

## **Sultan and Julie: A Series of Poems**

By Kiana Rawji, 2017

### **Watching**

She remembers how it felt  
to be followed by his eyes;  
he was always watching,  
she was always noticing.

His gaze was soft,  
gentle like his voice—  
his woman's voice.

She remembers not liking  
the parting in his hair—  
it was too centered—  
but she liked it when he  
changed it for her.

### **Lion**

Her father became a man  
when he killed a lion in Tsavo<sup>1</sup>  
but *this* man would kill no lion;  
it took him weeks to speak  
one word to her

and though his name meant *ruler*,  
he couldn't rule her.  
When he finally walked beside  
instead of behind her,  
he was too shy to ever  
hold her hand.

### **Mundele<sup>2</sup>**

She remembers the diamonds  
that were never in his pockets;

She knew this man  
would smuggle no shiny rock.

But he was a Mundele  
so they locked him up anyway.

<sup>1</sup> Rural village in Kenya, known for its man-eating lions

<sup>2</sup> Word in Lingala (a Congolese language) meaning white person, foreigner, or lighter-skinned person.

### **Pizza**

She remembers when they finally  
got out, when they sought  
something better,  
but found some things  
the same;

she remembers his quiet  
rage when the white boys  
called them “Pakis,”

when he wanted a home  
but no home wanted him—  
he was always wanting,  
rarely getting.  
And she was always noticing.

When the pizza slices smacked  
the windows, they didn’t  
crack the glass,  
but they did fracture  
his heart.

### **Heart**

She remembers when his heart  
started to give out, when he took  
to the warmth of the fireplace  
over the warmth of her embrace,

when his voice fell quiet,  
and his chin began to droop  
onto his small chest,  
where the red thing  
was enclosed—pallid,  
barely beating.

### **Blow**

She remembers the slow sting  
of his glare when he yelled—  
when his woman voice  
turned into a man voice.

She needed to get out

of the kitchen, to get air,  
so she did, but only  
to meet the blow  
of a windshield.

### **Cheese**

She remembers each day after,  
when his eyes loved her again  
and his voice held her,  
rocked her like a baby,  
and she knew it wasn't her,  
it always something else—  
some things the same—

A Mundele in the Congo subdued  
by mundeles in another world,  
this man was no lion slayer,  
no diamond smuggler;

this man didn't swallow his pride,  
he stepped on it, and it stuck  
to the bottoms of his shoes—  
like the cheese on the pavement  
when he wiped tomato sauce  
off the laundromat windows—  
so that every step, with its sticky  
resistance, was a reminder.

### **History**

At eight years old, her father  
journeyed from Gujarat to Kenya,  
mounted on the rough back  
of his father, as they trudged  
through the jungle—

by day, their bare feet struck  
hard soil, the ground dark  
like their skin under  
the searing Indian sun  
and at night, they slept in trees  
to evade the hungry  
eyes of tigers  
and when they reached the port  
and boarded a flimsy dhow,

they gave themselves over  
to the mercy of the sea  
and the mercy of their God.

They were looking  
for something better.  
They found  
some things the same.

### **Echoes**

She can hear the sounds from history,  
from the time when she didn't exist,  
when she was supposed to be nothing<sup>3</sup>—

she hears the leaves brushing  
against her grandfather's bareback,  
she hears the tigers' paws prowling,  
the jungle groaning,  
the sails rustling,  
the ocean churning—

she hears it all, and like hearing  
the ocean in a seashell,  
she remembers hearing  
the past when she put  
her ear to his chest.

If she hears it all now,  
she can't have been nothing  
before.

### **Diamond**

She remembers the diamond  
that was in his pocket,

the one he spent fifty years earning—  
the one thing he wanted  
and got

besides her.

### **Legacy**

She remembers the hospital room,  
how all the siblings, cousins,  
children, grandchildren—  
partly his legacy, partly hers—  
gathered around the bed at dawn,  
perspiring with prayer.

His voice was strained,  
but his eyes were calm,  
and they said plenty  
as they looked around the room,  
pleading, yet somehow proud.

When he left, the children  
and their children found  
his shoes, polished them,  
scraped the cheese off  
the soles, and walked  
in them every day.

This man was no lion slayer  
no diamond smuggler,  
No, this man was something better:

he was forever

### **Watching**

She knows how it feels  
to be followed by his eyes;  
he is always watching,  
she is always noticing