

Sasenarine Persaud, *Lantana Strangling Ixora*. Toronto: TSAR Publications, 2011. 112 pp. ISBN 10: 1894770722/ISBN-13: 978-1894770729.

Scottish poet Kenneth White calls poetry the shortest form of short story. This is certainly true of this fine collection by poet and novelist Sasenarine Persaud.¹ These poems run the whole gamut of experience, from a pleasant evening dinner and a night's peaceful sleep shattered in the morning when you waken realising that your alarm failed to go off and you are going to be late for an appointment and the traffic, the *traffic* is so slow ("Lantana strangling ixora"), to the final poem in the collection ("Elephants in the Room") where people frantically try to get rid of the embarrassing elephants in the room by hiding them in denial. Love, requited or not; politics, the experience of being of Indian ancestry in Guyana, are also some of the themes addressed in this volume.

Unlike lyric poetry, these poems are not always easy to read. In "Quattro," a man (the poet?) recalls watching his father's morning ritual of shaving in a "mirror no larger than a laptop's screen or a British Guiana postage stamp stuck on a hallway bedroom wall." It was "the only mirror in the house" except for the one in "mommy's rotating vanity" in a bedroom they hardly visited "since she departed." Finished shaving, he cleans his razor, then sets off for work on his Raleigh bicycle until "unexplained," he stopped. We're left with a puzzle... a snippet of memory that returns "in a florescent dawn facing a wall-wide glass hoisting this gift: a razor with four blades." When does this occur? At a later point in time, or when he returns? The poet doesn't say, saying much about the way life sometimes presents itself in memory.

I've found myself returning time and again to this and the other poems in this collection, resting and at times wrestling with them. As I've said, these are not easy poems, and I don't think they are intended to be. I think they are intended to *engage*, to force one to think. In "Reply to 'a white man considers the situation,' 'a man who is privileged by position, by a Cambridge degree and a cotton skin,'" the poet speaks "as one West Indian by breeding – without ancestral tree as one who mended his own trousers with multi-hued scraps before carnival, was foisted on this land as one who walked barefoot through puddles and ran on the burning grass." There is bitterness here, as there is in the reality. "Today we shake hands as one poet clothed in the epics of Europe to another freighted in the Upanishads," the poet concludes. "Truth is not the same in all cultures. Skin is not the same in all cultures or love for those who

¹ Sasenarine Persaud is the author of eight poetry collections, two novels and a book of short stories.

can afford ‘black sentries’ – and those who cannot.” In yet another poem – “In January” – “an African father makes you African – if you are born in good ole USA!” The words sting, and are intended to. My heritage is English and French with a dash of Scot. But a person with a black parent is African American and cannot claim their whole heritage, which just might be French or English and Ghanaian.

One goes home again to Guyana and finds old ghosts in memories of long lost loves, finds that one doesn’t any longer quite fit into the old country. Yet one cannot leave it entirely, either.

The final poem in this collection, “Finding Am C,” is a poignant one and one that I can easily relate to. “One thousand miles south in a book sale languishing among poetry titles” he stumbled across a poet he knew nothing about “except the blurb,” bought her book, and discovered American poet Amy Clampitt. He concludes the poem, and the book, with this: “The ash tree cut. Your leaves/ dispersed to my fingers; breath in ears/your bounty sailing on this page.”

Poet Shanta Acharya has this to say about Saseenarine Persaud’s poetry:

[It] is packed with allusions and inter-textual cross-references to other works, writers, mythologies; and of course his favourite subject, Hinduism and/or Indianness. Even a casual reader of Persaud’s poetry cannot miss this element in his poetry. The third line of ‘In a Boston Night’ refers to ‘a Krishna-blue bulb.’ There are several deeper references to various aspects of Hindu philosophy and aesthetics. Challenged at a conference of mainly Caribbean scholars at the University of Miami to define his ‘Indianness’ manifest at the centre of his work, Persaud replied that if you took Indianness/Hinduism away from his work it could not exist, that he could not exist. This is not unusual among poets and writers; one would not understand a lot of Eliot without Christianity. But for someone who has never been to India, Persaud’s intellectual, philosophical engagement with India defines his inner self and imaginative landscape.²

This is what, for me, makes *Lantana Strangling Ixora* both fascinating and challenging, the same way I found Rabindranath Tagore fascinating and challenging to me so many years ago; poems that challenge and make one think, and I like that.

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² Shanta Acharya, “Persaud’s Intellectual Engagement with India Defines his Imaginative Landscape.” *Confluence Magazine*. Online. 2 June 2012. <http://www.trarbooks.com/IABNReview.htm>.