

## POEMS by Binu Karunakaran

### Piper nigrum

It has nothing  
in it  
black and crinkled  
neither fruit or berry  
grown on weak vines  
that twine lofty  
trees, bear grape-like  
bunches emerald  
when raw rubies  
when ripe  
dried in the sun  
we buy them by weight  
as if they were gold  
or silver  
what does it have  
apart from a certain  
pungency like  
the roots  
of zingiberi?  
Why send ships



across the murderous  
seas? A sestertius  
is one by hundredth  
of gold aureus  
DEAR VESPASIAN  
WE SEND 100 MILLION  
A YEAR  
to Barbarica & Barygaza,  
Nelcynda & Muziris  
tell your men to be  
wary of merchants  
who sprinkle lead  
add weight to old moist  
ware. In Rome  
a pound of long  
pepper sells  
at fifteen denarii,  
white  
at seven,  
black four.

its good  
for your  
vigour  
and my



phlegm

### White Pepyr

White men came  
for the *fruyte* of a tree  
with *leuys lyke leuys* of Juniperus  
that *growyth* on the south side  
of *hyll* mounts of Caucasus in the  
*stronge hete* of the sun

the *wodes*  
they thought were guarded  
by many *serpentes*, chased  
away by *vyolence of fyre*,  
once the *fruyte* turn *rype*,  
by men of that *countree*

for them the *greyne*  
of *pepyr* was white by *kynde*  
made *blacke* by men  
of colour who  
grew them



with  
the  
blemish  
of  
fire.

Neythal

The white square sails  
of black yavana ships  
have vanished beyond  
the rim with the tide  
but the girl with anklets  
of foam is pacing the  
shore her eyes scurrying  
after the burrowing sand  
crabs, locks of pale orange  
hair blown by the wind.

Kurinji

The vine that ringed the wild jack tree  
has wilted. The spotted koel with red  
eyes has lost her song waiting for  
tender drupes to spot. It's another  
rainless year in the hills and his mother  
out foraging lesser yam has come back  
with empty hands blaming smoke from  
a forest fire for the redness in her eyes.



tonight, she'll sing  
If someone asks her.

*(From Muchiri, a sequence that explores the lost city of Muziris, ancient port in Kerala which had spice trade relations with the rest of the world for several centuries)*

\*Piper Nigrum is a fictionalized monologue/missive to Emperor Vespasian by Pliny The Elder, which draws material from Natural History that relates to the huge trade imbalance between Rome and India.

*“And by the lowest reckoning India, China and that peninsula (Arabia) take from our empire 100 million sestertii each year. That is the sum which our luxuries and our own women cost us. For what fraction of these imports, I ask, gets to the gods or to the lower world?”*

### Natural History, Gaius Plinius Secundus

\*Pepyr is a found poem from early European accounts of pepper gathering from the translation of Bartholomeus Anglicus, a 13<sup>th</sup> century scholar and Franciscan friar, by John Trevisa, a 14<sup>th</sup> century writer and translator. Early botanical descriptions of pepper were based on writings of Dioscorides, author of *Materia Medica*.

\*Neythal and Kurinji mimic Sangam era poems to recall the specific geographies and the pepper trade.

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