

Price of emigration

Tariq Latif

In this film a French actor plays a Scotsman
who is banished from his clan. A broken man,
he wanders around the world seeking a new home.
Our parents left their respective homelands

to improve the prospects of their lives
and their children's. Having graduated,
we play-act being British, fussing over mortgages,
joking about pensions and grudging the fact

that in our jobs discrimination is a given.
We knew, not just from intuition
but experience, that big conglomerates
and institutions practise preferential promotion.

Ramjit's father once confessed to me
he never intended for his children to stay.
To his frustration they scattered,
pursing careers, all over the U.K.

And in the last of his days, they took flights
to Panjim to share his last hours with him,
the last unknown honeycombs of his life.
Those intense moments silted down to silence.

A day later raging flames from the pyre
burned in their minds, a blaze of images:
his nervous laughter; his solemn face;
his teasing them how rich they would be

if they were to open businesses in Goa – to live
in their own country – to enjoy each year
the festival of lights with all their extended
family; his leaving them to go back home to India.

They stayed awhile, sniffing the hot
salty air of his birthplace, eating
methi aloo with lal mircha and roti,
cooked to perfection from recipes

passed down by word of mouth, by countless
generations. They conversed with uncles,
aunts and cousins who knew the family roots
from over five hundred years. Ramjit's relatives

asked again and again, 'Won't you stay? Come back
home and stay. We only ever see you and your
siblings at weddings and funerals.
You're missing out on so much family life.

You are our flesh and blood. This was your father's home.
Now it is yours, Ramjit. We know you always
had dreams to return and teach the homeless children.
It is a noble aspiration with good karma.

You'll never find the family love we have for you
anywhere but here at your family's root.
And they hugged him, one by one; and as Ramjit
wept his heart broke over two continents.

He had made a choice and knew some day
in some distant future he would
have to explain to his grandchildren
the ugly meaning of the words, prejudice

and racial discrimination, that home,
their true home, would always be India, that love,
love over-rides all absurdities. His close cousins,
uncles and aunts, unsure when they would see

Ramjit and his siblings again, all went
to the airport to see them off. They watched those planes
leave white trails that pointed to different skies.
White roots that vanished before their eyes.

Tariq Latif

Tariq has three full collections and one pamphlet, all published by Arc: *Smithereens* (2015), shortlisted for the Callum McDonald Memorial Prize; *The Punjabi Weddings* (2007); *The Minister's Garden* (1996) and *Skimming the Soul* (1991). He is currently looking to place his fourth collection with a publisher. Tariq lives and writes in Fife, in Scotland.

A recording of this poem can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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