

## **Torn Lace**

A correspondence between  
Shivaneer Ramlochan and Andre Bagoo

Dear Andre,

I confess to you: I think often of fire, my friend.

Burning bodies has always been crucial to how I understand death. The first cremation I attended was my grandfather's; he was transformed into ash and tiny fragments of bone on the banks of the Caroni River in Trinidad, according to Hindu rites. I remember the immense nature of that heat, how even out in the open it felt like a furnace. I remember the dome of my father's head shorn clean, in accordance with the traditions. In truth, fire has never been very far from my traditions. Fire is what I believe and hope will herald my death, in the end.

Despite this, I'm afraid as hell. Some nights, I close my eyes and the Northern Range of hills in flames comes to me, like the harbinger of a dream that might yet come to pass. It's true that some forests can take care of themselves better than humans can dare to imagine. It's true, too, that most forests might be better off without a human footprint. We did, after all, weaponize this fire. To warm our homes, to scorch our meat, to slough the life off our bodies when we're ready to leave.

I admit to you that when I wake in the hot night, I reach for my matchstick and candle to try to stave off the burning heartache of the world. It may never work, but I offer you such an admission. All I can do is try to caution myself against the wrong kind of flame.

Warmly,

Shivaneer (Poem attached)

## **The World's Oldest Woman Offers Herself for Dissection**

That canny empress ripped from her colony  
Shielded the lucifered tallow with her madness,  
Trailing torn lace and nitrous promise  
Through Thornfield.

Staked through their mad hearts with sargassum seaweed,  
All madwomen understand it's better to consume the manse  
With fire. It's better, if you can, to light the  
Lamps on your pathway to hell.

To protect myself from burning, I stuffed my old heart full  
Of sphagnum moss. I lay down in the bog of the  
Cretaceous country and begged for a loamy death. Let  
Every soil cradle me when it's time to go.

To keep the fire from the trees, I ate them.  
Scissor me surgically, and you will find  
Bromeliads from the Botanic Gardens  
Functioning in place of my pink lungs.

Come closer. Lean in. The Guiana Shield wetland forest  
Balances on my breastbone, Roraima's Amazon  
Reservoiring upward into my suprasternal  
Notch. Cut me there and let loose the waterfall.

Remember, as I'm laid out on an amphitheatre  
Table, what I've said about madwomen

Is that we mark the cycle of living and reforestation through fire.  
Forgive, if you can, the smell of burning human flesh.

When the world was first beginning, there was a forest.  
You can see that, can't you, staring at my insides?  
Peel back the flesh curtains, jigsaw this mountain  
Range from that one, witness how deciduous and strange it was.

Dear one, delivered mad as I am into our green basin,  
Sanctified, arboreal, calcified soft tissue,  
Deribboned skin as sucker vines, unclassified by modern  
Science – know I tried to keep growing things alive.

Even now, in the year of Our Fall 1001, when we are hotter  
And more intemperate than any combustible hell.

Dear Shivanee,

Mervyn Taylor tells the story of the owl in the Rockefeller Christmas tree the giant tree arriving prostrate, dragged by its feet, gift-wrapped in pea green paper. They found her, eyes startled, feathers, hungry, and the worker wondered if he was imagining, like that time as a child when some kids swore they saw it, screamed in the schoolyard. Imagination. Maybe this is how fate corrects the chaos of a tree's felling – with an owl. And maybe this owl is like your poems: hunting by night, a parliament of talons, heads spiraling, each a candle that buds before dying. Bring light, bring wind, rip words from others, because in our city of rain-washed histories, all the trees are falling. Dearest, you promised me poems. You sent me fire. I give you torn poems –

Yours,  
Andre

## **Tropopause**

such sheets of fire, such bursts of horrid thunder, and then, again,  
such groans of roaring wind and rain, I never  
knew such a night  
as this  
a lowness  
a poor, bare, forked animal  
a small deer  
a traitor  
a storm at his bare head  
such children  
such a fellow  
such sacrifices  
such addiction as yours honours  
such conditions  
such unnatural degree  
such a tongue  
as yours  
unconstant starts  
such dispositions as ours  
such a need to hide itself  
such a monster  
such a king



Andre,

When I was very young, younger still than my grandfather's funeral, I would climb onto my uncle's roof and gaze over the sleeping green plains of Las Lomas. In my thirty-four years of living, I've seen verdant hills denude to housing complexes, I've felt the throat of the rural part for rivers of metal, as constant and solid as long, liquid staves splicing the hinterland. When I read your poems, I taste the wind of that frayed childhood. My heart beats as quickly as the green span of an owl's. If I go mad in our Anthropocene, dear one, then let it happen to wingbeats. Hold on to this if ever you find yourself in a place made unbearable as a furnace, a landscape where the temperature has become your enemy.

Fierily,

Shivanee

PS, a coda:

### **Cinquain of Safekeeping**

When fear  
Somersaults you  
Wide as naked doves, cry  
Into the air for safe passage  
Spread wings.

**Shivane Ramlochan** is a Trinidadian poet, critic and essayist. Her first collection of poems, *Everyone Knows I Am a Haunting*, was published in 2017 by Peepal Tree Press and was shortlisted for the 2018 Forward Prize for Best First Collection. Her second book, *Unkillable*, is forthcoming from Noemi Press (2022) as part of their Infidel Poetics series. She is the Book Reviews Editor at *Caribbean Beat Magazine*, and works with the NGC Bocas Lit Fest, the Caribbean's largest Anglophone literary festival.

**Andre Bagoo** is a poet and writer, the author of four books of poems. His essay collection, *The Undiscovered Country*, is published by Peepal Tree Press.

A recording of this correspondence can be found on the WritersMosaic website at [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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