

LEEYA MEHTA
The Abduction

—Lines composed in the Thar desert, six years after India's nuclear test

1

It's been six years since angels crossed the road at springtime.

Six years ago the Cherwell carried boats of scrolls whose black letters sliced through ivory sheets. We undid the blue ribbons and the words fell onto our feet, cutting our flesh. We bled. Our feet caked, shards of *T*'s and *Y*'s stuck out as we ran home in a sapphire meadow knee deep in water, gray spires suffocating as the wings came down in millions around us.

That night at the ball we crammed strawberries into angels' mouths but they would not keep silent. "The desert is so still at night," they said. "You can hear the shifting of the sand."

The juice from the berries dripped from their lips and splashed on our feet, burning them. "My stinging skin, where is my home, where is my home?" I asked. The night was fluorescent, your green dress fired cannonballs into the sky. "It is time to celebrate," you said, "not to mourn."

We danced. Fireflies in the desert broke into homes, hovered over sleeping children, entered bloodstreams, blew up spleens, burned up hearts, singed brains and livers.

"The desert rose to the sky," I said, but you had already forgiven them.

Your mouth covered my eyes, my tears made you spin round and round, your waist-length hair catching the strobe lights. Your seduction was complete, how could I resist you? You pleaded, "Love me. Love me," so I took your hand. "Dance," I said. I wished you were dead.

At seven o'clock no sun rose over the valley. The streets were empty as we dragged our trains home. You stopped for a moment to take up the fabric in your hands and then—as if you knew I would need something of you—you tore off the dirty train and stuffed it into my surprised hands.

Six years ago angels crossed the road at springtime in front of me. I stood in an emerald green dress, alone. They carried you away with them.

The empty street wound round the river's neck and as I crossed the bridge on the high street, I saw the boats sail out of view. I threw the green rag after them. I was free. I was free of you.

2

I have a memory of you alone in the night,
The rain outside, you screaming to belong,
My people you called them.
I will not accept that, I said, pushing you away,
These are not your people, these are not my people.
You wore your silver angel around your neck
As if it would protect you from hate.
Conquerors and conquered we have been
With such jewels of god hanging by our hearts.
Like the sand in the desert, you had believed
The burning train would never happen again,
That the women on their backs were the victims of barbarians,
Not our people.
“Why do you want to belong?” I had asked you.
Sometimes I feel belonging is like loving a corpse,
History's endless funerals.

3

I return without you to Bombay, the city of our birth. Memory is a curse; what have you done?

I search. I know that carved silver creature must be somewhere. You hadn't taken it with you the night of the ball, you had left it on the dresser by the window overlooking the crab apple tree. I must find that *Asho Farohar*, I must wear it, I must remember what happens when I hate, when I hate who we are because I fear our people are killers.

You could not understand why I do not like mirrors. In the mirror in the green dress we were the same person; my betrayal—when you decided silently in a room full of angels to leave me—was to let you go.

4

I have been looking for you in a hundred cities;
I have been calling your name;
I watch the mountains rise up in Tehran like
Vultures worshipping the sun;
I throw my net into the Arabian Sea and pull up
Skeletons of exiles who searched for land.

Hesitant in prayer, I stand in an ancestral fire temple in Udwada
Repeating softly, *humata, hukhta, huvarashta*
Good thoughts, good words, good deeds.
You are nowhere to be found.
Don't my children need to know who you are?

Finally, in Pokhran, in an ancient *haveli* with
A Hindu shrine that leads off from a courtyard full of peacocks
I sit silently watching for a sign.
The sand moans, the well runs dry, the angels do not come.
They will not come.