

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 13th century scholar and Franciscan friar, by John Trevisa, a 14th 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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