

India Radfar's New Poems

Reviewed by Tara Roeder

the desire to meet with the beautiful

By India Radfar

Tender Buttons Press, 2003

Paper: \$11.95

In her new collection of poems *the desire to meet with the beautiful*, India Radfar remarks, "I am growing more precise: words are demanding/ more precision of me." Her reader's encounter with the fruit of this awareness is a happy one; the pared down language and compact composition of *the desire to meet with the beautiful* makes the book precious in the best sense of the word, a tiny treasure trove of gems like "the opposite/ of a fruit tree is not a tree without fruit" and "the return should be sweet...a lightning maybe; a complicated flower.

Drawing on rich shards of language and imagery from India and ancient Greece, the promise of *the desire to meet with the beautiful* is that we will "fall into place/ into rooms of meaning/ collecting fragments." *Mirza's Cave*, the first work in the book, "describes a room/ we're not always inside/ the room of sleep." We indeed fall into place, into a carefully designed site of specificity, a room of words "cold to the touch, glistening with wetness." Radfar's language constructs an intimate space and fills it with tangible treasures. A store of "leaves that hold themselves up/ the inner bark of things/ old stones grieving, quivering," *Mirza's Cave* is also an invitation into the private recesses of the poet herself, the place she "reach(es) to for the letters/somewhere below the throat."

Radfar sees herself as a collector; gleaning from a variety of landscapes—dreams and forests, caves and gardens—she carefully chooses words that “hold flowers/ form muscle/ were beautiful to swallow.” Radfar’s reader, inexorably drawn into her precisely rendered dreams and objects, will similarly find herself swallowing Radfar’s “thick imagined leaves” and “words fruit water,” the pleasurable products of her unique poetics of distillation.

Radfar begins and ends *Mirza’s Cave* with the words of yogi Allama Prabhu, who writes, “looking for your light,/ I went out:/ it was like the sudden dawn/ of a million million suns...O Lord of Caves,/ if you are light,/ there can be no metaphor.” This dazzling encounter both constitutes our final moment in *Mirza’s Cave* and points us back to Radfar’s language with renewed appreciation for the way that her own encounter with the dazzling has “purified” her language, allowing it to express the inexpressible with sublimely crafted words that are at once hard and intensely evocative.

Paper Sea, the second work in the collection, begins with the words of Greek poet George Seferis: “I woke with this marble head in my hands...It was falling into the dream as I was coming out of the dream/ so our life became one and it will be very difficult for it to disunite again.” Radfar’s own objects and collections intermingle with a rich assemblage of Hellenic imagery in Paper Sea: “paper sea/ paper aphrodite/ paper me.” As vivid and tangible as Mizra’s Cave, it is a collection of words “slipping off smooth surfaces/ into water,” a series of shored fragments reminiscent of Sappho in their intense simplicity.

Radfar’s intense consciousness of the relationship(s) between language and control permeates the work; amidst shards of love and longing, one of her speakers knowingly entreats, “don’t let the masculine/ rise and take control of language.” Radfar’s techniques of compression create faultlines, spaces where absence signifies as much as presence; “words hide within lines/ lines create disappearances—.” A heterogeneous hoard of myth, word, and image, *Paper Sea* echoes the notions of finding and collecting that are central to

Mizra's Cave; the work is filled with the objects and absences redolent of the ocean and ancient Greece.

the desire to meet with the beautiful is an intensely pleasurable collection, a diverse and wonderfully conscious litany of light and desire. Radfar's ability to craft tangible space with her pungent, precise language creates a unique experience for her readers, an experience that Radfar herself can best illuminate: "receiving the meaning again and again...without any repetition./ the result is the object in the memory/ the presence of the text...the resonance...the transition to the beautiful."

Tara Roeder earned her BA in English from St. John's University in 2002, and will graduate with her MA from St. John's in May, 2004. This fall she will enter the PhD program in English at the City University of New York's Graduate Center.