

SAMPLER

Ramanujan

Also by Amit Chaudhuri

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Ramēnujan

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One

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Ramanujan

MAHESH would cycle or simply stride
to the Broad Street Wimpy's
to get himself a beanburger.
With a wisdom not expected
of a Tamil Brahmin from Delhi
he claimed it would suffice.
In Balliol, the alternative
was jewelled Brussels sprouts and carrots
in remnants of lukewarm water.
On good days, they – the vegetarians –
might stumble upon sauerkraut
or steaming cauliflower au gratin.
You, Heeraman, chose
to forage weekly up the Cowley Road
for turmeric, rice, and chick peas
and potent jars of chana masala powder.
In the Co-op, you'd spotted 'yoghurt'.
It was chick peas that kept you alive.
In hall, you scrutinised the mash.
Poor Ramanujan! Seventy years
before you he must have been
the first meat-abhorring Hindu
to conjure up from odds and ends
– no spices then in Oxbridge, no
curry leaves, hardly anything
even for ordinary Englishmen
in a time of conflict and rationing –
a semblance, at odd hours of night and day,
of an aroma that half-pacified
the voice that asked, *Why are you here?*

Cambridge

It took us a few days after we arrived
in the suburban flat
from which Churchill College was a glimpse away
– milk left in the fridge
by an invisible hand,
bread and jam placed recently on a kitchen shelf –
to realise Cambridge was not Oxford.
It felt more beautiful for a day.
On Madingley Road, the weather
was wet, the wind
cutting.

Unexpectedly, the fens
became an invisible presence for us.

Then, to phrase it dramatically,
I was told I might die. I'd never felt
more well or alive (mentally,
I'd never been as out of place as in Cambridge).
From Addenbrooke's, they sent me to Papworth.

How numb we were on the eve of departure!
The journey, twenty minutes by taxi,
seemed to go on into the narrow-laned
mordant hush of a Cambridgeshire
without industry or migration: just glum stillness.
Here, past a roundabout, in a verdant
nothing, a lease of life was enforced on me.

Papworth Everard! I'd forgotten
the second, almost Gallic, half of the name.
Nothing to define it as an English village

except one Cost-Cutter.

Papworth.

That was the inaugural tour. The name
would keep coming up. A few days to go,
our umbrellas drenched, heavy of foot
on Madingley Road – a taxi stopped
as if the oracle had spoken: ‘Do you know
the way to Papworth?’ It was too much.
Defeated, we asked him to turn the car around.

Ancient wide building, the catacombs
coursing through it like veins! You and my parents
hovering at doorways, or standing, summer’s ghosts,
by the curtain to my bed in the ward.
The imperial fixtures of bathtub and basin,
the unremarkable generosity of space,
and, outside, sunlight. It had stopped raining!
Despite my wakefulness that night
when I lay listening

to the woman with the smoker’s rasp
remonstrating with staff recurrently,
then fell asleep, urging the dawn
to come, so I could see you
and my parents
before they took me,
despite being paraded round on a wheelchair
like a middle-aged woman in a sari
in an airport
now to X-ray, now sonography,
despite the affection I developed
for the two transplant patients who bookended my stay,
I never felt I knew the place.

I thought of Ramanujan
and the men for whom this dour house was built,
a last stop, in which the chilly breeze
through the window was therapy.
Others would sit tinkering, or daydreaming vacantly –
but Ramanujan, your spirit left your body
many times in Cambridgeshire before you went home.

Now, eighteen years after
returning one tentative afternoon
to the flat in Benian's Court,
I think of Ramanujan
where I left him in Papworth,
the war ebbing, my life beginning.
I think of you too, and my parents.

That building, unsmiling memorial
to men permanently at a loose end
among whom he was strange
misfit: what will happen to it now?

Two

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God

I listen for it
in my sleepstruck daze
in the toilet.
I know it'll be there
like a greeting
meant for no one else.
It's my acknowledgement
of the day
when it's taking form.
Loudspeakers demarcate the invisible
neighbourhoods, voices
orchestral, three bodiless
muezzins floating angrily
over the beaten dun-coloured
balconies
of Park Circus and Broad Street
in a web of notes.
You forget there's no other noise.

Today I heard it
in the afternoon – when,
on Sunday, these localities start
to retreat from slumber.
I like the low growl
which itself is half-asleep.
Though it's in my proximity
it echoes from
the horizon of new buildings and old.

I've heard it up close
where the minaret and the middle-class lane
each pretend

the other cannot possibly exist.
In five bursts, ephemerally
but recurrently, a familiar memory:
the voice
so inhabits the ear
as an admonition
you have to shut the window; it's
full frontal din, impossible
to make sense of at close quarters.
It's as if human and God were face to face,
touching noses;
difficult to delineate features
and do much else but breathe His odour.
Yet those who live without the benefit of distance
apparently don't hear it at all.

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