

Carole Maso

*The Young Woman from Punjab**

A young woman from Punjab and her baby trail the mother and child and no matter what the mother does she cannot completely shrug off their shadow. Even though she does not understand why this young woman and infant boy from a distant land must follow them, she tolerates it—they must be looking for something very important she reasons. Or perhaps it is simpler—perhaps they have been drawn by the great silver river, like so many are drawn. The woman from Punjab mutters sometimes, sometimes sings in an incredibly lovely voice, sometimes wails, but all without sound and the infant boy cries at times and sleeps the rest of the time.

Inevitably at some point in every day, the young woman from Punjab and the baby appear, though some days it is very late. Sometimes the mother goes to look for them and if she cannot find them, she goes back home and waits for them to come. She knows it must be a far place they journey from, her hunch is Punjab, though she cannot be sure.

She notices that more and more the woman, when she arrives, is crying. The mother remembers how difficult it was when her own child was a baby, and she also understands how difficult it must be for them to be so far from home. If she could only verify their existence, then perhaps there would be a shift in their rapport, in their relationship to one another, in what could be communicated. The mother does not dare ask the child about them, as she is not prepared for the answer the child will give, and also she does not want to hear what it will sound like to ask the child casually, have you by any chance seen the woman and the baby from Punjab today? If the young woman and baby are invisible, it is not on the mother's account. Some days she sees them everywhere she looks. The baby seems to know sign language as so many babies seem to know these days, and the mother feels he is trying to tell her something urgent, but she does not know what.

And then they are gone. They do not come back again. A year passes and the mother opens a newspaper and reads about a woman from Punjab who moved to New York when she

Carole Maso, 'The Young Woman from Punjab', an extract from *Mother and Child*

was six, grew up, walked in the American summer, had a son, and one July morning distraught, killed the baby, and then herself. The mother is horrified when she reads this, but she is also a little bit relieved. She gets on her knees. She feels an inexplicable gratitude. Because of what the shadow mother from Punjab has done, this mother will not be required to.

She and the child will be spared.

* © Carole Maso 2009. *Mother and Child* is published by Counterpoint.