



1971

Tarfia Faizullah

i.

In west Texas, oil froths
luxurious from hard ground
while across Bangladesh,

bayoneted women stain
pond water blossom. Your
mother, age eight, follows

your grandmother down worn
stone steps to the old pond,
waits breathless for her

to finish untwining from
herself the simple cotton
sari to wade alone into green

water—the same color,
your mother thinks, as
a dress she'd like to twirl

the world in. She knows
the strange men joining
them daily for meals mean

her no harm—they look like
her brothers do nights they
jump back over the iron gate,

drenched in the scents of else-
where—only thinner. So thin—
in the distance, thunder,

though the sky reflected
in the water her mother
floats in burns bright blue.

ii.

Gather these materials:

slivers of wet soap, hair

swirling pond water, black oil.

Amar peet ta duye de na,

Grandmother says, so Mother

palms the pink soap, slides

it between her small hands

before arcing its jasmine-

scented froth across her

back. Gather these materials:

the afternoon's undrowned

ceremonies, the nattering

of cicadas—yes, yes, yes—

Mother watches Grandmother

disappear into water: light:

many-leafed, like bits of bomb-

shells gleaming like rose petals

upturned in wet grass, like

the long river in red twilight—

iii.

1971: the entire world unraveling
like thread your mother pulls

and pulls away from the hem of her
dress. In America, the bodies

of men and women march forward
in protest, rage candleling

their voices—in Vietnam, monks
light themselves on fire, learning

too late how easily the body burns—
soon, the men whose stomachs

flinch inward will struggle
the curved blades of their bayonets

into khaki-clad bodies, but for now
they lean against the cool stone

walls of your grandparents' house,
eyes closed as your mother watches

her mother twirl in the pond, longs
to encircle herself in ripples

of light her fingers might
arpeggio across green water—

she loves the small diamond
in her mother's nose, its sunlit

surface glittering like curled
hot metal she knows falls from

the sky, though never before her eyes.

iv.

Why call any of it back? Easy

enough to descend with your

mother, down

and down hard
stone steps—how I loved,

she says, to watch her—

yes, reach

forward to touch

the sun-ambered softness

of the bright sari Grandmother

retwines around
her body—yes,

your eyes
dazzled by the diamond's

many-chambered light
—it shined

so, Mother says,
though it's not you

she's speaking to anymore,

caught as she is in this reeling

backward—1971
and a Bangladeshi

woman catches the gaze

of a Pakistani
soldier through rain-curved palm

trees—her sari is torn
from her—

*She bathed the same
way each time,* Mother says

—the torn woman curls
into green silence—*first, she*

*would fold her sari,
then dive in—yes,*

the earth green
with rain, the water,

green—*then she would
wash her face
until her nose pin shined, aha re,
how it shined—*

his eyes, green

—*then she would ask me to wash her back—*

the torn woman a helix of blood

—*then she would rub cream into her
beautiful skin—*

the soldier buttoning
himself back
into khaki—yes, call it
back again—

v.

Two oceans between you, but still
you can see her running a finger
along the granite counter in the sun-

spilled kitchen, waiting for the tea
to boil before she drives past old
west Texas oil fields still bright

with bluebells. But tell me, she asks,
*why couldn't you research the war
from here?* Gather these materials,

these undrowned ceremonies—
tea poured into a cup, a woman
stepping lightly across green field

into a green pond—but don't tell
her the country of her birth
became a veined geography inside

you, another body inside your own—*Oh
Maa, she sobs. I miss her so.* You open
the door to step out to the concrete

veranda. Look: the moon is an ivory
scythe gutting another pond across
which the reflection of a young girl's

braid ripples. *Tell me,* you say, *about 1971.*

*From Seam, a book in the Crab Orchard Series in
Poetry, co-published with Southern Illinois University
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