

Elegy in India Ink
by Heather Hartley

“Le suicide offre tous les avantages: c’est raffiné, c’est chargé de sens, c’est fin-de-siècle.”
“Suicide offers every advantage: it’s refined, it’s filled with meaning, it’s fin-de-siècle.”

—Tonino Benaquista, *Saga*

I.

Before the traffic of human lives made headlines,
(opening inside page of a Monday *New York Times*),
four virgins of the village of Bhilai,
inland from the Bay of Bengal,
not far from Bangladesh or Nepal, in India,
on the seventh of April, sisters,
committed suicide.

Aged sixteen to twenty-four,
Minakshi, Meena, Hemlata, and Kesar
wrote a note on lined paper that they left near the door:
We four sisters are fed up with our lives.

They started early the night before.
They pooled their money and bought some cakes.
They stayed up late playing card games and tricks.
They played with words.
They stayed awake.
They ate sweets until they were sick.
They fell asleep on the concrete floor.
One, two, three, four:
the early hours quickly passed.
One, two, three, four:
they hung themselves from rafters with long scarves.

II.

The calligraphy of bodies in mid-air,
dim in the dusty light,
spelled out the sisters’ last wish.
Something still lived in those dark silhouettes,
in the alphabet of limbs and in the stiff grey lips,
something desperate and deliberate,
impossible for the illiterate,
something illegible, difficult at first, faint,
then, on second glance, was quite clear
and impossible to erase:
Minakshi, Meena, Hemlata, Kesar.
It was their names, their names that lived there.

III.

In the West, suicide is linked to mental illness—depression, dementia, suicidal tendencies.
Schizophrenia, neurasthenia, panic disorders, the willies.
In the West, suicide is all in the head.

In the East, they say that suicide is perhaps a different malaise—social, economic, political.
A question of caste, of debt, of ancestry, of industry.
One of arranged marriages, dowries, *paneer*, chutney, education, elephants, offspring.
Of sacred cows with six legs, of an ancient society in a new century.
Of something else, something indistinct and obscure:
the shadows of so many women and their weight in the third world.

IV.

Perhaps our word *suicide* contains an answer to their death:
s, a thinly curved consonant escaping into air,
u, the you, the incriminating vowel,
the twins, *i*, that cancel one another out,
cancel out the self,
the sluice and wave of *c*,
d, soft thud of tongue against gums, penultimate
before the demise, the *coup de grace*, mum—
the final, silent *e*.
But this is all Occidental.
Their suicide was premeditated, Oriental.

V.

On the palms of their hands,
on the soles of their feet,
on the walls of their house,
they wrote their names.
Blue ink stained deep
skin, smooth and pale as parchment,
marked walls discolored with dirt,
and in few words spelled out their suicide note,
their final, desperate hope:
Minakshi, Meena, Hemlata, Kesar.

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