

UMA PARAMESWARAN

The Interview

Wanted, a bilingual office supervisor,
The ad had said, but the four mouths that spoke at her
Made no reference to bilingual or supervisory skills.
Marketing, said the Walrus, tell us
How you would market Product X.
And she, adeptly riffling through cards
in filing cabinets stored back of her memory
told him how, step by neat correct step.

And then there was a pause.
Her clear brown eyes surveyed theirs
That studiously looked down at graffiti
They had scribbled on their pads.

Then Grendel's Mother reared her head
And said:
Our corporation is funded entirely by taxpayers
but we take pride in running a tight ship
Like the rest of megacartels.
Toe the line, as we say, toe the line.
The sidekick to her right nodded admiringly.
You do see the need, yes? he said earnestly
As Mother G. boomed forth again:
Now, about those placards you wear
from time to time, would you be, hm,
wearing them if we take you in?

And she answered with even keel:
All my placards, buttons, pins
Always say the same thing—Equality.
I wear one all the time,
And I would wish that all of woman born
Would wear one too, with me.

And four silent hisses breathed
Yes, that's the problem.
Placards, buttons, pins,
Yes, that's why we cannot hire you.

And she answered their unspoken fears.
I am your problem.
In me the bodies of those you've stepped over in your
race to the ivory tower;
In me the voices of those you've silenced in your climb to
brutal power;
In me the sweat and tears of those you have drugged into
helpless trance
In your Urizenic plans for perpetual dominance.

I am your *problem*, she said,
But only because you brand me as such—
A problem to be swept under the rug.
I have been there, she said,

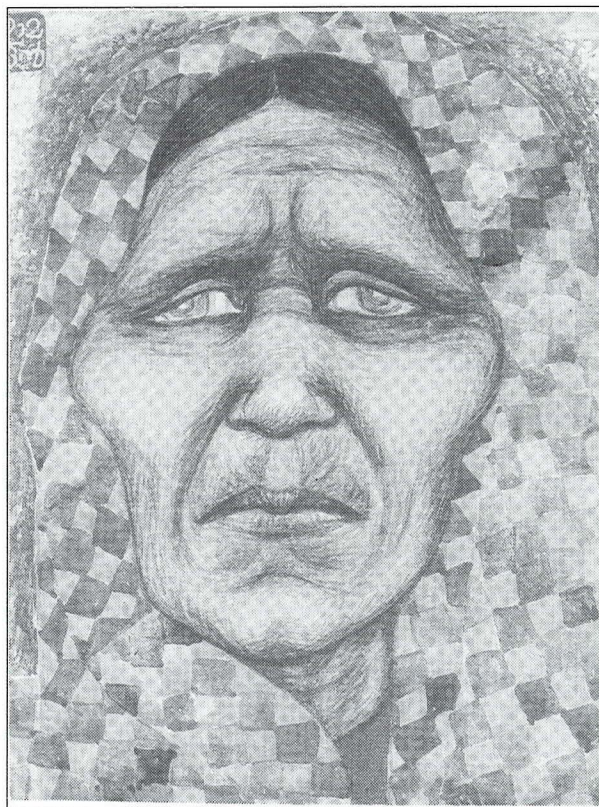
Under the rug with dustmice
That once were human beings:
once-girls pawed by your friends, crude, ruddy;
older women joked at by your drinking buddies;
secretaries silenced by your veiled threats of firing;
workers baited by your carrot powers of hiring.

I am your problem, she said,
But I am your *answer* too.
For I have been there under the rug
And I really do know
how it can be cleaned
Without undue hurt to your ego.

I am with them, she said,
I in them as they in me,
Words and voices muted in helpless grief,
Words and voices shared in agony,
Words and voices that will ring again and again
Even though you shoot down my friends and me,
Words and voices that will echo and resound
For our time that is yet to come.

The Walrus, Grendel's Mother and sidekicks
doodled on.
NEXT, they said. Let's call in the next.

Uma Parameswaran was born in India. She teaches English and Women's Studies in Literature at the University of Winnipeg.



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