

Meena

I went to visit some relatives in a small village in the north of the Panjab. Sitting, drinking tea in the courtyard, I noticed that there was a large tumble down house opposite, built in the Islamic tradition. It was easily the biggest house in the village. In the balcony on the first floor I saw a woman standing there. No one else could see her. Immediately, her life story came to me and I reproduce it here.

In the Balcony

Meena stands in
the balcony of the
biggest house
watching the village girls
go chattering by
to the river to
wash clothes
and she dreams
of simply skipping down
from her first floor
balcony
and joining them in
their laughter and
light steps.

To go to the river and
slap clothes against rocks
and natter and chatter,
all the gossip.

Understand

She has never tried
to understand
how she married a local
Muslim administrator.
Her father had decided
everything
and she found herself one day
married to him.
She never knew she
might end up with
a Muslim husband.
Rich, yes
and influential
but where did it leave her?

On the First Floor

She lives on the first floor
with every extravagance
and everyone in the village
eyes her house
with envy.
Except her.

She is like an
exotic bird
living in this gilded cage.
She has never even
seen all the rooms on
the two floors above her
or the one below.

Sometimes she only hears
the servants
and hasn't even
seen them all
with her own eyes.

Whispers

Meena, he whispers
and then short of breath
hisses in her ear.

He has never called
her by her
full name,
Meenakshi.

He loves her hard
as if he is desperate
to prove his manhood.

And she lies there
inert
letting him have
his way.

Who is Meena?

A Visit

She craves a visit
from a Hindu priest
to give her a mantra
to bring peace to her,
inside.
She is a Muslim now
and learns the Arabic
and prays alone.
But she misses the music
of the puja,
the Hindu tradition.
She misses her family.
She has not seen them
now
for years.
Alone, she strums the
chords of her music
to herself.

A Coiled Snake

A coiled snake.
At least she can see
it coiled,
lives by the front door
protecting her.
Or hiding people away.
It is the reincarnation
of someone.
At least that's what
they say
and her master,
her husband,
is happy for it to stay.
Every day when he gets home
she touches his feet
out of respect.
But not love.

Veil

She had to veil herself
when the painter came
and painted straight on
to the wall,
historic events of Babar
and Akbar.
She only had her eyes
naked to see
the artful brushwork
that changed
a grey wall into
a thousand illusions.
Where is the picture
of Shiva?
She cries out her religion
and pale,
waits for her master
to return.

Paths

Does life have as
many paths as
a pomegranate has seeds?
She wonders
if the pomegranate
can live in her world
or is it better
eaten, seeds scattered
across the horizon.

One Day

One day a master
will stand at the door
and see her ghost
spirit
in the balcony.
He will call
the Hindu priest
and they will conduct
the puja
to set her free
from this cage
gilded by invaders.
And her invasion.
she will be cleansed
and can go on
to some other existence
free from all
of this.

Barren

Meena is barren.
She will leave no
stain on the world.
In years to come
only her image in
the balcony will remain.
She will leave no stain
of her own.

Afterword

I did free her spirit from the gilded cage of her, by now, crumbling house. I couldn't find a suitable Hindu priest so I did it myself. Since 1920 she had been a prisoner of the culture of the time. Now she is free, reborn, to fulfil her destiny.