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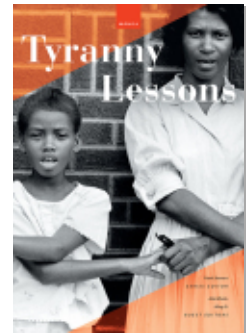
The Barbarians, and: The Magician

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Two Poems

THE BARBARIANS

after C. P. Cavafy's "Waiting for the Barbarians"

We were certain they would come.

We broke the idols of those who
might have stood against them, one by one.
We waited in the capital to welcome them
with goblets brimming with children's blood.
We removed our clothes to put on barks
set fire to monuments,
propitiated fire for the sacrifices to come,
changed the names of the royal streets.
Afraid our libraries might provoke them
we razed them to the ground, letting
only the palm leaves inscribed with the mantras
of black magic survive.

But we did not even know when they came.
For they had come up, holding aloft
our own idols, saluting our flag,
dressed like we used to be,
carrying our law books, chanting our slogans,
speaking our tongue, piously touching
the stone steps of the royal assembly.

Only when they began to poison our wells,
rob our children of their food and
shoot people down accusing them of thinking
did we realize they had ever been
amidst us, within us. Now we
look askance at one another and wonder,
"Are you the barbarian? Are you?"

No answer. We only see the fire spreading
filling our future with smoke and our
language turning into that of death.

Now we wait for our savior at the city square,
as if it were someone else.

THE MAGICIAN

I clearly remember the day
the magician had come to our school.

He showed us some card tricks
and asked for a girl.
It was Khadeeja who came forward,
the bold girl who had been
laughing at his manliness,
telling everyone the secret of his tricks.
He laid her on the table on her back
and removed her clothes, one by one.

Magic, thought everyone,
and kept quiet.

Then the magician took out
a butcher's knife from his bag.
"I am going to cut this girl into
four slices like *halwa*," he declared.
"Any objection?" he asked
the teachers and students.

Magic, thought everyone,
and did not object.

We gazed, with bated breath.
He slowly brought down his knife.
Khadeeja's blood flowed
onto the school floor as she screamed.

Magic, thought everyone,
and did not wipe the blood.

The magician cleaned his knife,
got down from the stage
and walked away.

Magic, everyone thought,
and did not stop him.

When he did not come back,
“Khadeeja,” we called out together.
She replied, but
we could not see her.

Her voice had come
from *The Arabian Nights*.
We opened the book and saw
Khadeeja gliding on the flying carpet
dropping flowers and peacock feathers
over the bleeding Damascus,
the dead Baghdad,
the choking Tehran,
the screaming Cairo,
the seething Tunis.
Flying with her was a *tumri*: “*Babul moraa naihar jhootto hi jayen*”*

*Bride's farewell
song, composed
by Nawab
Wajid Ali Shah,
exiled by the
British from
Lucknow.

“Khadeeja,” I called again.
She dropped a slate pencil
from the flying carpet.
With that pencil
I wrote my first poem,
I still write.

As I write each line,
I leave my home,
go to my beloved's.

Translations from Malayalam by the author