W is for Walt Whitman’s Soul

One of the very first Indian words to enter the English language was the Hindustani slang for plunder: “loot.”

William Dalrymple

It sits with a fork made from a lotus on an ivory chair eating an elephant steak in the company of bears and feral nautch girls on a monsoon evening incandescent with an appetite as mighty as railroads spann’d across seas and reclines, its cheeks burnished, its ass varnished by suns setting on bronze and sugared with saltpetre, its torso a tableaux for the annals of rectitude, the theatre for roiling or robust passage, a veritable Suez Canal towards missionary victories which thrust from such bejeweled and oiled loins anointed by coin—that emission of plump plums, lump sums into the Ganges, that coiling coy virgin maiden winding her languid locks, batting her lashes to its lashes—its spine a gentle wire. Supine, its belly swells with salt and figs with meat and treaties, it corks open a profound song—itself it sings into books heavy with truths on the chair dressed with leather and raw hides kissed by ox blood smeared with beef dung lined with raw silk woven from worms plucked from boughs basted across its pious beaming eyes its spidery ghosted lids, and its byzantine glance unmoors from its Chinese porcelain and crosses the ebony table polished with lac secreted from the cloaca of the kerria lacca set with glazed cakes eaten by pinked mouths wearing crimson robes, to its guests polished and glossed and stained by the ooze drawn to color the uncolored raw linen, the wood, the human. Then its wrist cuffed by gold and cowries and studded with coral draws
a whisper-thin muslin veil dyed carmine—sucked from crushed scale of cochineal boiled in ammonia and bled into curds and rouge glinting sanguineous and turbid between bug and rug snug a thug in redcoat or a turncoat carrying urns of this stuff—from estates of cocoa coconut calico—across its face while soft éclairs of chocolate bumble out from its plumed rump choked with gum and linseed flax and cassia cinnamon and pepper like so many lines of blood underwriting the mutton and not the goat so it can it sell them with a name of a place like scarves or garlanded whores moored to wharves suckled by mother of pearl or teas named after Earls and they with whole scores to settle settle for homemade cures nettles ginger turmeric—a paste or to taste—and it steals and seals in letters scented with sandal sent abroad waxed and pressed with cornelian gems honed from ground it owns and makes stone from their flesh ekes ink from their sweat soaks indigo in lye fermented with time and makes color so it can bid for its own passage, the passage, O of this soul, to India!