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Necessities, Imagine Yourself Happy, Punya for the Angel
Gabriel

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Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism, Volume 4, Number 1,
2003, pp. 165-172 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mer.2004.0016>



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ARLENE ZIDE

Necessities

for Gagan

Today, singing has been banned
the sky has closed up shop and
street dogs sprawl across the paths to sleep away the city
Speaking doesn't work either—
if you say yes.
he will say maybe and
the others will deny it all
turning away to face the flag.

I am not here,
sleeping somewhere on a stone
embankment

The dock in my dream runs alongside
the cement jetty lined with rounded stones.
Even the air is gray
forbidding.
The cave in my dreams is on a green and pleasant hillside
in the Bronx.
Here I walk in the cold
pulling my cowl tighter around me
Yesterday no letters came
the phone frowned silently on its hook.
There was mud everywhere, but
there was going to be a bath of dust.
No one asked even a stray cat in
but she came, clawing the curtains
howling her hungers.

[*Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 2003, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 165–166]
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We fed her cheese and sausages
the cream left in our cups
Below, ragged children plied the vagabond streets
whining coins
grubby hands daring
someone's clean socks
or the seductively pale arm
of a sitting-duck tourist
locked in his motorized cage

Her friend asked—शर्म नहीं आती
sharam nahin ati? not ashamed?
but neither democracy
nor shame
fills the belly in the cold
and school needs matching sweaters, clean faces
and shoes
a father
who doesn't run away
or drink the flour for the chapatis.

Catfood, caviar, Kleenex
the necessities pour out of her bag
sugar, flour, ghee

New Delhi, 1996

ARLENE ZIDE

Imagine Yourself Happy

Give up your portion—
the one you didn't get
Go on a picnic,
lie on the prickly pine needles and survey the sky
ignore the flies, the ants, the striped pine beetle
which falls
straight down
into
your plate.

If the phone frowns sullenly
on its hook
forget it
and don't keep waiting for the postman
keep on working
If the electricity vanishes again
pull out that book you need to read
let go
When the man makes his usual lazy job of it
wear the grayed seam
eat the grease-sodden lackluster food set before you
Bring the ailing machine
back to be fixed for a fourth time
or throw it out—
forget it.

and when again
you dream
of a past

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swimming up from the family curves of pain
or the dream-uncle with the stranger's face
disavow it
reliving real pain
in unreal surroundings
the stubbed toe on the dream piano
the broken ankle on the pink escalator

Incredulous, fend off assurances voiced
by the dead
uncle who alive chewed rancid cigars to a stub
and never said two civil words to you
disown the reek
let it go

When your poems languish
in unopened drawers
or on the page set no worlds ablaze
remind you
of your mother,
preoccupied with your ungrateful brother's ills
no space or time for even one kind word of praise
Drown
it swallow it whole
ungrasp
the scorpion's raw tail
let it
go

When the no-longer girl
wafts by in her bedraggled garb
leaves behind
(like the cartoon-character who moved in dust clouds)
the detrita of cow-scent, mud and flies
When she holds her husband-pounded head
aching in her palm and pounds
your dirty clothes

to shreds,
give away
some jam, an aspirin,
that half-stale loaf of bread

When the BBC, so civilized
bleats
its 15-second footnote
on the gravity of the growing poverty
of women
and the children in the world
and goes on
to an hour
on the cricket scores, the goings on of tennis,
racing, golf scores
Let it ripple past you
float through the window
to the surrounding hills
Don't pull it through your teeth or chew it with your heart
Heave
a deep sigh
go on

Walk the hills
ignore
the rising heat
the tar-scorched earth beneath your feet
the broken branches of the stunted trees
the raw gashes

in the graveled land
the birds fluttering anxious from the trees
the pining bees
the frantic langur shinnying up a half-dead
tree
to escape
the adolescent scream of city wheels

Ignore
the dust rolling from the plains
the truck-screech shift of gears
the cicadas' pleas

Imagine yourself happy
smile

wait
for God to reappear
and smile.
open-eyed
a church-going smile
freckled,
pink
Don't even think of it

Ignore it
let it go
unclench
ungrasp
let it all
go

Imagine
yourself happy.

Mussoorie, U.P. India
1996

ARLENE ZIDE

Punya for the Angel Gabriel

Chamundi has been offered scented yellow flowers
high up on her hill.

Kalimata too, receives her due
in plumes of rose and sandal smoke.

Here they seek out *punya*
tallying up the good against the bad
keep the balance of celestial accounts
with good deeds and promises.

We
have no word for it in English
though sin, its opposite
looms large in night's imagination,
and drop the occasional coin
with hope, in beggar's palm.

At night, mother, I wander in my dreams
across that barrenness where your grave surely lies
and mornings, *bube*, cannot even tell myself the place
to leave for Gabriel's book
the tombstone's token *mitzvah* stones
never settling up
such old accounts.

Hyderabad, India

Chamundi and Kalimata are avatars of the goddess Kali.

Punya is a good deed, merit, the (Sanskrit) equivalent of the Hebrew mitzvah.

(There is a tradition in India of Chitragupta, who like the angel Gabriel is said to keep accounts of each person's good and bad deeds for a reckoning after s/he dies. It is a Jewish folk custom to leave token pebbles on a tombstone as remembrances of a visit to a loved one's grave, for Gabriel to record as a good deed.)

bube: grandmother (Yiddish)