

(WITNESSING THE) ASKING FOR SEX IN A HOLY TOWN IN  
KARNATAKA

Becca Campbell

He saw me sitting idly on my motorbike,  
watching the auto-drivers swarm angrily around him.  
“He’s asking for a girl,” the coconut-seller standing next to me,  
explains.

A bee’s nest disturbed.

He saw me take note of the man jumping away from his touch  
as if his ignorance was contagious.  
We had spoken earlier, awkwardly, and he left abruptly in the middle  
of a sentence. Questions hung untidily in the air-  
City boy, where are you going?

A bee’s nest disturbed.

He didn't see me drive ahead to the place where I knew he would be taken to.

Clumsy demands; irate response.

He had been waiting for his friends,  
party guys, arriving at night.

Big buses crunching over bursting landscapes.

A bee's nest disturbed.

He saw me staring as he was pushed into a small room by the men  
who live there;

their cricket bats used for more than games that day.

Beaten, disoriented, panicked, and pathetic.

Finally, he emerged.

Walking up to my spot of uneasy observation, fearing for what may  
happen next...

"What more will they do with me?"

Honesty.

"I don't know."

Whimpering, pleading,

"Can you tell them to have mercy?"

Curiously digging,

"What did you do?"

Flinching.

"I can't tell."

Dig.

"What did you do?"

Shame.

"I can't tell you."

Have you ever overflowed with sorry-ness?

A sad, quiet howl; you can sense it from all angles when it happens.

So many bees' nests disturbed today.

## ARTIST'S STATEMENT

This poem was written in an attempt to work through a confusingly tragic situation that happened in my fieldsite in South India. The bewilderment continued to stretch itself in unanticipated directions; the longer I watched the situation unfold. What I have always known to be an extraordinarily peaceful place, particularly in its public expressions, suddenly had become grounds for aggressively proving a point to a young man who made a huge mistake.

This young man, coming from a nearby metropolis, mistook the nature of the town to be more of a party place than it is and was asking around about bringing “a girl” to a room. What ensued was a jolting rupture of what this young man had anticipated happening on his vacation, and a shock for me observing the unfolding of this confrontation.

The initial annoyance I had felt towards this man, and his complete and total unawareness of the environment he was in was quickly replaced by a deep feeling of sympathy and concern. He was trying desperately to enact a version of what he thought would be a fun holiday for his friends and himself.

Suddenly, I, the anthropologist, became the point person for this man to try to negotiate his prolonged punishment with the local people whom he had seen me interacting with. Observation is, of course, paramount to the anthropologists' work, but it is when we are forced into situations through the practice of observing that webs of knowledge, relations, experience and expectation get stretched and twisted, resulting in more complicated, occasionally horrifying and profoundly imbricated forms than we originally began with.