**- Kamala Das*

I don't know politics but I know the names
Of those in power and can repeat them like
Days of week, or names of months, beginning with
Nehru. I am Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one. Don't write in English, they said,
English is not your mother-tongue. Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Every one of you? Let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
It is as human as I am human, don't
You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my
Hopes, and it is useful to me as cawing
Is to crows or roaring to the lions, it
Is human speech, the speech of the mind that is
Here and not there, a mind that sees and hears and
Is aware. Not the deaf, blind speech
Of trees in storm or of monsoon clouds
or of rain or the
Incoherent mutterings of the blazing
Funeral pyre.

The New Cotton

They are just boys, chain
ganged to the side of the road,
dressed to the nines in sunny
orange, that shade of red that
never seems to set, familiar
color of that foreign flower,
the kind you can close your
eyes in sleep and still see, but
these boys are not flowers
anymore, no
thing that can be seen to bloom
has been left to bloom, in this
place where a chain around a
Black man's ankle is the state
jewel, but if you still own your
eyes you know they are still boys.

They do not yet know how to
bend, someone has not yet
passed on the secret
of how to save their backs
for the rest of the journey,
someone forgot to offer the
old way of how to get through
the whip of their young days
in order to reach the sweet
rock of their old, they angle
and arc carelessly, not knowing
they are match
sticks of American history,
never squatting down low
in the grass, never bending
at the ankle or thigh, they are

such proud brittle lion trees
about to break in every
direction but free, the weave
of all their fabric wasted
in the constant picking up
of useless plastic things,
that as I get closer,
that as I pass,
look white and sticky plump,
some kind of new cotton
stuck inside their reaching
Robeson hands.

by Nikky Finney
from The World Is Round

Hate

Arthur Ravenel, Republican Senator from South Carolina, called the NAACP the "National Association for Retarded People" at a confederate flag support rally. He later said, "I made a mistake and I feel badly about it because I said 'retarded people' and I have a retarded son." He added, "That does not mean I'm apologizing to the NAACP."

How does a father
with a son struggling
to be seen whole
in the eyes of the world
forget the son long enough
for a slip of the tongue
to be recorded forever
for posterity's sake.

How does a father think
that a son will never know -
what he said that day at the rally
when he slipped
and he the father revealed
his true feelings
about he the son
the same feelings he feels
about other different people.

How does a father
slip off one tongue
while he is rallying
his confederate troops
and slip on another
later
after the rally
when he is home

with his son
gentle inheritor of his name.

He does not.
The slippery tongue
is one and the same.

What could make you
forget your son?
A fight over a flag?
The heat from a simmering
hundred-year-old war?

Hate stops at nothing.
Not even the sacred door
to a son's private room.

by Nikky Finney
from The World Is Round

Will V-Day Be Me-Day Too?
Langston Hughes

Over There,
World War II.

Dear Fellow Americans,
I write this letter
Hoping times will be better
When this war
Is through.
I'm a Tan-skinned Yank
Driving a tank.
I ask, WILL V-DAY
BE ME-DAY, TOO?

I wear a U. S. uniform.
I've done the enemy much harm,
I've driven back
The Germans and the Japs,
From Burma to the Rhine.
On every battle line,
I've dropped defeat
Into the Fascists' laps.

I am a Negro American
Out to defend my land
Army, Navy, Air Corps--
I am there.
I take munitions through,
I fight--or stevedore, too.
I face death the same as you do
Everywhere.

I've seen my buddy lying
Where he fell.
I've watched him dying
I promised him that I would try
To make our land a land
Where his son could be a man--
And there'd be no Jim Crow birds
Left in our sky.

So this is what I want to know:
When we see Victory's glow,
Will you still let old Jim Crow
Hold me back?
When all those foreign folks who've waited--
Italians, Chinese, Danes--are liberated.
Will I still be ill-fated
Because I'm black?

Here in my own, my native land,
Will the Jim Crow laws still stand?
Will Dixie lynch me still
When I return?
Or will you comrades in arms
From the factories and the farms,
Have learned what this war
Was fought for us to learn?

When I take off my uniform,
Will I be safe from harm--
Or will you do me
As the Germans did the Jews?
When I've helped this world to save,
Shall I still be color's slave?
Or will Victory change
Your antiquated views?

You can't say I didn't fight
To smash the Fascists' might.
You can't say I wasn't with you
in each battle.
As a soldier, and a friend.
When this war comes to an end,
Will you herd me in a Jim Crow car
Like cattle?

Or will you stand up like a man
At home and take your stand
For Democracy?
That's all I ask of you.
When we lay the guns away
To celebrate
Our Victory Day
WILL V-DAY BE ME-DAY, TOO?
That's what I want to know.

Sincerely,
GI Joe.

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by Cornelius Eady
from Brutal Imagination

*In 1989, in Boston, Charles Stuart
killed his pregnant wife and
shot himself in a scheme
to collect insurance money.
He told the police the assailant
was a young black male.*

*Susan is Susan Smith who
claimed a black man abducted
her children.*

CHARLES STUART IN THE HOSPITAL

Susan Smith now knows what
Charles Stuart knew in Boston:
We do quick, but sloppy work.
All these details:

*How tall was I? the police asked Charles,
And ask Susan,
But I vary; I seem smaller and taller
After dusk.
What was the tone of my voice?
Did I growl like a hound as I waved
The pistol in their face?
Was I as desperate as a teenaged boy,
Horny for a sweetheart's kiss?*

Here's what I told Susan:
"I won't harm your kids."
But if the moment was mine,
Why would I say that?

I sit with her at the station
The way I sat with Charles
At the hospital:
A shadow on the water glass,
Changing hues,

The slant of my nose and eyes.
Depending on the light
And the question.

Charles rocks in bed with the bullet
We gave ourselves.
*How far away was I? We never stopped
To think.
We were in a hurry.
In Boston and South Carolina
I was hungry for a car
And didn't much care how I got it.
Deadly impatient, Charles tells the cops,
But if I couldn't be seen,
But why would I do it that way?
Why do wives and children seem to attract me?*

I sat with Charles the way I sit
With Susan; like anyone, and no one,
Changing clothes,
Putting on and taking off ski caps,
Curling and relaxing my hair,
Trying hard to become sense.

By Victoria Bedel
from Swoon

Bedecked

Tell me it's wrong the scarlet nails my son sports or the toy store rings he clusters
four jewels to each finger.

He's bedecked. I see the other mothers looking at the star choker, the rhinestone
strand he fastens over a sock.

Sometimes I help him find sparkle clip-ons when he says sticker earrings
look too fake.

Tell me I should teach him it's wrong to love the glitter that a boy's only a boy
who'd love a truck with a remote that revs,
battery slamming into corners or Hot Wheels loop-de-looping off tracks
into the tub.

Then tell me it's fine—really—maybe even a good thing—a boy who's got some girl
to him,
and I'm right for the days he wears a pink shirt on the seesaw in the park.

Tell me what you need to tell me but keep far away from my son who still loves
a beautiful thing not for what it means—
this way or that—but for the way facets set off prisms and prisms spin up
everywhere
and from his own jeweled body he's cast rainbows—made every shining true color.

Now try to tell me—man or woman—your heart was ever once that brave.

Adrienne Rich, "Here is a map of our country" from *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (New York: Norton, 1991)

Here is a map of our country:
here is the Sea of Indifference, glazed with salt
This is the haunted river flowing from brow to groin
we dare not taste its water
This is the desert where missiles are planted like corms
This is the breadbasket of foreclosed farms
This is the birthplace of the rockabilly boy
This is the cemetery of the poor
who died for democracy This is a battlefield
from a nineteenth-century war the shrine is famous
This is the sea-town of myth and story when the fishing fleets
went bankrupt here is where the jobs were on the pier
processing frozen fishsticks hourly wages and no shares
These are other battlefields Centralia Detroit
here are the forests primeval the copper the silver lodes
These are the suburbs of acquiescence silence rising fumelike
from the streets
This is the capital of money and dolor whose spires
flare up through air inversions whose bridges are crumbling
whose children are drifting blind alleys pent
between coiled rolls of razor wire
I promised to show you a map you say but this is a mural
then yes let it be these are small distinctions
where do we see it from is the question

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Homophobia

I could say that discovering such ugliness
in a friend is like standing on my own porch,
barefooted, ready to jump into the sweet grass,
still soft with spring newness, and finding coiled —
its outline broken by fractals of sand — the blunt
venomous head of a prairie rattler,
lying in wait, striking out at whatever
comes within range of its desire or fear.
Throwing itself forward, the snake
would be as certain of its normality as my friend is,
coiled around the memory of the man who died,
rattling with indignation at the news
that he died of AIDS, and I, I could be the mouse,
frozen with timidity, having blundered
on an exceptionally beautiful morning
into this toxic stare, struck dead on the spot,
the hypodermic lullaby poisoning my conscience
as much as muscles of my throat and heart. But
the snake is beautiful, those diamonds etched
along its spine as newly green as the fragrant sage,
and the mouse, the mouse being swallowed
would become of use, its cells, mother
and father of new snakeskins, and I could turn
back, refrain from jumping off the step, and the snake
would slide into the grass, its body a long sigh
breathing itself away, leaving me to thank heaven
for such a glimpse, and such a narrow escape.
The snake would not, as my friend does,
keep flinging itself at a dead man, talking about
how repulsive it must have been, how shocking
to imagine the lovemaking of two people
of the same sex, though she keeps imagining

it again and again. As if she held her soul
in an artificial grip, forcing its jaws open
to the naked drip and chill — though a snake,
so pried upon a petri dish,
would be milked of all its poison.

by Rebecca Seiferle
from Bitters

THE MAID

I went to the movies.
A lady saw me and said,

“Why not work for me?
I need a maid.”

I took my son for a walk.
They called me a nanny.
The kid was a doll,
But his mommy looked funny.

I did volunteer work.
They offered me a job.
“Poor thing,” they clucked.
“She must be unemployed.”

I taught a class. They said,
“Where is her director?”
“She’s just a guest,” they said.
When I came as school inspector.

“New tenant,” they assumed,
As I showed off my own home.
“New typist,” they presumed,
As I typed my new poem.

- Bracha Serri, 1983

Translated from Hebrew by Helene Knox and Smadar Lavie. Excerpted from “Border Poets: Translating by Dialogues” by Smadar Lavie from *Women Writing Culture* (1995.)