



Jess Thayil's poem, 'Lux aeterna - *nitya jyoti* - eternal light', sets the theme for Black Bough's special Issue commemorating 50 years since the Apollo 11 moon landing. Jess is working to complete a first collection of poems and her poetry has featured in *Magma Poetry*, *The Stinging Fly*, *Ink Sweat And Tears*, *Potomac Review*, *Abstract Magazine* and *Black Bough*. Jess lives in Bangalore.

Q) You've contributed new poems to Black Bough's second issue for space- and cosmos-themed poetry. Before we get into what those pieces mean to you, could you tell us how you made your way into writing poems and getting published in international journals?

A) I'm delighted my poems have a home with Black Bough, thank you. When I took up creative writing some years ago, it was after many years of not writing. Through school and university, I'd taken part in creative writing competitions and sometimes got placed first, second or third. But I gave it up as my focus on building a career in journalism intensified. So when I began to write poems again, I was overwhelmed by the excellent poetry contemporary poets were writing.

But I knew I wanted to write poems. I discovered the world of literary journals and I also started to read contemporary poetry. After a few years of actively writing and editing my poems, I started to send some of them out to international literary publications. I continue to submit my work to many of them and now I also have a manuscript taking shape.

Q) What recurring themes do you encounter in this first manuscript of your poetry?

A) It's difficult to be a woman and a working poet in the world today without looking closely at issues of gender and the realities of navigating the world as a woman. So I find those elements do come up again and again in my poems, because all writers have to be true. All poets have to continue to write what they find themselves writing. And because we're all in relationship with others as we live in the world, my poems are an investigation of a range of relationships, while also trying to answer questions on individuality.

LANDSCAPE WITH HANDS –

here known skin and mouth
the learned curve of limbs
but hands have more magic
than memories; we carve ourselves
from rock suffer storm-lash emerge
into the light I love you

and here between our hands
still pools sweet waters of eyes
our city where pasts melt.

(from Black Bough Issue 1)

Q) 'Landscape with hands' was a really popular poem in Issue 1 of Black Bough. Tell us about the writing of this poem and what it means to you?

It's wonderful to connect with readers and fellow poets through a poem! I'm pleased about 'Landscape with hands' receiving that kind of response. It's a tiny love poem that's easy to enjoy, but it's more than that.

While writing and editing the poem, I thought about giving the body and *eros* the position they deserve without staying there. Because I see it more as a poem about the act and pursuit of building, and a little journey in which the reader can end up in a city ('where pasts melt'). The poem is about devoted work. Don't we love the joyful attention in Mary Oliver and W.S. Merwin's poetry, no matter what their poems are about? I like the idea of joyful attention between lovers. So for me, 'Landscape With Hands' is rhapsody – a 'joy poem', not just a 'love poem'.

Q) We're excited about the three new poems you've contributed for the current issue of Black Bough. Tell us about them.

A) I look at themes of creation and destruction as a subset of my larger themes of womanhood and the self. I identify as a Christian by faith, but because I grew up in a country that's home to people of multiple eastern faiths, it's difficult to shut oneself off from how that kind of landscape speaks to me. Much of Buddhist and Hindu cosmology, for example, deals with the cycles of creation and destruction. If we think about an emotion like fear – it's a created thing, and so it can just as well be destroyed through an individual's agency. 'Lux Aeterna/ Nitya Jyoti', the poem you've chosen to have as the title poem for Black Bough's Issue 2, looks at a woman in danger and what she does with fear.

And, if we choose to see it, an event of creation or destruction is not just a single thing. Because two things can be true at the same time – there's creation in and through destruction while the converse can be true as well. All of that runs through the other two poems I've contributed.



Q) Your language in these poems is precise, there is a physicality in your chosen words and your images are vivid. You also work in more than one language, which makes for a rich fusion. Does this come naturally to you or do you find it hard to achieve?

Working in more than one language may come somewhat naturally to some Anglophone poets who are used to navigating different languages when they come from a country like India. People enjoy different things, and that's exciting for anything we do, even outside of writing poetry. I like that effect of 'fusion' in some of my poems, but whether or not I use one language or more when I write a new piece, I'm more interested in writing poems that readers feel at home in. And I find that saying something simply in a poem isn't easy. Lucid language can express intricate realities – I'm trying to remain devoted to the work that entails as I continue to write poems.

Lux Aeterna / nitya jyoti

in the death-churn *kanti kayapushbi*
her left hand melts fear *vagdanam dwipam*
the moon softens its tug the ocean relents
and breaks into song *shanti: shanti: shanti:*

from Bhumi's girandoles stars leap and lance
the gloom. As Varaha lifts a conch to his lips
velliccam: velliccam: velliccam:

(from Black Bough Issue 2)

Q) Would you regard yourself exclusively as a poet or have you written in different forms.

A) I've been busy for years with writing poems, but yes, I try to write some prose fiction. I enjoy writing non-fiction. If I manage to complete prose projects while continuing to write poetry, I'll take that to be a bonus from the writing life.

Jess Thayil was interviewed by Matthew M C Smith,
Editor of Black Bough Poems.

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