**Contemporary South Asian Poetry in English: A Diasporic Journey**

Usha Akella, *The Rosary of Latitudes: Poetry & Prose*. Houston: Transcendent Zero Press, 2015. 192 pp. $ 20 (Paperback).

Pramila Venkateswaran, *Thirteen Days to Let Go.* Hemet: Kelsey Books, 2015. 46 pp. $14 (Paperback).

Phinder Dulai, *dream/arteries*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2014. 119 pp. $ 19.95 (Paperback).

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s I made my way into this poetic odyssey, allowing Usha Akella to conduct me to the holy sites where poetry is celebrated, it slowly dawned on me that I was in the company of a pilgrim poet. It is not just the world poetry festivals that are sanctified in this volume; the latitudes where these recitals are happening are also explored and evoked in all their richness—the bazaars, the pubs, the cafes, the climate, the ruins, the architecture, the teeming street life, and their encounters. We are given a capsule history of the places visited, but this is not a travel guide, useful though that information is in capturing the spirit of the place. The journeys are to the heart of things. There is a clear and direct investment of the poet’s self that measures and contemplates her relationships with family, with nature, with social issues, and with the notion of homelands—which in Akella’s case happens to be a triptych composed of Australia, India, and the U.S.

Akella lays down her terms in her introduction, and it is on these lines that the book must be judged. “When is a poet not a traveler?” she asks. “When a poet meets a place, a meeting of two worlds happens and the word becomes the capsule for it.” (15) What the poet-traveler needs above all is an endless curiosity, an empathy for people, and the willingness to take things as they come. Usha has an abundance of these qualities and puts them in the service of her observations, making cross-references to the countries, continents, and cultures she traverses.

Akella ambles between poetry and prose without awkwardness or pretension. This makes for an easy intimacy with the reader, like being invited to peek into her diary in which she records her deepest feelings and secrets. Even though the prose is clearly demarcated from the poetry in the table of contents, it is not airtight. This results in a rather fluid spillover—the poetry often a loose narrative of reflection and statement; the prose often sparkling with lyrical touches (“Ripe Fig,” “Walking About Kolkata with Anne Waldman”). When she adheres to the formal requirements of the genres—letting prose be prose and poetry be poetry, she produces eloquent and inspired work. Examples of these are the Anne Frank poem “The Secret Annex,” as well as poems like “Woman on the Sand,” “A Kind of City,” “Thirteen Plus One Ways of Looking at the Sea”; of the prose pieces, “Van Gogh in the City of Museums,” “Mother Land,” and “Waving Stars and Warning Stripes” stand out.

The pure lyrical impulse is on display in poems like “The city in which I want to find my beloved”—a city of white houses against the deep blue Mediterranean which goes by the musical name of Santorini, and reads like a chant. In writing about the picturesque, she does not neglect the dark side of the bloody histories of places like Iraq, Afghanistan, Columbia, and Israel, nor the overtly visible conflicts that still plague places like Mexico, Nicaragua, and India. Within the poetic journeys then, is enclosed a spiritual quest emerging out of two archetypes whom she idolizes: Kali and Rumi. The pilgrimage sites she has visited include the basilica of Guadalupe, Mexico; Mevlana mausoleum in Turkey; Dakineshwar Temple and Belur math in Kolkata; and Jerusalem. Among her credits is a 2011 production of “Ek: An English Musical on the life of Shri Shirdi Sai Baba” who has been a central figure in her spiritual life. The book has a glowing foreword by Keki N. Daruwalla and an equally enthusiastic afterword by Ravi Shankar. Photographs and maps are scattered throughout in support of the text. This is a book of many symphonic movements by a poet who has a restless soul and wandering feet whose footprints illuminate the path for reader-pilgrims to follow in their own individual quests.

In *Thirteen Days to Let Go*, Venkateswaran conducts us through the prescribed Hindu rituals following the death of her father, which seek to satisfy the spirit of the dead person. The rites culminate on the thirteenth day when relatives and friends gather for a feast to celebrate the spirit’s residence with the ancestors. Let’s look at the thirteen sections of the title poem. For those living in a different time zone, as immigrants do, the news is always delivered in an early morning call: *father passed away.* Hopping across “an ocean and two continents,”(32) the daughter arrives in his presence: “Finally, I am in your absence.”(31) She depicts inner sensations as often jarred by surrounding noises. “A high-pitched film song blaring away”(31) close by prompts to her to this aside—“am I in a Bollywood scene?”(31)

The task of sending “father /into the unknown” is performed by the sons. As she surveys the room and his belongings, we discover the ambivalent nature of her relationship with her father: “the terrors are not captured by a single photograph”(34) in the albums. She recalls previous visits during his illness. She had planned to write poems of hate, to forget him, “but memories fester, you live in my pores.”(37) There are also intimate moments with her mother. The final section is a glorious chant, a mantra, and a poetic libation.

Apart from this long poem, there are other poems about her father that are deep, and often lyrical, meditations on aging and spirituality. Especially notable are “Ceremony,” “The Nest,” “Love Letter,” “My Father’s Eyes.” In “Love is Something Else Today,” the ambivalence is clearly declared as she feeds him:

Do I hate or love? The lines blur

In the space between spoon and lips.

I wipe his brow, feed his abusive mouth. (15)

Other poems in this slim volume include “Swimming in Walden Pond,” in which Venkateswaran describes her dip thus:

I am up to my neck in philosophy,

My toes touching its shifting floor. (16)

In “Sighting Hawks,” she goes “hawk-tipsy”(24) reeling down Kansas roads. It is a pure lyric, the best in the tradition of Hawk poems. In “Field Trip to the Cochin Synagogue,” she muses on the irony of seeing Muslim girls in a Jewish temple. In “Above Kerala,” she captures the lush landscape in all its fecundity. This is her fifth book, and it shows Venkateswaran at her best—a sure-footed, even-handed poet who has grown steadily over the years. A remarkable achievement, thoughtful and delightful at the same time.

Phinder Dulai is the Vancouver-based author of two earlier books of poetry: *Ragas from the Periphery*, and *Basmati Brown: Paths, Passages, Cross and Open*. The heart of the new book *dream/arteries* lies in how it retells the tragic story of an historical event in the broader narrative of migration to the New World. In 1914, the Japanese steamship Komagata Maru set sail for Canada with 376 Sikh, Muslim, and Hindu migrants travelling from Punjab. Even though all of its passengers were British subjects, they were refused entry at Vancouver. The ship sat moored for two months while the courts decided the passengers’ right to disembark, and the city’s white citizens thronged the pier taunting the passengers who were victims of starvation and unsanitary conditions. Eventually, Canada’s racist exclusionary laws were upheld and the ship was forced to return to India.

Dulai recounts the story by delving into Maritime records, nautical maps, passenger manifests, and the detailed record of the Komagata Maru to show the brutal nature of the racist policies and prejudices that led to violent incidents, rigged trials, and death sentences for those who dared to stand up in protest. The poems are spoken in the voices of boats, oceans, court records, newspaper reports, government officials, the dead, and the abandoned—all orchestrated like a Greek chorus. The ship itself is the vehicle that moves the narrative. Built in Germany, registered under the name SS Stubbenhuk, it sailed as the SS Sicilia in 1894, before it was acquired by a Japanese company and rechristened. It made 14 journeys ferrying 34,125 persons who sought sanctuary in the new world, until it was retired in 1926, in Japan. Komagata Maru, in literal Japanese usage, means “beloved ship protecting the respected commercial activities of the proprietor.” Pictures of the ship, and its turbaned, suited men, its children, and city officials provide a visual record of the grim ordeal. The author plays with typography to mimic the ship’s hull, its passage and its being grounded, which is effective to a degree. I wish I could say the same about the later sections of the book which have several poems where the typographical shifting and spacing of words, lines, and stanzas seems arbitrary, and contributes little to the poetry’s impact.

All the same, *dream/arteries* is a powerful reminder of a forgotten chapter of Canadian immigration history and a well-deserved tribute to those who stood up and fought.

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