Chris Mooney-Singh


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Pantun of the Chinar Grove (Srinagar, Kashmir)

Written above the gate of the Shalimar Gardens, Srinagar, Kashmir by the order of Emperor Jahangir (1542-1605)

‘If there is a paradise on earth, it is this, it is this, it is this.’
- Jami

Someone has set a bomb off in a car where tourist buses come from foreign cities. Disturbed, the birds alight from a chinar and now there’s shadows running in the trees.

As well as flowing blood from foreign cities, seeping where the leaves turn smoky purple, the sound of running in those giant trees brings crack troops and walkie-talkie babble.

It is the dusk when leaves turn smoky purple with a game of hide and seek, just like a movie – some crack troops, the walkie-talkie babble and insurgency behind each massive tree.

The blown up bottle-bodies are a movie that Bollywood will buy and script and make because revolt behind Kashmir’s State Tree insults the tranquil ripples of Dal Lake.
Bollywood will buy and script and make
this upturned tale upon some pristine hillside
with song and dance, a house-boat on Dal Lake,
yet those dead tourists do not stop to ride.

What was a heaven dancing on a hillside
is now some shadow running in the trees.
The flag of peace has slipped away to hide
as Kalashnikovs bring shadows to their knees.

The final shadows fall behind the trees
here in the dying season of the chinar,
and now the mourners fall down on their knees
because a bomb was set off in a car.
Coconut (Malabar Coast, Kerala)

A person needs
a tree of heaven,
a place to rest,
a place to forget,
a seat of ease,
with falling nuts
with shells for cups,
of meat and milk
and healing oils,
thickened curries,
flowers for weddings
and ceremonies
smashing the shell
inside the temple
like cracking the ego
and passing back
sweet blessed Prasad;
or on special occasions –
anointing a guru
like a maharajah.
Such a tree might
rise up slender
as a coconut tree,
a fine full woman
breasted, tall,
in her prime and
always ready
with slim, lean trunk
so boys can climb
to shake her down,
to shake her down
then greedily
drink her breast milk.
A nation needs
a tree of heaven
in a watered place,
a respected space
where love can plop
its fruit in the lap.
It must guard against
creating the kingdom
as a barren place
where belief begins
to drive its nail
into the trunk
on a moonless night,
or spit at her
while passing by
in cursing heat.

A philosophy needs
a tree of heaven
a final place
a paradise tree,
a rising myth
a kalpavriksha
to let it see what life
could be ahead
and how to make
this starting point –
a place to rest
a place to forget
a life of work–
success and loss
of milk and pain
along a beach
at morning, dusk,
and shade midday, 
the shoreline saying 
over and over 
this is the place, 
this is the place.
Ber Tree (Amritsar, Punjab)

You bear such a famous name
straight from old poems,
and yet in India you’re

still the plain ber tree, laden
with poor man’s fruits,
not too sweet to spoil us

and cheap in the bazaar.
Yes, plainness is holy,
a dukh banjani tree of cures.

At the Golden Temple,
one leans over the marble tank
of water, built around

a once-upon-a-time miracle
pool. A heron once dived in
and flew out a white swan.

Seeing the remarkable,
a cripple’s faith rose
and he jumped in next.

Soon he could run a race
to show and tell. Guru Ram Das
built a temple next

and soon a city rose
from the fruit of that
faith and blessing.
And I’ve seen a ber
in the village of one saint
who sat beneath with focus
and a hand telling beads.
It’s said he had visions,
then got his orders
to cure the sick
with the shape of the story
within these branches.

The voice in the tree,
once a princess
snubbed a maharishi.

As a cure for pride
he rooted her here
for penance as this ber.

She still serves here
with yellow-green berries,
the most simple of treats
for a race of farmers
who have few rupees
for mangos or papaya.

Dropped berries are taken
with faith as medicine
and little tongues of leaves
talk to the pure-hearted,
giving them guidance,
telling them how to pray.
and how to get through life.
A thousand years of penance
are set, until the tree

falls and she will be free,
but the trunk is strong
and the fruits – not too sweet;

each has the hint
of sourness at the pip.
Who knows, one day even

when teeth spill the juice,
that last tart flavour
will be gone, will be gone.