

Layers

Zaffar Kunial

Layers, Zaffar Kunial, 2017

Zaffar Kunial was commissioned by Manchester Literature Festival and The Whitworth to create a sequence of new poems responding to the work of artist Raqib Shaw. He also took inspiration from a visit to Raqib Shaw's studio in Autumn 2017. The poems were performed at The Whitworth on Thursday 19th October as part of the 2017 Manchester Literature Festival.

Manchester Literature Festival
The Department Store
5 Oak Street
Manchester
M4 5JD
www.manchesterliteraturefestival.co.uk

Copyright © Zaffar Kunial

Manchester Literature Festival would like to thank The Whitworth, Arts Council England and Manchester City Council for their generous support.



Manchester
Literature
Festival

the Whitworth



Supported by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



**MANCHESTER
CITY COUNCIL**

Layers

The Lyric Eye (from *Faber New Poets 11*, 2014)

Metbinks I see these things with parted eye

– William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

I've stood at your portrait at different times.
Clocked my own face, now and then, in the glass.
A cloud, eclipsed. Vaguely before, or behind
you. Half cast. At a loss.

Even the gloss
back then, at school, left me looking this blank.
In the dark. Not on the same page as you.

But when I stand, here, almost in a blink
I can place my eyes – glazed over your stare;
let you lend me your ear, your famous cheek;
let the flare of your nostril stretch thin air;
even try on your earring, from five feet,
four centuries apart. I swear – by this lapse –
the light on your mouth seems cast
half on mine
when I borrow the line between your lips.

The Fourth Wall

I grew up in a golden age
for the bedroom
and I haven't grown out
of it. I say golden partly
because there wasn't much to do
on either side of the bright
door lock. And I hadn't
discovered reading.
But the future came in
every so often

through the wallpaper.
My first was dark shades
of yellow, prismatic as dust
in butterfly wings, or as leaf-light,
smudged like the first morning.
The second was black Star
Wars vinyl-coated wallpaper.
Faces floating in galactic
darkness. The third was splashes;
flicks of yellow and red and blue

against white; and the other day,
I found a matching duvet cover
in the depths of an Age
UK charity shop on Bridge Gate,
and eventually picked it up for a price
it might have fetched when new; new
as the upper world that flickeringly appears
and dissipates like spirits or sprites
into a forest's small keyholes,
or a man into a second-hand

shop in midday in midsummer
with a son who wants toys.
Though the father doesn't need
the duvet cover with the primary

colours, he can't leave without this,
as well, a fine example of past imperfect –
the exact shades he used to wake
to, the same watchful shapes too
laid over those other surfaces
that before would keep him in.



'After A Midsummer Night's Dream' After a Midsummer Night's Dream

Artwork © Raqib Shaw. Photography © Raqib Shaw and White Cube (photographer Ben Westoby)

Self Portrait as Bottom

1

In the first layer of this picture
you'll find flora and fauna
and me. A head braying.

In the second layer, painted over,
underneath, is the artist laughing at me.

In the third, more buried, he is realising it is himself.

2

Flying across the Atlantic my first and last time
they thought I was a mule, or something, at the airport
and though my bags were pretty empty
they thought someone would pass me something
or something and I had to be escorted until departure
by unspeaking security. And the face I thought I saw
that morning in the mirror, O so early, was O, O
not the face I wore and the beard it looked past
seemed to grow more with armed guards either side of me
all the way to those magical movable stairs
and the breezy fairy door of the plane
and me sinking in my numbered seat.

3

Does my head look big in this?
They said it as a joke. I wasn't
in on it though. But I laughed
when they did. Here's me
guffawing with my big teeth.

Here's flowers. Beautiful like me.

Here's silks. Threads fit for angels.
Here's butterfly catchers with bug eyes.
Here's gods with the wrong heads on.
Here's ivy-cladded blue dryads riding swans.

Where is this wood near where
I'm from? An impossible place.
The inside outness of it.

Here's me getting on the train.
And seeing the shadow of the head you see.

Here's me stepping out in prose. A rude weaver who or what can't
stitch a numbered speech.

O, O God the shame of it. The bottomless difference from what I
thought I was and this. My eye had not heard. O kiss my ears. A poor
man's minotaur. A weaver what or who has lost the thread of who or
what he or it is. Hath you heard the language I speak? But can't be.
Or be the picture of. Look at my shadow.

A mouth beyond earth braying. A bray you translate for me.

4

Numbers.
No poetry in them
but here's me in them
and them in me. I spat
into the bottom
of a test tube
drop by drop
and posted it to a lab
across the North Sea.
But before it went
into the box
and their SAE
I stared at my shadow
in the test tube
and in that plastic

alembic's elongated U
was an elongated
face of me
staring past my drool
trying to summon –
or glue, the way spit
does a stamp –
the unconnected
unspeaking dead.
Me from thousands
of years ago
so the science says.
Let's get down
to the numbers.
What could be more
prosaic? I am split.
50 % Europe.
50 % Asia.
The numbers speak
to me and feel like
a thousand-year stare.
But the numbers
thousands of years ago
didn't end there.
18 % of me
is from the narrow island
they call *Great Britain*
and then *17 % Ireland;*
8 % Europe West;
3 % Scandinavia;
3 % Finland/Northwest Russia,
and *1 % Italy/Greece,*
labyrinthine lands
of the minotaur
and the lost thread.
And from my dad?
48 % Asia South.
Which means my father's
folk were converts in the near
past, perhaps lower caste,
believers in the many,

in cast blue gods, or
Buddhas, or the hard
to define forest gandharvas.
And the last 2 % of me
is from what they call
Asia West, or *Caucasus*,
which is anywhere
above the Himalayas
to Turkey and the Black Sea,
almost meeting
Mum's small Italian/Greek
but not quite.
And this bit, the almost meeting,
I've felt at some level,
a low level, mutteringly,
a kind of abysmal underneathness
or usness, underneath the heights
of language, which ridiculously
I looked to see in that U-
shaped test tube, through
saliva's bubbled glass,
and to see it face to face
and not only
in part, or passing
or past.



'Self Portrait as Bottom (A Midsummer Night's Dream)'

Artwork © Raqib Shaw. Photography © Raqib Shaw and White Cube (photographer Ben Westoby)

Bonsai

One collected begonias,
and was tempted by bonsai.
But worried that their tray world
was too shallow and cruel.
The other grandfather –
more short-lived – wouldn't wear
shoes. Survived only three
days after a snake found a foot.
Mohammed Said. The name reads
in English like a sentence cut.

I do not own them, this day's owner
says, of his bonsai, their situation
occupied also, by potted begonias
that fall brightly and move me, to a garden
in Polesworth and flip a Saturday
to Sunday. Visits to England
from England. But this steady
pine I can't name has a Himalayan
air. And a three-century old sigh.
The soil's slight incline to the tree's

trunk moves a mountain to here.
If an exile's sigh has a word, or sign,
for me it's *such*. Such. A custodian
of what has passed beyond reach
or owning. In my father's house, *such*
means 'true'. Said at the far end of a sigh,
followed by a cigarette drag. On hearing a fellow
from a mountainous place say 'Life is short'
or 'That's how it is' ... A sigh, then: *Such*. I'd wait.
Nothing. *Such what?* I'd think. *Such what?*

*

I go back into the room of the Saturnian, stately
pine. A trunk of wounded rings, collecting inches

from each owner's time. I stare, soon rooted to the spot, to what I couldn't let pass. An old flinch, wanting to correct or prune my father's version of Himalaya. He said the end like the clipped end of Cordelia. And the second syllable, the one in his middle, was a drawn-out ahhh ... *Himabbbbia*. It ends like *a layer* – I'd think. Later I'd see better: all four syllables are his. A sole one I say as him.



'Self Portrait in the Study at Peckham (After Vincenzo Catena) Kashmir Version'

© Raqib Shaw. Photography © Raqib Shaw and Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd