

Elephants in Heat

A few days after we met you sent me a book
it had many pictures of elephants.
I saw a male beast scorched
by stove fire
belly and curling tail stacked
with precise flesh, eyes
irregular in passion.

On the margins faced in red,
two others sporting,
a female down below licked by waterlilies,
buoyant in the curlicues of waves.

I used to make up nightmares as a child
so mother would come in and lift me up
lips wet in all that moonlight.
I saw elephants in heat crawl over garden trees
the myena's nest slipped loose,
it clung to ivory:
the sky was coloured in blood
as in this painting *Elephant on a Summer Day*
Bundi School, circa 1750.

I wonder what it knew that painter's eye
seared by a fullness we cannot seize
in stanzas stone or canvas
short of stark loss:
our wiry bounding lines
silks and weathered ivories
scored by the Kerala sun
thinned and dissolved into desire's rondures

Mad covenant of flesh :
a beast unpacking
delight from his trunk
your tongue scorching mine undercover
this spring season
as sulphur bubbles from limestone

And the unquiet heart
like the pale monkey in the painting
takes it all in.

MEENA ALEXANDER