

Night of the Scorpion

I remember the night my mother
was stung by a scorpion. Ten hours
of steady rain had driven him
to crawl beneath a sack of rice.

Parting with his poison - flash
of diabolic tail in the dark room -
he risked the rain again.

The peasants came like swarms of flies
and buzzed the name of God a hundred times
to paralyse the Evil One.

With candles and with lanterns
throwing giant scorpion shadows
on the mud-baked walls
they searched for him: he was not found.
They clicked their tongues.

With every movement that the scorpion made his
poison moved in Mother's blood, they said.

May he sit still, they said

May the sins of your previous birth
be burned away tonight, they said.

May your suffering decrease
the misfortunes of your next birth, they said.

May the sum of all evil
balanced in this unreal world

against the sum of good
become diminished by your pain.

May the poison purify your flesh

of desire, and your spirit of ambition,
they said, and they sat around

on the floor with my mother in the centre,
the peace of understanding on each face.

More candles, more lanterns, more neighbours,
more insects, and the endless rain.

My mother twisted through and through,
groaning on a mat.

My father, sceptic, rationalist,
trying every curse and blessing,
powder, mixture, herb and hybrid.
He even poured a little paraffin
upon the bitten toe and put a match to it.
I watched the flame feeding on my mother.
I watched the holy man perform his rites to tame
the poison with an incantation.
After twenty hours
it lost its sting.

My mother only said
Thank God the scorpion picked on me
And spared my children.