

Poetry Section

Poems by John Thieme

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1. The Natural Order

In the desert, camels were grouping to attack alien troops.
Fish were leaping from the ocean to protest about submarines.
Crows were swooping from the sky to peck at landmines.
In the forest, apes were surrendering their dreams of becoming men.

A parliament of fowls voted to declare independence.
A school of whales decided to abandon the classroom.

A dryad was pleased to be a tree.
Lot's wife rejoiced to be turned to stone.
Ganesh pricked up his elephant ears.
Hanuman deserted Rama and joined the apes.

2. Thomas (for Derek Walcott)

Another Malabar sunrise.
Encircling dunes and palms that bow to earth,
paying mock respect to me,
their sceptical Messiah.
I doubt tomorrow will arrive,
but I'm happy building sand-churches
that may outlast another tide.

I dream about an over-crowded day,
when He fed hundreds, maybe more.
I doubt there were five thousand – who can say? –
and the wine flowed freely, that's for sure.
James and John brought shoals of fishes from the nets
they'd kept away from public view

and there were scores of bakers at the back,
kneading the miracle with their hands,
while He, upfront, entranced the audience with his tales.

I'm not naïve, like trusting Joseph.
He pooh-poohed cynics who looked twice
and said his son was human,
though not a chip from his old block.
And chaste, unsullied Mary, she could tell a story.
She taught me how to talk the talk.
So, since I never saw Him rise
and wasn't there when others saw Him after "death",
when *she* was gone, I worked a wonder of my own,
and spun my tale of *her* ascent from earth.

Now supine on these gold blaspheming sands,
sun-blind, web-footed, waving scrolls amid the fronds,
I'll spread the faith, avoiding Galilean cant,
a new hot gospel, laced with Common Era doubt.
A hermit crab moves sideways near my feet,
my first disciple, writing hieroglyphics in the sand,
Reshaping all my words in his Dravidian scrawl.
I school myself to doubt my doubt.
I talk to roaches, get wisdom from mosquitoes.
I learn the tongues of my new land.

It's true I tried to touch the nail marks in His hands.
"Feeling is believing," a knowing Roman said.
But believing what? He'd always been so smart.
Perhaps he never died at all.
I see a figure underneath the palms.
I think it's Him, come searching for me here.
Quick. I must translate His message first.

3. Chinese Chequers

I make steady progress across the board.
"Imperious" is the word you use to describe it,
while mounting a nonchalant defence
against my hopeful, hopping pegs.

In a moment of distraction, as I sip my tea,
broken orange pekoe from Sri Lanka,
I venture to remark that China
has given much to the West, and you reply,
“Oh yes, but taken so much more.
You taught us all your rules of trade,
how to give and take. We gave, you took.
That habit will be hard for us to break.
And this game? Japan gave *us* this German game.
So now we make smart sets to send to you.”

While you say this, I strive to cross the board
and steal a victory through a pincer-like advance,
hoping that your mind may be wandering to
your husband who left you eighteen months ago,
or your lover, arrested for cheating at chequers
with the sharp-faced Russian ambassador,
whose diplomatic immunity saved his skin.

“Of course,” you say, “The West has given too,
but let’s not talk about the Opium Wars.”
There’s little humour in your voice.
“One way of avoiding that past
is to put it in the margins of a longer,
finer history of walls and warriors and woks.
Oh yes, we sent you woks too, didn’t we?”

The game looks to be moving towards stalemate,
as you pull backwards from the board,
grating your chair-legs on the tiled floor.
I see a chance to win the day
and swiftly push my pegs towards your space.
You deftly thwart my move, not by ingenious defence,
but by rising to your feet. You whisper softly,
“Our pandas seldom mate in Western zoos.”