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Ulysses at Ithaca

Sudipta Mandal

“We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods,
I should be glad of another death.”

-“Journey of the Magi”, Eliot.

“Keep Ithaca always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you are destined for.”

-“Ithaca”, Cavafy.

This country was once mine.
Not anymore.
Nevermore.

When I was stationed in Iraq,
I met one-eyed men,
men who had a clear vision of heaven,
clear and obstinate as that of a blind philosopher.
Curiously adapted to desert agriculture,
they sowed landmines, and reaped in time
blood and flesh, and what more, a wild pleasure
that comes generally from hatred of people
who outwit us.

What business had we there (you may ask)?

True. We killed as many wretched souls as we could,
all in supplication to a bloody, malevolent god.

But have we not drunk and eaten of the same Communion?

Well, that makes the journey exciting
in the first place. We find others like us, dwarfs and giants,
and size them up. You see,
the Laestrygonians in Afghanistan
were hardly less troublesome.

To continue, each day we saved a child,
and each day it returned, monocular of course,
with a jacket full of, not sweets, but explosives.

We shot them mostly beforehand.

Ethics, you say? The ethics of a soldier!

My friend, you do not read history.

Horses pregnant with men, bearing terrible infants
of a New Age-that's ethics for you!

While the City burns, you could always listen to Bob Dylan
on your walkman, and wash your hands off...

"After all, we are but pawns in the hands of gods"

But gods are not hard to appease.

Men are insatiable.

My wife Penelope had some kind of neurosis.

Her father, a Vietnam veteran, gave many sleepless nights
to her mother before allowing her

the due death.

She knew what to expect, where to look for..

I mean solace. She found it in another man's arms.

I came to know of her defection much later
when I came home.

I dealt with her lover accordingly.

What lands have we here?

Patriots are so cheap these days.

There, on the farthest portion of Guantanamo Bay
the eastern horizon beckons us
to old lands newly found, where
the paths of glory do not run through churches and prisons.

Let us get out while we can,
to find an easy nook in Empire's arms,
to live to tell stories of blood and sweat
to children, swarthy and skeletal,
who scarcely get to eat once in a day.

Bio:

The poet is from West Bengal. A recipient of Junior Research Fellowship, he was a former Guest Lecturer in English at Dwijendralal College, Krishnanagar, Nadia. While most of his poems are yet unpublished, a few has come out recently in some academic journals.