

**Kirpal Gordon**

**ON THE EQUATOR:  
IN PRAISE OF SKIN**

Two rivers of different colors, different speeds  
run side by a side for a few kilometers until  
the Amazon widens & swallows them. The guide

from Manaus smiles, "She is mighty that way"  
& names the wild fruit from her swollen banks:  
*goyaba, mamao, maracujo, jinipapao.*

\*

By mid-afternoon our little launch runs aground  
tangled in roots whose reach under  
water's still mirror reflects the green thirst

each branch makes for sky. Vines wrap around  
rubber trees like boas, & later, upriver, a boa  
wraps itself around its captor, a family man

with the bewitching daughter, their shack  
hung in alligator skins, shrunken monkey heads  
the tooth & talon necklace of the preyed upon.

\*

Sunset eats the entire sky. Atop the tallest  
tree, the tucan's exotic color changes to exotic  
song. The air, a dream of sifting blackness

shoots awake with the bristle of insects. Our  
motor-silenced boat drifts downriver. Frogs  
moat both banks, exchanging a passionate

resonance, sounds in which sex, fear, existence  
& death live inside each other. Sleep? Yes  
I want to sleep I tell myself, hanging from

a hammock while underneath my skin, a single  
itching anthill, colonies of eggs burrow deep.  
Don't worry, I tell myself, give in to sleep.

\*

Forty eight hours later, back in civilization  
penicillin devours whatever puffed my face  
into a marshmallow so huge my eyelids shut.

Unable to see, the doctor recommended sleep.  
Species they don't even have names for  
drowning into life within my screaming

bloodstream, I finally fall out of panic  
into sleep, feeding the dream that another life  
feeds on mine, a case of hives, aliens trying

to scare me out of my own skin which isn't mine  
either, just some container I've been given  
a loan I'd like to recover, how the guide

explained to me what my country was doing  
to his: bleeding it dry, the only container  
I got left to keep me hanging on.