



“Play Wisteria for Me”: Poetry as an Augury of Tropical Future(s)

Kathryn Hummel

Birla Institute of Technology & Science, Pilani, KK Birla Goa Campus, India

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4086-4503>

Abstract

Set within diverse milieus of tropical, coastal India—in Goa, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh—this suite of poems joins personal narratives to wider contexts, exploring everyday perspectives and experiences that reflect or hold the potential to shape futures in regions where tradition intersects with contemporary concerns. Drawing on social and political complexities as well as poetic realism, the poems emphasise speculative elements of physical and ecological precarity and the unfixeness of the self (Barron, 2019). Alluding to public health crises, environmental shifts and the psychological impacts of rapid development, the poems also address technological engagement and multispecies vitalities through depictions of changing urban and natural landscapes. With interlinking themes of solitude, longing/belonging and community, the poems navigate the liminal spaces between utopian desires and dystopian realities, mediated through personal and cultural interactions. Collectively, the poems speculate on tropical futurisms grounded in locally-rooted thermal and ecological experiences, while challenging conventions of the “futuristic” according to regional specificities. This paper moreover adds to the ongoing discussion regarding the role of creative practice as research, offering a poetry-led perspective on the potential trajectories of coastal Indian communities.

Keywords: creative practice research, poetry, tropical coastal India, speculative futures, ecological experiences, tropical futurisms

Flirtation in the Time of Nowhere

so let us sink then
 you & i
into the muffled afternoon

clearing wafts of paranoia
& pestilence
 broken in with
the unsealing of my door

 bring your own bottle
your own body to isolate next to
mine make marquez our
 daily text

between the grating & the net
 isn't the sky blue?
surgically masked magically
real under
 my lock; your key

if home
 is too far from reach
its margins
 contracting

make our own music
 easy
at the cruise time
of seventeen hundred

what a swell party you
propose
 the whole household
invited

if our joints ache
it's only from the
 last weight pulled if

we blink it's from
unaccustomed rest
 there's only so much
inside ground
 to disinfect

dark rum'll do
 just fine for setting
hands alight

eyebrows we can
 pluck more or less
into such
articulate questions

children will be pulled
from our path

as we swipe left for diagnosis
 right
for antidote

anything might be part of the cure
 dystopian reelings
 freak falls
of rain

interior relief

all
that's missing
is the breeze

Touchstone

small talk—small world

if that's what this is
striking an empty echo
in a packed chamber

captains of the popular narrative
letting off skyrockets
of unimpeachable virtue

two-dimensional villainy
impeccable in *khadi*
coloured in by puritanism

nobody chaperones
the chaperone
nobody is the keeper
of their kin

the bloodlines of sanctimony
do not concern
the follow spot

late night
monsoon catastrophising
Ezekial on Cain: *It may be of
some importance /
he kept his nerve*

who to abjure—how to submit
to the toothless product

when was right ever so rigid
truth so reactionary towards
the beautiful multiplicity

counterpoint hereafter
an act of faith



abstraction the only
recourse
to survival

possible slogan for undies:
no outsiders allowed
probable slogan for T-shirt:
evolution is a slow burn

Pix/elation

Disco lights in pixelation under rain.
This is what we stepped out for: lychees
& bit flips. The screen of my phone glows
signals through my unlined bag. There are
so many strings to pluck. Heart: ham:
draw: latch. Almost all at the point of
unravelling. This isn't the time to score
the half-written list of acknowledgments.
We can stare hard enough at transience
till crystalline. It won't alter the compound.
They will be—we are—terribly lonely
animals. I'll take my chances northward,
to a powered out laneway & a half-kaygee
of rough red unwashed skins. Edible
luminosity in the dark. You, tending east,
check in—while you can. There are no
goodnights to say at the wicked-away
end of an almost full, good enough day.

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The magic is in the editing but nothing need be purged yet from this hour: much more from the before, from what it took for us to get to here. The calmest water can conceal a fraught of rock, or broken glass still jagged before turmoil. Opacity takes time: it took us less to brush down our aching limbs and ride out in spite of rain, certain of our destination. You knew the way

but the blue temple marks the land, its foundations cleft and guarded by a tribe of dogs bred sandy and white. Streaks of rain tempt us through a hairline paradise where the canopy's wreckage engulfs the sand, ghosting our footfalls, giving way to the waves we can only sense from the drench in the air. There's a reason why olives are taken with wine. Salt and fruit sublimate

the senses through a razor-thin meniscus, cutting then misty. Fallen *thaati pallu* bare their filaments of flesh with waning sweetness. It's not proper unless there's skin in the sea and tonight the waves test warmer than the air: a fever pulsing against the crown of sand. To both, my body has the least resistance. It strides out until it finds a depth suited to its length and drift,

broken pieces drawn beneath. All of them, broken pieces: foam sweeping past like fire: your limbs inclining with distrust. Unmarked hide of a small dog risking the storm: *merupu*, her name. Layers of nerve stripped away: salt in the vein. A flood of different waters from sky: from sea: from pore: from well. The fragments you let me break off you restored by the thunderous waves.

Play Wisteria for Me

Some Saturdays there will be time for another quart in the short morning. For another crack at perfection—at cracking imperfection. In the absence of amends during the long unmagic hour, the fantasy girl hasn't mouldered. Clavicles scalloped by lilac lace, kneecaps turned in discreet pli \acute{e} —her reluctance secondary to the composition. Petals at her feet seem pinioned by the rain. Things of chitin and wood before departing for a damp soir \acute{e} e. It's spring, and the light's superlative.

Mix turmeric into honey to anoint raw sores for healing. Golden coronae blossom through sleeves and sheets, lurid remnants of death dreams as sweet as paste and uninflamed resurrection. There's no nonsense to the secret earworm of the deluge that strums through sleep, in catching its patterns to work into the tapestried morning. New threads—Heart of Daisy, Phallus of Crocus—stitch together a noxious haze. There's never a precise shade to match to disillusion.

'After you' is such a frosty expression, mannerly but short of rue. It signals this cool saturation, detached at the heart from a progressive pulse. Substitute some of Rachmaninoff's volatile tempos. Everything's closing, aligned to the reeling earth, the folding of diurnal blooms, to shopkeeping hours. Still, nothing's finished. Nothing's ever done. Another child's pending from a mandrake root. Notes from wisteria's sousaphone strike out like months in a delicate year, like tremulous petals—falling, disintegrating.

Poetry as an Augury of Tropical Future(s)

For many years now, I've travelled from coast to coast: south to north and back again from where I come from in Australia to where I have been living in India—along the sultry coastlines of Goa, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh, the composition sites of these poems. With discrete and, at other times, interwoven themes of solitude, longing/belonging and community, the selection delves into the liminal spaces between utopian desires and dystopian realities, mediated through personal and cultural interactions. This convergence of personal, interior narrative and wider outside context is echoed in the progression of observation and interaction towards circumspect speculation. In this way, the everyday events and perspectives explored through the poems reflect or hold the potential to shape futures in regions where tradition intersects—easily or not—with contemporary concerns.

In “Flirtation in the Time of Nowhere”, the longing for physical intimacy is transformed into a political event as routine life becomes a threat and familiar community a dystopia. While concerned with pandemic futurisms, the pre-monsoon “freak falls of rain” alludes to climate change and its risks for tropical coastal living: despite its sly tone, the poem articulates perils beyond viral infection. “Touchstone”, like “Flirtation in the Time of Nowhere”, contemplates elements of socio-political precarity and the unfixedness of the solitary self, evoking poetic realism (Barron, 2019)—albeit through the lens of post-truth and cancel culture. Khadi, a hand-woven cloth symbolic of India's independence movement, refers to a resourceful past while indicating an increasingly dubious iconicity; similarly, the allusion to the poet Nissim Ezekiel's depiction of a stoic Cain suggests the necessity of keeping one's nerve now and in the deluge to come (2005).

“Pix/elation”, “Urumu”, and “Play Wisteria for Me” collectively address technological engagement and multispecies vitalities through their depictions of changing urban and natural landscapes. In “Pix/elation”, the errand that brings the speaker and addressee together, as well as their eventual distance and separation at different points in the city, foreshadows the physical and psychological impacts of rapid development. Despite the tenderness of its narrative, “Urumu”, the Telugu word for thunder, evokes the ravages of coastal weather: the dis-ease in the air, the currents in the Bay of Bengal and the shifting tectonic plates of the earth. The domestic scene described in “Play Wisteria for Me” moves beyond the interior: commentary on the environment outside is contained in the descriptions of a springtime picture-within-a-picture to homemade natural remedies. This paradox is sustained until the final stanza, which describes the onset of twilight in the neighbourhood—and perhaps in civilisation—while alluding to the growing population on a delicate and disintegrating earth. In each

of these poems, the “I” is solitary, even in company; the interplay of disconnection and desire creates a tension that speaks to tropical futurisms grounded in locally-rooted thermal and ecological experiences, while challenging conventions of the “futuristic” according to regional specificities.

For the precarious tropics of the Global South, the imminent era may not signify decolonisation or self-directed development but even more loss: homogenisation rather than hybridity, as physical domicile and environment follows cultural identity. What connects these poems is not only the country that inspired them, but their implications of or reactions to change and to portents, captured through the imagery of tropical futurisms and their potentially lacerating outcomes.

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Kathryn Hummel (PhD) is an Australian/Kaurna yerta-born writer, researcher and multi-media artist. Her digital media/poetry, non-fiction, scholarly research and fiction has been published, performed, translated, awarded and anthologised around the world. Of her six books of poems, the latest is *Lamentville* (Math Paper Press); her narrative ethnography *Udbhēda: Details of Bangladesh Life & Adda* (Vernon Press) was released in 2025. As a Visiting Associate Professor with the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Birla Institute of Technology & Science, Pilani, KK Birla Goa campus, Kathryn teaches and researches at the intersection of social science, cultural studies and the arts.