Travellers

New poems by Michelene Wandor

c Michelene Wandor
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a sudden buzz

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something made out of nothing

A Tuscan hillside. A monastery. I sit alone at a round table in Miravalle, the local restaurant. Andrea, the drama teacher, arrives. He bows a punctilious hello, flicks back a thick, caressing wave of black hair over his temple, and sits at another round table. He is an artista.

I am the poet I sit alone

overnight, my inner right arm is

angrier than a mosquito

Andrea runs the summer course. He flirts with the young women, slippy straps on shoulder-bare camisole tops. He wears a black leather jacket, carries a black leather bag. He checks his hairline carefully each morning for signs of flecked grey.

I am the poet I sit alone

the pharmacist tells me

I have very sweet blood
oil of lavender
sharp on the skin

Andrea opens doors for me, a code rusted from centuries of chivalric use. He calls it courtesy. I say they are not the same thing.

that night
I talk to the mosquito bite
upper inner arm red field spreads
the mosquito cannot buzz in English

The acting exercises are like leather.

I am the poet I applaud

bread olive oil and salt are cake
bright yellow duck egg dense omelette
hot yellow
ham and formaggio are cake
I am born into taste at my round table
white bread in olive oil
salt hits my palate
sweet and sharp
outside it rains

jasmine and eucalyptus and oleander

in the cool air my arm cools

The leather factories are in Ponte a Egola. Bus, train, TV aerials. The scent of tanning fills the air. Soft leather curls round the nape of my neck, a soft black leather jacket, loose and cooling. It fits as if made for me. I buy it and it is made for me. My leather lover.

I am an artista

mozzarella buffalo and basilica

red white and green

The end of the week Andrea joins me at my round table. The slippy-strap students wave to us. Blasts of cool air from barred windows. Outside a leaf floats, a bell, a bird in a mirror in yellow, red and black.

you have sweet blood

whine mosquitoes in the night

I wear my new black leather jacket, my dark hair streaked with grey. Drama and poetry. There is a buzz in the monastery room. Listeners look out across a green valley streaked with houses.
the mosquitoes buzz

we are artists

we make something out of nothing
the colour of botany

1.
magic in a tiny purple flower

prizing stigma, three red threads

rising from a single stem
crocus

saffron

female, though rising

male, with soft colour

a plant is gender

saffron pollen

remove stigma carefully, leaving three threads attached,

three red threads

magic in a tiny flower

purple red hot yellow

Homer tells us that Jupiter and Juno’s bed was covered with crocus flowers
dew on purple leaves

hide three red threads

yellow taste

after botany
saffron

2.

a botany lesson

Homer plants, leaves for a winter
bulbs hide ten centimetres under
ground, take out in July, divide, replant in
August, between four and ten flowers in
October

pick early in the purple morning
blooms still nearly closed
only the caps
leave the stems
female or male
there is no stigma in gender

Homer picks saffron threads
100,000-200,000 needed for today’s kilo

shake in a tambourine
toast quickly over fire to
preserve taste and colour
bottle in glass vials, store away from light
wild boar and fungus
Homer’s hands stain red gold from picking rare love for Juno and Jupiter’s bed

3.

saffron travels
risotto eaten by Romans
wearing saffron robes
saffron nestles in the Sistine roof, in
risotto alla Milanese

Perugino, little Pietro from Perugia
eats soft sheep cheeses
Perugino, master of Raphael
uses saffron to mix paints
takes ultramarine
brightens water to sharp pointed blue
for the virgin’s robe
from Rome to Florence to Perugia

Homer counts 150 flowers for one gram of saffron threads

Juno and Jupiter eat soft sheep cheeses
Homer covers their bed with crocus flowers
no-one cares that saffron is the symbol of unhappy love

Jupiter and Juno eat soft sheep cheeses

saffron colours risotto

tastes yellow love

after botany
brushstrokes
bees and brushstrokes
chasten the hillside  jasmine
and rosemary fly higher
in search of acacia

Toulouse-Lautrec sees vultures in the distance
dark butterflies, whirring, blurring
skirting cloud shapes
dancers’ skirts are white jasmine wings
    backstage they can
    can do
Henri Matisse sees eagles circle
keeping the cloud’s heat  circling
hot dancers hands painted round
    fire in the dark blue night
hot wood carbonises coal, chars
the blue sea’s edge, dancers’ feet brushstroke
the dunes, ridging like woodgrain
woven by scuttling crabs

Laura Knight sees a yellow canary
once caged to warn of danger
now flying wild, coloured jasmine
she brushes backstage ballet sylphs,
strokes canaries in free flight

the forest twines jasmine vines
silver willows sweep eyelashes
each pronouncing a different shape
birches stroke and brush the forest’s face
black vultures hiss when they feed
eagles whistle, pipe
male canaries sing
dancers’ feet rest
Laura holds a yellow feather
beached
flat, matt and packed the sand
cracks with sea traces, lines
from the last tide’s foam

feet feel cowries, fine ridged, oval
shapes too small to hear sea’s sound
feet sink, making tiny sand spires, like
cathedrals too small to sound prayer

out to sea, a solo surfer bobs
feet hide behind waves, a
spiderman shape

way back on land, a respectful distance
grass and low walls drizzle damp
stone upon crossed stone, carves
a headless bishop’s breast
prone, feet chipped,
locked stones, beached
far from sand
beyond, the surfer’s head bobs
to the sand, haloed spiderman red
by the sinking sun
behind him, the horizon exudes a false solitude

further back, the towering cathedral
boasts rock-year centuries,
the bishop’s cowrie-fingered hands
like a lingering fossil, lined
with wind-blown sand

feet on stone
the crow-black verger holds cross-keys
sweeps sand from the nave
welcomes visitors to prayer
surfs at weekends

from the beach, he sees
matchbox cars at a distance

postcard days for some
the Clock of Heaven: a fugue

(Latitude and longitude were once calculated by gauging the height of the sun or a given star above the horizon.)

1.

Marc Chagall’s grandfather clock was too tall for the shelf, so it stood on the earth

does the earth go round the sun
does the sun go round the earth
turn and turn about

Friday, we break ground out of Plymouth Sound

somewhere the sun is always shining

Monday, thick clouds winds whistle and sing a hideous storm

gold and silver

pearls, diamonds
calico and ebony

swells and roars

somewhere the sun always shines
beats light from heaven

turn and turn about

dark hell is black upon us

pepper, cloves

sails lie without use, sea swells

cinnamon, nutmeg

sea swells above the clouds

battles the heavens

water floods the air

somewhere the sun shines

waves are mountains

turn and turn about

fingers touch the moon

it takes the earth twenty-four hours to spin round the sun

the earth opens, we fall to hell

elsewhere the sun shines

no night star, no day sunbeam

emeralds.

the sea fills our ship

cinnamon

hatches to deck

cloves.
rocks and more rocks

(Latitude and longitude were once calculated by gauging the height of the sun or a given star above the horizon.)

2.

John Harrison learns woodwork from his grandfather
rings church bells
plays sweet music on the viola da gamba.

he builds a mighty clock

tropical hardwood with its own grease.

wooden teeth never snap off

a clock telling accurate time

no matter where it is

a face with four dials

surrounded by eight carved cherubs in a tangle of vines

brass, steel

one dial marks the seconds

rods and balances at odd angles

one dial marks the minutes

a clock, a cross between

a galley and a galleon
one dial the days of the month.

a mythical sea vessel

one dial marks the hours

somewhere the sun

a time machine

shines

we need a girdle about the earth
to know where we are

the sun is a ball of fire

slides down the ropes, a fiery globe

the earth is a cog in the clockwork universe

somewhere always cinnamon cloves gold silver pearls diamonds calico

ebony emeralds cloves diamonds gold calico silver cinnamon the sun shines

the clock of heaven paints numbers

on the stars

turn and turn about

Chagall’s grandfather clock reaches up to the sun

(Latitude and longitude were once
calculated by gauging the height of the
sun or a given star above the horizon.)

the sun is always shining somewhere
GBS (Great British Stripling)

George Bernard Shaw plays piano
for the heavenly choir
reviews the music of the spheres
Corno di Bassetto

bassoons grunt and buzz
violoncello hums
flutes whistle
horns are hoarse
trumpets bark
oboes squeal

on earth as it is in heaven

Marsyas and Apollo square up

on earth, a stripling, fresh
from provincial Dublin
whistles *The Barber of Seville*

Marsyas and Apollo square up

a critic’s hand should be against every man
and every man’s hand against him

a contest

the problem with the pianoforte
is that you can hear it next door

judged by the Muses

English ladies and gentlemen can sing
reasonably
out of tune without perceptible effort
they avoid the correct pitch by instinct

Marsyas plays the double reed
aulos, pipes, bagpipes.

Apollo plays the lyre, harp, viol

revive the old music
the beautiful pure choral counterpoint
of the 15th and 16th centuries, lutes, harpsichords

Marsyas plays, people dance wildly
Apollo plays, people have tears in their eyes

Shakespeare reads sonnets to his dark lady
her fingers walk with gentle gait
over the blessed wood of the virginals
saucy jacks leaping to kiss the tender inward of her hand

the judges go with Apollo
when people do less than their best
and that less badly, they inspire hate
and loathing
Marsyas is to be flayed alive

Bach is for the future

luckily Marsyas wears a sheepskin

the Viennese Ladies’ Orchestra are a bouquet

crimson silk military tunics

white shirts and skirts

Marsyas believes in free speech

is against slavery

the conductor’s sleeves are short and wide

freeing a plump wrist and arm

Marsyas is for the common people

fine artists inspire the warmest personal regard

Bach belongs to the future

hell rises, heaven descends

dances on earth

rhythm and harmony are given

given to the common people

the late Golden Age of early music is foretold

GBS reviews the music of the spheres

plays piano for the heavenly choir

Bach is for the future Apollo says he is sorry
two women

1.

two cities the most beautiful in Italy

two palaces the most beautiful in Italy

Mantua and Ferrara

cloth of gold, silver and silk

Latin, Greek and Hebrew books music and poetry

paintings and tapestries

two fine white marble statues

two princes resilience, dignity, grace and courtesy

two wives beauty, elegance, grace and wit

two women

Lucrezia Borgia, born in Rome

Isabella d’Este, born in Ferrara

two women

2.

the devil likes the dark

the devil makes almond cakes taste like sawdust

the devil makes Rodrigo Borgia pope

in exchange for his soul
Rodrigo signs the contract with his blood
written on the air
we’re all in hell until the world ends, says the devil
if this world is hell, then I am willingly damned, says Rodrigo
eating biscuits tasting of almonds

the devil is an honourable man

3,
Isabella is in Mantua her husband, Francesco Gonzaga
hides behind his desires

if you had to give birth, says Isabella
you would be more chaste

if men gave birth, they could not go to war, to keep you secure
says Francesco

touché, thinks Isabella

our marriage was arranged when we were babies
love has never come into it

France and Spain fought over Naples, says Francesco
Lorenzo de Medici kept the peace

Now Lorenzo is dead, there will be war

Plato put women in charge of a city, thinks Isabella

4.

a nun prophesies
the sword will come
the enemy will ride their horses beneath your castle walls
in sowing the wind, we shall reap the whirlwind
there will be mud and rain

   a foreign king will ride into Rome

Isabella wants to live in peace
give birth to a son for her husband it is her duty

5.
bricks fall from the windows smoke rises above the clouds.

Pontificam Habemus

a fountain in the shape of the Borgia bull spouts water

   from mouth, nose and ears

Pope Alexander the Sixth

what did I tell you, says the devil

6.

Lucrezia is thirteen
roast pheasant with almonds and ginger

balsamic vinegar and blackberries

Lucrezia’s father is pope

Rome is the centre of Christendom, and Alexander

the wild Catalan from the hills of Aragon

is at the centre of Rome

Lucrezia will marry into the Sforza family

from Milan says the pope

they will help the papacy

to capture Naples

a battle plan, not a love match, thinks Lucrezia

at her wedding she dances like an angel

with her brother, Cesare, who dances like the devil

bedcovers with gold fringes and crimson linings

7.

the French king wants permission and money

from Francesco

to march through Rome to Naples

Francesco pawns Isabella’s diamonds

the sword will come the enemy will ride beneath the castle walls
Isabella prays to the Virgin Mary

Cesare Borgia commands the Pope’s army

a ruthless soldier rides like the devil

the French army gathers outside Rome

the Pope welcomes the French with

peaches and almond cake.

to save Rome from being burned to ashes, with

jewels, gems and sweet smelling musk.

the French take Naples

bread cheese honey almond cake

8.

the French hold on Naples strengthens

Lucrezia must have a new husband

a Neapolitan, to help seize back Naples from the French

the pope annuls Lucrezia’s first marriage

Cesare swears he did not threaten the Milanese husband

with poison

9.

he is seventeen, the same as Lucrezia
a handsome Neapolitan

neither wants this marriage

she smells of cloves and honey her hair is smooth as silk.

neither is a virgin they laugh

if they pretend they are virgins it will be fun

he studies the black thread on her dress

he undresses her

she takes off her fine ruby necklace

she lets down her golden hair she is light as a feather

they see, they love each other

at the wedding

Cesare dances with Lucrezia

says he hopes she will dream of unicorns

a symbol of chastity

my dreams are the one thing which no-one can control

says Lucrezia

10.

Cesare has the French disease

too many nights in the arms of French Venuses
or the mal de Naples
depending on whether you are Italian or French
onions and honey will cure it

11.
Cesare whispers the Spanish want to take Naples from the French
Lucrezia’s husband is a Neapolitan
he is spying for the Spanish
says Cesare

Lucrezia laughs he loves me I am a Borgia
he loves Rome he would never betray us

12.
Alfonso has been stabbed no-one knows who
Lucrezia weeps

13.
the doctors immerse the Pope in a great jar
of iced water
the skin peels from his body with the shock
if you laugh on earth
you will weep in hell, says the devil

cardinals ransack the Pope’s rooms
silver rubies gold
a group of beggars carry him to the church of St Peter.

you will weep in hell

if you laugh on earth, says the devil

14,
a private villa an orchard, hedges for privacy.
jasmine, between rosemary borders
lilies, carnations, a fishpond fragrant herbs
in warm water
drawn from the earth beneath the city

I did not choose my husband, says Isabella
I did not choose my husbands, says Lucrezia

Isabella admires Lucrezia’s embroidered satin
dress, the hem a flame of pure gold
Lucrezia offers Isabella a Spanish dress
with flowing sleeves

15.
Isabella runs Mantua whenever
Francesco goes to battle no-one tells her what to do

Lucrezia smiles women can be close to children and government
Isabella smiles men never miss what they have never wanted
Lucrezia would rather have been a man not to be pregnant all the time not to be ill every time she is pregnant

Isabella smiles carnality without risk husbands take their pleasures where they will we put up with it it is our duty

it suits our husbands to think we are rivals, says Lucrezia then it is our duty to continue to please them, says Isabella

16.

on Mount Parnassus nine Muses dance

Venus is warm, soft, beautiful

next to her stands Mars, the God of war

two women laugh

two women
gates

music is

for four seasons in the lagoon city

la musica e’ divina

on earth as it is in heaven

on stage a zither hides in a kettle

a violin in a cobbler’s boot

a flute in a chimney sweep’s broomstick

when books are burned, the ash travels straight
to heaven

the ash

climbs ladders between

pages

each ghetto page in the lagoon city in 1516

each page is words

each page is music

censored books hide

behind Venetian gates in 1516

(the Venetian Duke eats kosher biscuits when he visits
the ghetto synagogue during carnival
then he leaves, by the ghetto gates)

later, in 1628

collegium musicum, the Accademia degli impediti

invites the Jews to admit impediments
for a temporary belonging

on stage con la musica

con le parole
(except when the plague rides into
town and blame rides again)

centuries seek keys to the gates
behind horses balanced on a frame flat

painted on a wall
behind tigers galloping with centaurs

watch men wrestle with serpents
see salamanders lick a dish clean
precious as ginger, sweet as syrup made with violets

centuries find the right key
wrapped in black and purple velvet
Napoleon unlocks the ghetto gates
Napoleon brings the Republic of Venice to an end
(1797 is a long way from 1516)

Napoleon burns the ghetto gates
Jews have the same freedoms
as all other citizens

…

zither, violin and flute come
out of hiding
books unfurl their pages

(it is not known whether Napoleon ate kosher biscuits)
travellers
desert  dust turned golden, fires
glow ash grey
no more wind, the dust still stings
the sun has pushed the night out

he wears a long robe, a keffiyeh round his face

she wears a long coat over a divided skirt

a keffiyeh round her face
only their eyes show

walking here, pitting strength,
loose and easy

he has been sent to bring her to Cairo

she has brought Shakespeare, maps,

leaning forward against the hot desert wind, the hamsin

 crystal, rugs, quinine, camphor, bandages, soap, flea powder, a lavatory seat

hands dangling, loose, easy

he wears a grey flannel blazer with pink piping, white flannel shorts, a bright red tasselled belt round his waist, to show he is a bachelor

the fire shimmers the waterhole rusty
her favourite moment is sugar in the first cup of coffee
in the chill of dawn

The British are making schemes.
to remove the Turks.

maps, held firm

s he says the best way to catch fish is to put a basin,
weighted with stones in the stream. Bread in the basin.
Cover the basin with a cloth, with holes. The fish swim
in, get the bread and can’t get out again.

The British are planning to enter
Jerusalem, to end the Crusades finally.

he likes a breakfast of milk, eggs, bread and honey.
(he was deemed unfit for military service)

pointed fingers moving fast

he becomes Lawrence of Arabia

she is the uncrowned queen of Iraq

once camels would have circled

The British government needs
Palestine, in order to guard the Suez Canal.

you shall sleep in their houses and eat at their tables

Palestine will be divided between the British and the French. The British
must protect the oil.
the plain is covered with places wherein they have rested

The British have promised the Arabs independence.

an Arab tent, black goat’s hair

Britain and France will share in the exploitation of oil.

she wears her hat to dinner

a fire of desert scrub burns in a shallow hole in the ground

The word ‘guest’ is sacred from Jordan to the Euphrates.

the desert is thick with associations

lamb and rice bread olives

ces of milk and lemonade

she has never been so sunburnt in her life

the Iraqis call her Khatun

Lady of the Court

a rich red brown

not at all becoming to a lady

bright, crackling fires

he has lived among the Arabs

he has quitted his English self

in England she is just a woman, an empty jar
here she is in linen and khaki

tamarisk

sometimes she wears blue-green velvet in her hair

the night is moonless

stars above the fog

the tribesmen understand him because he wears Meccan clothes: embroidered silk and gold

the voice of the wind will be heard

she knows all the sheikhs

the Mesopotamian tribes

Arab clans campsites

wells railways lines

the touch of rain and frost are sharper than praise or blame

He is to help organise a rebellion against the Ottoman Empire.

murder will be like the drinking of milk.

He wants to draw on her reports for his campaign.

murder will be like the spilling of water

In Cairo, she will have a post on the Military Intelligence Team.

the mountain wears a skullcap of snow

She will be the eyes and ears of the British and convince the Arab tribes to co-operate.
a wet evening mist rises from the ground

The British have occupied Baghdad.

She wants to make Baghdad a great centre of Arab civilisation and prosperity. To move the Arabs towards independence.

the trees must be washed

they are very dusty

The British will not give up Iraq. She must come to Cairo to put the Mesopotamian case. The Arabs can gain independence afterwards. It is distasteful, but it must be done.

the voice of the wind will be heard

She is Sheherezade in the Arabian Nights.

He says, come to Cairo, Miss Bell.

She says, I will come to Cairo, Mr Lawrence.

one day they take the tent down and depart

and the place is left desolate

his woollen cloak is covered with silver beads

when the wind shifts, the women set the tent up to face in another direction

the touch of the rain will be gentler than praise or blame

they are in a country like a garden of flowers.

murder is like the drinking of milk
They will lunch at the Savoy in Cairo.
Turkish coffee. Cigarettes.
pale blue hyacinths

She will wear a soft black satin gown,
the skirt down to the ground.

irises and red anemones

purple hellebore dot the grass

The British will break their promises.

the mists lift their heads from the hollows

They have sold the same camel twice.

wisdom hath builded a house

she has hewn out her seven pillars

Does she think she is a spy?

I am a traveller, she says.

So am I, he says.

in the eastern sky

the strong yellow rays of the rising sun

a pine cone from a cedar in Lebanon
two men

they are in a country like a garden of flowers.

Khalil, Palestinian, Christian, poet
in Jerusalem

Alter, American, Jewish, poet
in Jerusalem

America has entered the war

the Turks say anyone hiding an American is a spy

the word ‘guest’ is sacred from Jordan to Euphrates

in the desert, says Khalil, I would roast a sheep

your sheep is not kosher, says Alter

bread and olives tea with lemon

two men

arrested on the last day of Ottoman rule

December 1917

The British have entered Jerusalem.

two men

sit back to back their

hands tied together behind their backs

the plain is covered with places wherein they rested

walking chained socks in rags.

four days to Jericho.
chained socks in rags. walking

how many days to Damascus

they shall sleep in their houses

I could teach you Arabic, says Khalil

I could teach you Hebrew, says Alter

two men

in one cell

they shall eat at their tables

Now the British have entered Jerusalem

Palestine belongs to the Palestinians.

Now the British have entered Jerusalem

there is a Jewish state. It is promised.

A promised land.

the nightingale nourishes the red rose with his heart

There is a Balfour letter of declaration

says Alter

It is not an internationally approved document. It is not even a formal promise by the British government

says Khalil

the strip of herbage divides the desert from the sown

The British are fooling the Arabs, says Alter.

The British are fooling the Jews, says Khalil.
a wind catches at the boughs in envious mood –

when we are free

My study in Jerusalem will have green walls and black furniture. I shall have a telephone says Alter

when we are free

My house in Jerusalem will have an orchard and a tennis court. I shall have a telephone says Khalil

wisdom hath builded a house

they are released on bail

You can buy a new pair of socks, Mr Sakakini, says Alter

they will sit on cushions and drink coffee

We shall form a group of Jews and Arabs, Mr Levine, says Khalil

a jug of wine a loaf of bread

Hebrew for the Arabs

Arabic for the Jews

some olives tea with lemon

one day they take down the tent and depart

two men
forest fire in Provence

haze has

    fired underground dry resin, unprompted clouds rise

pinning red through the wind. changing yesterday’s green

the fire speaks sparks, cannot control its speech, a

    person with too much to say and no order

in which to say it

the damage measured in area and value by men who

received postcards from relatives last summer

their elbows are comfortable, though

some will have no tables this winter
American Brando

Harley-Davison roars splat, spattering
fumes, toxic, noxious, an
American dream, dreaming

face, lips tongued, arrogance twanged
through narrow lanes, across
flat fields, nose to gate, a gale gently starting
an East Anglian farmer bends, shielding his eyes from
the wind’s tears, no time to bid the day across

rows of white crosses growing from the ground sweep
by the bike’s side

legs streak splashed mud from careless wheels
leather back streaks away
crosses are alone
nothing crosses their minds, not even a dream
Sheba and Solomon

1.
Sheba comes to Solomon, and after
the exchange of gifts, they share a red and purple
velvet cushion

    sewn in stars and moons, no
graven image

    red and yellow and pink    and on
the hot pink    Sheba rests her hand and drinks
with Solomon and they
listen to the women singing

    (they do not know that after the
     Second Temple women’s voices and
     instruments will be banned )

and Solomon lifts Sheba’s hand and guesses her fingers

must be heavy after the business of the day

and Sheba smiles

and the women sing

2.

with the wine so warm and Solomon’s beard

like velvet    it is easy to cushion in

the dark tent
next day Sheba blinks in the cold morning sun
moves away from Solomon, and the velvet cools

3.

Sheba remounts her camel
moves in a cocoon of mist her women beside her
the dry desert promises lushness
ahead every breath is damp
the horizon shimmers silver mercury
their skins glisten, their feet glide

Sheba dreams of her Biblical sisters
running round the rims
of earthenware, as real to her as
her own body

graven images, forbidden women arousing something deep
imagining muscles moving, tendons flexing, bronze roundness
glowing a ruby danger, far away from Solomon’s red and purple passion

Sheba pulls her robe close around her
5.

the Bible does not relate details, but nine
months later, Sheba is delivered of a son
she is a rich woman in her own right

for this is the land of Ophir, which some say is in
the heart of Africa, where King Solomon’s mines are

this son, called Menelik, grows towards
Ethiopia where he becomes the first king of the Jews

6.

the Bible rides through the centuries
and it comes to pass
that the Ethiopian Jews, the Falasha, are outlawed,
their lands seized and a rabbi brings his family to St John’s
Wood, to give a talk about their plight

(not knowing that now women’s voices and
instruments are no longer banned)

7.

I come upon them in Regent’s Park
marvelling at the giraffes, something kindred in the way their
necks crane
I begin a conversation, the woman’s English is slow and halting. She is as beautiful as Sheba. Her children play in a patch of rare sun on the grass and roll and tumble.

She wants to tell me something.

She comes close. One year, she says, a strange thing happened. Everyone knew.

No-one remarked.

All the women menstruated at the same time.

I nod. I have heard of that happening.

Nuns, I say. Mothers and daughters living together.

This woman, who smiles and whose face is soft and such a different colour from mine, puts her hand on mine and says isn’t it strange how we live such different lives.