

Rules of the House

—
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Apogee Press
Berkeley · California
2002

As remembered

I am only beginning to understand how seasons affect me.

Winter. Snow beating street people into obedience. How mothers held back from stepping out in discreetly ornamented shoes and thin nylon socks.

This is the way I count years: the winters we had fire and the summers we erased because we were in another place.

I am told I was five in 1971 even though my birth certificate states I was born in 1969. The elders count on their fingers. They have done it for a long time.

It was winter but not the kind of winter they were born into. They were wearing hand knitted woolen sweaters. I was wearing a jacket that children born to refugees wear.

When I am with them, I cannot say I remember. I say, as I am told I remember.

It is not the accuracy of the story that concerns us.

But who gets to tell it.

Sun storm

Like brides behind veils, my people peep from drawn curtains and feel the air with their fingers. They do not see any use for heat and are not hospitable to it. Electric fans focus on bare shoulder blades and erect nipples.

Mosquitoes persist. Hands do not move fast enough.

On arrival, my people were instructed to throw away their black clothes, then taught to distract the sun. In crisp white pajamas and khadi shirts, they walked the camp till it paled to a canvas of gathering spirits.

Night led them to the edge of the stream. Feet in water, they talked about what they had left to lose.

Some afternoons, old stories were translated into Tibetan.
You are blessed, strangers said. God has delivered you. Such is his bountiful nature.

Sparrows tattooed the air. Prayer beads clicked as mantras circulated above the parable of a son who erred and was forgiven. The story teller's lips bent with crystals of sweat.

Jesus loves you. For years, F thought Jesus was the president of a country. He thought he was a rich old man.

He told one story-telling woman she was wrong. Jesus had nothing to do with it. It was all fate.

Sliced tongue

Pigeons leave their hiding beds.
The sun does not bring light but it is day.
An hour of day we know as prayer time.
We toss grains into the air,
watch how in timorous light their outline
arrives as motion and thought.
Still, life keeps death. Places called home,
in someone else's country.

The water song

M's mother was so beautiful her father hid her in a box. I choose to believe this version of a story even though reason compels me to question the existence of one such box. Wooden or steel. Details make it permanent.

Cement roofs do not entertain the reality of rain. Only when the curtain is drenched do you acknowledge it.

I am reminded of Jetsun, how after dipping her feet in the Ganges, thought she felt a little flutter in her head.

After my hands are washed, I undo my altar. The offered is erased from my possession even as it remains.

After the dishes are put away, after the curtains are drawn, some women will make love.

It is not the knowing but the moment after saying *ah* that pleases.

A ritual is a place of wisdom. In time you learn how much water exactly fills seven prayer bowls.

Somewhere must be a photo of M's mother. When I see it, I will understand why M never told me she jumped from a bridge and tried to take a Chinese soldier with her.

A lama said I was her reincarnation. I have the same underestimated will. M's will is more flamboyant so it is suggested I learn from her.

One more say

Think on this when prayers fall like thick paint on dry asphalt.

Think on this when the face is fading.

Think on this and be decisive in your motions. The breathing. The utterance.

No Eastern star leading conch shells and a rainbow at dusk. Those who must believe, do.

Who dares to question the accuracy of a direction when the journey was not theirs.

The moment of birth. Before the father extended his arm towards the mother.

Here is a location. Here it is scattering like mustard seeds.