

NORMAN LOCK

from *Alphabets of Desire & Sorrow: A Book of Imaginary Colophons*

*Alphabet of Dust*

Shrinking from the dry wood's murmured grief, Suchera woke from fire into the weak light of the room, with its odors of milk and rak blossoms, where her husband lay down inside his own unquiet dream. Rising, she went out into the yard to feel the coolness of the day's first hour and saw, incised in the dust by rain drops carried in the wind's sleeve from the Mae Nam River (whose meaning is "mother water"), many small mouths gaping. An unschooled farmer's wife living at the time of Ramathibodi I, she nonetheless would write from that day until she, too, lay on the funeral pyre (an old woman garlanded with rak blossoms) letters in the dust to her dead infant, tracing small mouths groping fiercely for sustenance.

*Alphabet of Desire (2)*

When in the course of writing his memoir, the Austrian industrialist Franz von Reinhöhl came to relate his one and only meeting with Elisaveta Bagryana, in the summer of 1924, he could do nothing else than to allow a little of the *eiswein* that he had kept undisturbed in his cellar for more than forty years (as if for this) to spill onto the empty manuscript page. It was not the exquisite Bulgarian poetess he saw each time he remembered that supper on Sofia's Vitosha Boulevard, nor the words they had said to each other, nor even the reason for their having had met, but only the wine staining the damask cloth, which his hand—because of a nearly overmastering agitation—had allowed to slip up over the brink of his glass—so strong at that moment was his desire for a woman whose face he no longer could recall.

*Alphabet of Empire*

The dream imperial whose figures were the cross, the sword, and astrolabe increased westerly for Juan Díaz, from the Canary archipelago to Mexico's gilded edge, as his eyes fixed on emeralds mined from the ungovernable sea and amulets milled by aboriginal light. Later, on an alien plateau, the Spaniard yielded to the flower gardens of Moctezuma, the bridges of Tenochtitlan (lacustrine city surpassed only by Constantinople), and the obsidian knife. At Tlacopan, during *el árbol de la noche triste* (Gethsemane of defeat and sorrow when Cortés wept), Juan Díaz wrote by greasy light to his father in Seville a letter inscribed with barbaric forms that told—though the old *grande* was unable to pronounce them—of a country annexed by death for death's own paradise.

*Alphabet of Mourning*

He mistook the black marks for an accident of a clogged nib. (A sneeze such as a pen might make overcharged with ink.) Impossible, in any case, to have reproduced them with any of the strict forms in his box of type. When he had set the manuscript's last word—in stark Bodoni—he locked the form and, hanging up his smirched apron, went home for tea. He could not have known that the graffiti were spores of death sown deliberately, in ink, by Simon Reid to conclude his final novel, *Mourning*, published posthumously in 1837 by William Blackwood & Sons. The compositor had not stood thirty years before on a hill outside Glasgow under gray wreaths of smoke when, among the crowding black umbrellas beaded with rain, Reid's young wife was let down into the flooding earth.