

Reaching Out

John Thieme

Imaginings flowed freely all that summer,
between the north and south, the west and east.
They travelled downwards, upwards, sideways, all ways,
striving to reach far corners of the globe.

Acned George, in England's Kentish garden,
dug twisting holes to reach the land of Oz,
hard labour for a skinny ten-year-old.
Adjourning every evening when the light failed,
he recommenced his work next day at dawn,
his goal Cassandra, living "down" in Melbourne,
unknown to George, a woman in her prime.
She texted him: no earth had moved as yet
and, lacking faith, embraced her namesake's gloom.

On a vacant lot in Minnesota,
Priscilla moved soft soil to journey east.
Her cravings nurtured first by *The Mikado*,
she tunnelled, singing songs from *Miss Saigon*.
She knew that China lay within her reach.
She'd get there if she burrowed long enough.
She'd learn karate from a black-belt warlord
and read Confucius with a bearded saint.
She'd chew chow mein, eat sweet and sour chicken,
she'd dip her egg roll in her wonton soup,
her wishes granted through Aladdin's lamp.

In a crowded town in Haryana,
coy Sita had no room at all to dig,
but she too reached another distant world
by sending messages to Augustin in Brussels.
He asked how she was coping with her exile,
now Rama had despatched her to the woods.
He was, his messages implied, au fait with all things Asian,
though, truth be told, he'd never strayed from home.
He'd read the *Ramayana* – in more than one translation,
though she hadn't yet found out exactly which.
Too well-bred to be openly flirtatious,
she laced her emails with emojis,
the smiley ones, so easy to insert.
She played his game, and answered him with irony:
no hurry to come riding to her rescue,
she loved her canopy of forest foliage,
the tigers, earthworms, crocodiles and crows.
All creatures pleased her gentle Hindu soul!

Cassandra dodged her Melbourne suburb's showers,
to reach the pawn shop down the road,
texted her ageing mother back in Athens,
to say she'd send her money very soon.
Yes, it *was* winter, but she wasn't cold.
No time to dream of other places,
she had to sell her jewellery and her gold.

Tea-Time

John Thieme

Climbing into the high interior of their fancies,
they spiralled towards Nuwara Eliya,
trusting their driver's knowledge of the bends.
Like the villages, the noonday heat receded.

The road corkscrewed through ever greener slopes,
and then, as if to order, they came upon tea-pickers,
sari-clad women with remembered headscarves,
transferred from kitchened packages at home.

"They pluck the leaves," the driver said, "for *peet-ance*".
He told them how the women came to be there,
Tamil migrants from another time and place.
"They work so hard for very little money."

He stopped the car, without their asking, saying,
"You may please take their photo, if you wish,
but first you ask permission, so it's all OK.
You ask Sonali. Wait, I call her here."

A broken-toothed, rough-cheeked imposing woman
approached the car, with proud unflinching eyes.
They pointed at their camera, gestured towards the pickers,
"We'd like a photo, showing them at work."

A rehearsed script came tripping off her tongue.
"No problem. Just take what you wish.
We like to show you how you get your tea.
First you see us, then visit factory."

She nodded at her leaf-stained, outstretched palm,
then spoke three words towards her watching crew.
Still plucking leaves, they flashed accustomed smiles,
bit-players in an oft-repeated scene.

The camera shutter clicked, she took the note they proffered,
with hands made supple by her daily toil.
"Thank you," she said. "Without you we have nothing.
I pray you'll never choke upon our tea."

She turned away and fumbled for her smartphone.
The driver smiled and tossed the coin
Sonali had just slipped him.
He, too, had played a long-familiar part.