

MAPS

MATWAALA ANTHOLOGY OF POETRY FROM SOUTH ASIA

EDITED BY ZILKA JOSEPH AND PRAMILA VENKATESWARAN

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EDITORS:

PRAMILA VENKATESWARAN

ZILKA JOSEPH

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OUR MISSION

Matwaala, the South Asian Diaspora Poets' Collective, is a community of poets of South Asian origin. Our aim is to have our voices heard and included in mainstream American literature, and to increase awareness and appreciation of South Asian poetry. In line with this mission, we are proud to publish our first e-anthology.

Usha Akella and Pramila Venkateswaran

Co-Founders and Co-Directors of the Matwaala Collective

FOREWORD

In a recent interview, Meena Alexander, whose poems dwell in the intersection of exile, longing, memory, and dissonance, said, “Even if we stay in one place, our dreams are passages connecting us with the lost places of our lives, and the fragrance of what might never have existed” (bloom-site.com). The poem becomes the home, the place of our various migrations. When Salman Rushdie exhorted immigrant writers about the dangers of cultural ossification, little did he realize that South Asian poets were prescient about his and Saul Bellow’s dictum: “Open the universe a little more!” South Asian poets have always *borrowed* from everywhere; the diaspora poets, spurred by migration, reap its literary riches. They sip chai in New York and look out the window to find the sprawl of Kathmandu or Chennai. Or when traveling in Mumbai, slip into an American accent or scream with impatience when time slows to a maddening crawl. There is not merely a double, but a few parallel consciousnesses in the jagged in-between-ness, or rather the migrating consciousness, of South Asian diaspora poets.

In this anthology of poets who trace their origins to different parts of South Asia and who migrate between different continents (Asia, Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, and the U.S), we see the shared experiences of the changing locus of the self, in a single day, or a single moment. As Agha Shahid Ali exclaims in his poem, “In Search of Evanescence,” “the temptation to write a poem / led me past the exit / so I could say // India always exists off the turnpikes of America.”

The poets gathered here, far from nostalgic or sentimental for some image of their *desh*, write poems thrumming the lived experiences of people in the margins or the center, in far strewn rural areas or in bustling metropolises, invisible or fully visible. They confront questions about their lives, their relationships with family, their failures and assumptions, the bittersweet revelations, in the only way they know best—in their poetry.

We honor Meena Alexander’s memory by including her poem “Crossroad,” which she read at Matwaala 2017, held at the Asian American Writers’ Workshop in New York City, and “Atmospheric Embroidery,” the title poem from her latest book. “Crossroad,” with its variegated imagery of protest brings to life humanity at the crossroads of barbarism and survival. Similarly, in “Atmospheric Embroidery,” she evokes Boetti to show humanity’s tapestry of juxtapositions: “in his mapping of the world / Everything is cut and coupled, // Occult ordering – silk and painted steel...”

Usha Akella’s poems puzzle out the nature of codes that rule women, echoing Kavita Jindal’s reverie on her bus ride. While nature teaches its inexhaustible lessons in Yogesh Patel’s poems, Zilka Joseph locates irony and humor in the clash of rules at the airport’s Immigration and Customs. The heart breaking lines of Rohan Chhetri’s poems take us to the threshold of human suffering. Ralph Nazareth brings this suffering to a whole new plane by describing human cruelty in “Victor Jara’s Hands,” while Saleem Peeradina’s poems tease out the existential pathos of the body. Sasha Parmasad takes us into the history of Indians in Trinidad; in the polyphony of her poems, her father’s lines mixed with the lived experiences

and the fighting spirit of a colonized people come alive. Archana Vemulapalli's poignant elegies sit alongside Vivek Sharma's humorous description of his Nani's use of pot in his ancestral village.

The multiplicity and inventiveness of South Asian diaspora poets is energizing: Phinder Dulai's chiseled words retaining in consistent lower case the subjugation of the immigrants on board the Komagata Maru, Indran Amirthanayagam's juxtaposition of images, Sophia Naz's economy of language, her "poetic-origami," Yuyutsu Sharma's image clusters, Sasha Parmasad's long lines like a symbolic wailing of ancestral history, the narrative flow in Zilka Joseph's poems, Varsha Saraiya-Shah's expert use of sound imagery are just a few examples of the variety in this anthology.

Place, textures, smells, sights, and sounds entice us, as does the silence between the lines. The voices, fractured and full, whispered and full-throated awaken us to the unity-in-difference that is South Asia. The diaspora joins in chorus against the fragmentation of peoples; instead of the narrow confines of communalism, the poets in the diaspora find in poetry their strongest democracy.

Matwaala is the platform where we celebrate not just established poets but the poets we may not have heard before. They provoke, invite, and question, joining their voices with the exhilarating plurality that is the United States. As Usha Akella says about poetry and travel that awakened her varied rhythms in her book, *The Rosary of Latitudes*, "I wanted to hold a country in my palms as waters to gaze in; the book got longer and bigger in its concerns-- identity, immigration, home, self, memory. But it reflects what is in all my work-- I am looking for my Self everywhere, for home" (World Poetry Movement). In their search for meaning South Asian diaspora poets recite in unison their varied truths and stories, leaving their indelible mark on the world.

Pramila Venkateswaran

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USHA AKELLA

from Ghazal

Plop! The road is corked open at the threshold to Madingley
Goblets of graves raise a manifold toast to those entering at Madingley.

Coral tongues of brick incant green chants in the cold embrace of air
Aren't we spellbound and sold to the ancient currency of leaves in Madingley?

In the ashen cerulean sky, black birds boldly arch their script
Old corridors slough their skin inside the mind of Madingley.

Weeping willows graciously bow to the fabric of his robe of night
Larvae of accents transit in the moldy air of Madingley.

Inside the harlequin passport of windows, newly stamped visas of faces
Nascent poets dare cross the quadrant maddeningly in Madingley.

On Turning 50

I give a million thanks today
 for the sun,
for the dancing paisley of the breeze,
 the broken leases of God's unkept promises,
 the crochet shadows of the trees,
 I think it, I think it, I thank it.

for the ink in this pen, my lifelong companion,
 for the poems these words become,
 for the wisdom in simple rhymes,
for the ones who loved me for the ones who did not, mocked and rock-ed,
 for cuckoo clocks that did not chime,
and the ones who hounded me from their hearth
 for the ones who gave me birth
for the petty bazaars in which I was sold,
 for this or that, for some petty price,

 I think it, I think it, I thank it,
 I rise.

And the ones who called me names,
 Or propelled me on the road to fame,
 Or thought I'd be bought,

I think it, I think it, I thank it.

I am not the ocean on many days
 Just a wave falling in, in, in
and the sky seems a shroud of sin
 and not the garment of his robe,
I think it, I think it, I thank it.

And on some days, I leap, I surge,
And laughter is a happy dirge,
I know I am all that flows,
And a wrinkle's just a crease of time,
And I am ready for Death if he comes through the door,

I admit, I've played the fool
Amidst too many wise men,
And I am a simpleton who loves way beyond her ken,
I think it, I think it, I thank it,
I'm lit.

As a candle holding still in a tornado,
I can let it all go.

This life, this life!
the blessings are blows,
I quietly row on the foam of days,
the blows are blessings
And yet I'll say,
even though the roses have thorns
and thorns have roses unborn,
I think it, I think it, I thank it,
I don't quit.

I've been young and told I was centuries old,
I am old now and growing young,
there are lilies blooming on days of dung,
for those unsung heroes
and unqualified imposters,
and the doves of war, and the doves of peace,
crisp pastel linen sheets,
I think it, I think it, I thank it,

For this body,
this body a matrix of pain,
mostly, a jigsaw coming apart,
like petals falling from a flower,
and still, and still, it holds my beating heart,
and saints have come in the sepulcher of the night,
held out palms like lamps of light,
for that alone,
I think it, I think it, I thank it.

I thank the crosses that I bear,
the glistening moist breakfast pear,
Nothing is what it ever seems,
We are awake in someone's crumbling dream,

Oh! I laugh and laugh and laugh at it all,
I am an oyster with a hidden pearl,
the mumble, the jumble, the rumble, the tumble
the bumble of it all,
the saints are sinners,
the sinners are winners,
I watch the phantom of the play with a smile and cry
the years have rolled by as marbles
gone mad,
they take all I have, will have or had,
I think it, I think it, I thank it,
thank His incomprehensible wit,
as he carelessly throws our lives as darts,
and we tumble about in fits and
starts.

I'm still walking on my feet free
freer than the breeze,
I can think it, I think it, I thank it.

There's always been a Hand
within the many hands that shake my hand,
hands that are swords or sweet words or new roads,
and that hand is her,
and that hand is him.

Finally, I know
I can think it, I think it, I thank it,
I could go today without regret
I'll go laughing every bit,
I can think it, I think it, I thank it,
for I breathe finally breaths without tears,
turning fifty, I turn without fear.

Hyderabad Speaks Tongues

When a city's streets are pages for politicians, fitfully a flower blooms
When an eye meets an eye, secretly a flower blooms.

City of bangles, whose wrist do you prettily adorn?
When a lover crosses a bridge, openly a flower blooms.

City of tombs, mournfully beating your chest
When a bride crosses a threshold, enthrallingly a flower blooms.

City, are your passageways really the radif or a computer code
When lovers' hands entwine, inevitably the destiny of a flower blooms.

City of kites sending dreams faithfully into a rent sky
When there is no you and I naturally a flower blooms.

City of poetry forcefully broken into tongues
When an embrace is cleaved irrevocably a flower blooms.

City of four pillars, this heart knows the muezzin and the mantra
When love speaks many tongues the silence of a flower blooms.

MEENA ALEXANDER

Atmospheric Embroidery

Wads of ice cream glisten on Route 6.
We stroll into summer, thoughts thrust into a bramble

Oriental bittersweet pocking the hedges,
Fists in pockets, lemonade dripping from a child's hem.

In Boetti's embroidery, in his mapping of the world
Everything is cut and coupled,

Occult ordering—silk and painted steel
Sun and electric moon, butterfly and naked man.

In *The Thousand Longest Rivers*
The Nile is the hardest water

Then comes the Mississippi–Missouri.
Once we lived by brilliant waters

Suffered the trees' soft babble,
Fissures in magma.

Already it's August—
Season of snipers in the heartland

Season of coastlines slit by lightning
And smashed bouquets of the salt spray rose.

Now I think it's a miracle we were able, ever
To put one foot in front of the other and keep on walking.

Crossroad

So there I am, almost at the crossroad
Stuck in a sudden storm of bikers, men in leather, engines snarling.
Flags spurt skywards.

I freeze at the metal barricade, the seam of sense unpicked,
Brown body splayed.
In the aftermath of light, what proof is there of love—

Buoyancy of the soul hard to mark
Apart from the body
Its tenuous equilibrium unpicked,

Wave after wave of arrival
Etching questions in encircling air
As if life depended on such flammable notations.

*

You come, sari with blue border blowing,
Just as I saw you first, head bare.
A sudden turn on asphalt, you reach out your arms

As if in a palash grove and call to me—
Come over here!
Sometimes the bleeding petals bring down a house

Bring down a Republic.
Children are bought and sold for money—
Ghee to burn her. Teen taka. Ten rupees. Ek taka one rupee.

Cloth to cover her with.
Camphor for the burning. Bhang to make her drowsy.
Turmeric. Chandan.

You halt at the crossroad, hair thrummed by a savage wind
(Later I try to follow marks of feet, touch cold cotton
That lashed your flesh in place).

*

I hear your voice—
Brood, and it will come, a seizure of sense, a reckoning:
Write with chalk, sticks of lead, anything to hand

Use a bone, a safety pin, a nail, write on paper or stone
Let the poem smolder in memory.

In the desolation of time write

How one inked the bubble with a woman's name
Way at the top of the paper ballot, saw her own hand quiver.
This was in the school with empty metal desks, near Fort Tryon Park.

One set her nipple to her infant's lips
Felt her heart sprout wings, flit over the barbed wire
Of the Immigration Detention Center.

One whimpered in her sleep—Mother, I know I am a tree,
I trail my roots behind me, the man with bad hair will ax me down.
One daubed her face with white paint, crawled

Into a cage outside the museum, hung a sign round
Her own neck—*We are barbarians come to live amongst you,*
Some of us speak this language.

*

Hoarse already, you whisper—
Come closer to me.
You who were born in the Gangetic plains

A year after midcentury
Consider the fragility of the horizon,
The arc of stars into which your father raised you.

When you fall, as surely you will one day
Try to swim forward into blackness
Arms pointing to where you imagine the vault of heaven to be

As Draupadi did, a great throated cry
She made in the forest,
Only the birds could save her, they picked up her cries.

Think of Antigone, who anointed her brother's corpse with dirt
To keep away the wild dogs,
She too made bird sounds, guttural cries.

Go to Standing Rock, where people mass outside their tents
In splintering cold, to guard the quiet springs of water.
There the palash blooms,

Tree used for timber, resin, dye,
Tinting the nails of the love god.
On its leaves names swarm—

Anna Mae Aquash, Eric Garner, Freddie Grey,
Balbir Singh Sodhi, Julia de Burgos countless more.

Thrust from earth's core

From the shadow of musk deer,
The green throat of the hummingbird,
In the honeycomb of light, they step forward to be counted.

(In memory of Mahasweta Devi 1926-2016)

INDRAN AMIRTHANAYAGAM

Never Too Late (to write)

Do you know what happened
to Catherine? Did she go to Canada?
Do you remember the lady
who taught us Tamil, who served
as governess at home on Kynsey Road?

*--Ah, I don't recall her now. I have been
quite ill. This cough does not stop,
but I am grateful that I got to see
your mother and you, that you were able
to come back in time--*

Let me try another approach.
It is three in the morning. I cannot
sleep. Catherine hovers outside
the window with the boy servant.
They have sack cloths on their heads.

We do not know where to go,
my brothers and I, huddled in a corner,
catatonic. Our aunt, the doctor,
will find us the next morning
unable to articulate

what we have seen until now,
fifty years later, on a tranquil
morning, snow heaped outside,
nobody about, the only sound
these fingers writing.

A Strange Stillness

For José Andres

The Red Line had a signal fit today stalling
trains from Shady Grove to Glenmont. So
we sit at Woodley Park/National Zoo petrified

as cockatoos who flew through heated bars
of cages into the freezing January wind
on the street above us only to find

the ceremonial gate shut on their attempt
to escape. (We are on Day 32 of the partial
government shutdown). But I invent I admit

this cockatoo business, adding to our world
of alternative facts as I wish to move the poem
along while we are stopped, signals crossed,

elephants, leopards and wombats above us
protected from the prying public, fed
on reserve funds that are starting to be depleted,

like Etosha in a drought, animals emaciated,
slobbering and snarling for the last drops
of water, while government servants

in fancy dress line up in elegant restaurants
offering furlough specials, goat-cheesed
pizzas leafed with arugula and mint, and join

gymnasiums to work off Christmas fat
in hour-long stints on stair-masters
and treadmills whiling away furloughed

time. But there is a safety net! Banks
will offer no interest loans. Do not worry.
Government must open again eventually

Every servant will be paid and can pay off
his loans and praise his gods. The zoo animals
too will always be well fed! (I was joking earlier

about Etosha.) They are our keep
in the nation's capital. We will not
allow them to starve...And we will tell

our children one day about
this strange period of stillness,

as if on a train stuck deep under a zoo,

on Connecticut Avenue, when
we miss paychecks, engage
in alternative realities, political theater,

and accept the generosity
of strangers, donating pizza,
flautas, beet burgers.

American Fitness

I have joined a gym with a fabulous name
that spans the globe, Planet Fitness. My role
in poetry should not be to publicize an already
well-known brand. But this morning as I stepped
on the treadmill and noticed the sea of taut
and toned people climbing stairs, riding bicycles,
stretching on mats, I felt part of a grand suburban
community, a hodge-podge of nations, the fabled
melting pot, which in Rockville, outside the nation's
metropolis, means pounds, lots of them trickling
off bones, along with side-eyed glances at neighbors,
relief by the water fountain: to have joined
the great American craze, with a now lighter load.

DEBANGANA BANNERJEE

midnight revealed the words I reserved for you

1.
it is dawn almost
ripples the reflection of stars on water
who hands me this familiar lament from elsewhere?
awake trembling the midnight attune
2.
are you who I found to lose my way?
I skipped past the ask two travelers lost
inside the remains of shrinking shadows
where the borders of love are already disguised
3.
lest I become drunk quenching my thirst
cries alone on the river bank like drunks
parched by our intensity
lest the river dries truth unquenched
4.
palpitations of my heart startle even the hummingbird
undulating in your thrumming tunes
who are you?
an unfinished canvas awaiting a final gesture
5.
dissatisfaction drips out my eyes ever since they opened
kajal smudges ajar the day
disheveled craving the fix of your few lines
unknownst to me unsent in ignorance
6.
rain's coming even if you don't
still as this air devoid of the desire to write
missing each singing sip cannot abridge the day
you delay with the darkness clouds impart
7.
sunset sweat swaddles your forehead
transfixed my eyes urge me to pat away
the profuse vanishing from excuse
what dusk's shadows and I banished from touch
8.
what was once your crater now overflows
full from this flood's rapids lull trees down

a rocking chair awaits on the other side
carefully across you will sit and rinse your wound
9.

let what remains stay
it will not thrive in a new home
thrills sheltered by the silence of once
exactly where the wrenching held here

10.
let's find peace another way tonight
we breathe in unison my head on your chest
chirps of crickets seep over darkness
dripping leaf-ladled water on my cheek
trickles between your fingers
until my fingers find your lips to say
don't spill it I hear already

(Translated from Bengali by author and Vincent A. Cellucci)

ROHAN CHHETRI

Toward Some Dark

They came at dawn, three angels
in jumpsuits, and felled the two ash
trees in front of the neighbour's house.

Now from our porch, the view
of the sky stretched unbearable blue
rent open from a mesh of shadowgreen.

The smell of pine in the air, thick,
wild. I thought this is how we arrive
at clarity. Through some clearing of

the living. When Grandfather was dying,
we found the little money he'd squirreled
away in a box too embarrassed to bequeath

it to any of us. Him pleading to us through
the final hours to please pull the fuckin'
shroud off his head. It was the yellow

mosquito net hung low above the bed
where he lay hallucinating, furious
we were trying to ease him toward some dark.

Our flushed faces to him then, like
the inhospitable cities of his youth.
So much loss manufactured by men alone,

so why not those angels at dawn
armed with their power saws putting back
simple terror into things.

Like the monsoons bringing the abattoirs
to the flooded city streets in Dhaka.
The bleeding child who supposedly asked,

Excuse me sirs, is your Lord counting
all unrequited airstrikes? Or
is His jurassic desire our extermination to be.

Now the wind flits on our porch like
a young unremembered thing, that one-legged
beggar I once saw hopping across the platform

to catch the Intercity, so he could beg

through the bogies, seven stations & back.
But don't forget the wind, it has lost something
& doesn't know it, sniffing about the heady
stink of sawdust & brine, stomping
on our roof again & again

like it has stepped on so much blood
drying from small wounds.

National Grief

After L. Cohen

Too many of ours were taken, & we grew
heavier not with grief but numbers, as if we'd
suddenly become aware of the air we stood in.

As if we'd only walked lightly in a dream before.
But we heard on the news a man had trekked seven
hours across the war-torn border into Aleppo

to smuggle toys for the children, so they could play
inside a bomb shelter. Someone heard the mad
sultan's ghost weeping near the old mausoleum in Delhi,

the day an old man died in a stampede outside a bank.
In a lab in Berlin, scientists tickled rats till they giggled
to their little deaths. One morning in early November,

a stunned silence sealed the air of fall, as if
some brute had risen to power. Nervous laughter
broke in corridors, & all day yellow leaves emptied

aspens in a feverish spell. A man drew a knife
inside a city bus, & the thick snow curtained
the world outside in a vast white of indifference.

The quiet that followed, just as the one that settles
after the barbarians come down. History, that slow
child, kept working on an infinite homework.

KEKI N. DARUWALLA

Of Near Absolutes

1

The coffin-lid tells the nail
we could be meeting soon

I reflect on absolutes
and they can mislead

like uncertain mumblings and half-truths,
uncertain about facts loaded on the other half.

Why should the echo of thunder be considered true
as it rummages in the dome of the sky

and gathers ions and iron filings floating in the air
then explodes, and frightens the dog under the bed?

An absolute doesn't climb or move; (does it think?)
It guards the gates, guards the river-ford.

2

Childhood tells memory we should part now.
What we know of each other is dubious, we've lost ourselves.

Myth says to reason, stop yapping will you?
Just come to my well and drink.

Forest to the flute, you are driving away the spirits.
Pipe down or I'll disinherit you.

Wind, unruly wind, tells the flapping canvas beneath,
I'll unfasten your tent pegs and fly away with you.

Notations from Old Notebooks

Of a sudden
memory bled,
winter got
into my bed.

Happened quick
as a finger's click,
like light boards aircraft
and zooms off at dawn.

Solitude is one thing
gold never bought;
just live with that underground
train called thought.

Listen to me
wayward son,
winter and aloneness
they are one.

She looked for a filament

she looked for a filament of sound
and she couldn't find it,
looked for a note that rang

as it slid along a silver candle-stand;
looked for an image that ran into light and darkened it,
an image that went scurrying like a mouse.

In the flicker of light as fitful as the glow of a firefly,
weightless as a firefly itself, memory moved
towards a tarot card of haze.

memory is heavy with thingness
memory can be death-heavy
parental death is staple for writers

but she didn't find what she was looking for
never sure what she was looking for
as receding limbos barricaded themselves.

PHINDER DULAI

a ship's story

i was born
in the yards of scotstoun shipyard
 launched into the clyde river and given a german name
 the straight funnel of my body
 threaded skyward by taut cables webbing heaven bound
my body a glory of black steel

 i moved at the fastest pace then
 i am old now and my sojourn near the end

for this voyage my new master
 purchased a second life for me

 the old world exhausted me
I had already made more than ninety-two crossings
between two worlds

 in the new world my usefulness was
extinguished

 tomorrow i will become the parts of the sum
 feeding the salt water the debris that was my
body

 each part of me i will offer to the unloved
 in hope my wards will be made complete
 whole for another life
 while my life escapes me

if you were to admire me then
 do so when I was beautiful and strong
 do so when my name was young
do so even now as i return the unloved
 delivering them to the rifles, lathis, and jails of britain's bharat

the redness of things

six hands with scarlet fingers

dusk

shape shifts turning crimson at night

a martyr chooses the dark path to the gallows

sanguinary and precise

the horizon steeped in a rust-filled sunset
seeps into the quiet waters

today will be yesterday and the world will be tomorrow
and future unfolds without my hand

the hull now dusted with an orange swath of pocked skin
scab flakes trail in the cliffed ridges of the after
wave

from sea to sun

scuppers bleed rust water into the pacific
a red-clad body hulls sideways
breaking a fall onto the top deck
her jeans scuff marked
the water of human cargo dribbles
lower decks teem with humid enclosure
bilge-brown rivulets roaming to the sun and sea
on the waterline, the salt kiss never ends

*let's play another game today, gamini – i want you to imagine the deck is your home and that
your cousins aadhi and vena are with you and you have decided to play the word game.
remember to explain the word clearly, and make sure aadhi and vena explain theirs too ...
yes ... i know, you played this one a week ago ... we will reach there soon and I will bring
you many new games*

it is a flexible approach
this rough and tough
it allows for collaboration
agency co-operation
a flexible triage is today's way
let's just make sure we don't co-opt each other
quarantine plans - check
medical checks - check
masks - check
identification and interview questions - check
detention and site security - check
individual case management procedures - check
executive oversight and execution - check
implementation execution - check

we begin

let's play another game, gamini, your favourite, the fill-me ga-me

*you play a young child and medical patient with no nutrients left
i will be the mother who was bled dry of everything
you will wear the mask and carry your ruined birth certificate
I will play ... what we saw when we left home
you will play the wounds aadhi and vena carried
this time both of us will play two actors playing innocents fleeing the crime scene
tomorrow
we play mourners of your cousins and their parents who were my siblings
today we play so-journers together looking for home*

*mama, who are they with the blue shirts and pants?
our saviours*

mama, who are we?
gamini, today we are refugees

KAVITA A. JINDAL

Faucet

A woman
may buy a tool-kit and know how to use it
may change the washer, adjust the stopcock
swap the ball bearings
fix the leaky spigot with a spanner.

A woman may suggest to Nature
that for the next millennia
men become pregnant
a facetious fractious suggestion;
the woman knows her pleas
are just venting, as ineffectual
as hammering water.

A woman may not drive in Saudi Arabia
may not bike unless in a ladies' only park
may not be seen in public without a male protector.
A woman must also be fertile
dribbling out male heirs;
she may spout songs in private
and dance in full Dior, smeared with make-up
for her mirror and other ladies to see.

A village panchayat in Punjab declares
that mobile phones given to girls
leads them to pre-marital sex;
boys can have cell phones and call for help
when they're in trouble, but females,
young things, must take it on the chin,
remaining on the drip-drip of advancement.

A woman there thinks: what if instead of aborting
female foetuses, the nozzle was turned off
as if by a spell, a sorcery; no babies were born
to the women of this village, then the new elders
all men, would die out without replacement
and further afield too the taps would be fixed just so
by the women who knew how.

(After 'Woman' by Arun Kolatkar)

Kabariwala

Upper Ridge Road, Delhi, 1975

At the door of our second-floor flat he sits on his haunches,
takes out his scales, weighs the bundles of newspapers,
talks more than usual as he places the kilo and half-kilo weights;
he makes my mother suspicious at his chirpiness.

She insists he weighs the papers again; they haggle
over the price he'll pay for seven kilos, how many paise
for each brown glass bottle, how much for each tin can;
and it's only when he hands over some rupees that he says

Next month my cousin or my uncle will come to collect
instead of me; I'm going away.
Going where, we ask; Going foreign, he says.
I'm going where there is free love

Where you can be with whomever you want whenever
you want; probably England, that's where I'm going.
Will you be a kabariwala there, I ask.
Don't think so, he replies, packing away his scales.

Onto his young shoulders he hefts the sacks of papers, bottles
and cast-off pans, informing me that in foreign
they don't re-process old things.
He goes down the stairs whistling.

Piccadilly Line Salon

That kind of Wednesday morning on the tube
when I'm sinking into stupor
after daredevil antics and death-chases in my dreams
burnt out at dawn.

Three women in my carriage are doing their make-up.
From Hammersmith to Earls Court
they peer, pout, slick, flick
they are good; they are quick!

Stroke, curl, swish.
I admire their chutzpah
their ability to create
their own boudoir

between their face and their mirrors
in a crowded train
elbows slicing into their neighbours.
Not that they need the glitz.

Not that they are plain;
far from it. They're almost perfect
now, almost finished.
One files her rounded nails

One pinches the skin over her cheek.
The third is ready to pack away.
Blot and smack lips, all done, sweet.
I straighten up.

Should I rustle in my satchel?
Check in a mirror
for bits of breakfast pear
stuck in my teeth?

ZILKA JOSEPH

For the Birds

Sudden dash of light in the corner
of my eye, a soundless flash in hazy swathe
of trees leaps stealthily from the small maple
to the crabapple that has taken this year's
drought hard. My eyes bore into foliage. Is it
a mynah? Dad, you taught me well how to look
and listen. This is Michigan, and it's probably
a grackle, but I think of the crow pheasant
(the coucal) I often watched in India, a wily
master of camouflage. I remember the first

time I ever saw one close up. I was seven
or maybe eight, sickly and bookish. While
sitting in the shade of a sprawling gulmohar
that dropped scarlet whorls of flowers
on me, it darted from under the hibiscus. So
graceful its arched tail, so fiery its beady eyes.
I was reading some Enid Blyton novel about
young girls in a boarding school in rainy
England who ate scones and crumpets, and had

fabulous adventures. It was a hot afternoon
as this avian beauty that normally threaded light
woodland and field slipped into my grandaunt
Lily's garden. She was a famous doctor
at Tata Hospital when few women
stayed single and had careers. She drove
a grey Standard Herald, and her frantic beeping
of the horn sent her gardener's sons rushing
to throw open the low iron gates when
she came home. Once, she gave me a nest
a weaver bird had abandoned. It adorned
my bedroom for years. She would tell me

about the trips she had taken when she was
young. All over Europe, and yes, to the Isle
of Capri—her favorite. All eyes, I would listen.
Then she would sing "'T was on the Isle of Capri"
or play a Vera Lynn record. Did she have many
lovers? I wanted to wear expensive Dhaka
saris, high heels, smoke cigarettes (as I had seen
her do at dinner parties sometimes), travel—
be like her. Would I ever go anywhere? I who
failed in math and science, hated bullies, hated
school. My head sailed in the clouds. My brain,
they told me, *was for the birds*. My handwriting

a bird's nest. My weak fingers would never grasp
a pen properly, my legs never walk normally again.
When would my flesh grow light, my bones
breathe only air so I could fly? When the bird

appeared from nothing, shapes shifted, my book
levitated. The bird floated, not walked. Did it
even have feet? I felt my weight lift. Floating
was as good as flying. It seemed not to see
me, as if it were a peaceful spirit passing
through. Strange girl, they said. A dreamer.
Did I imagine it then? Hearing a creak of leaf

and branch near my deck, the blur I saw earlier
turns to flesh and blood—a gawky crow
who arrows to the roof from the forsythia
and caws shrilly. Curious juvenile, her
glance is full of questions. Friend or
foe? Food or death? I throw my head
back, look up at her. She peers at me
over the edge. I slip indoors for bread, then
leave ripped bits on the railings. Where
is she? She's hiding somewhere, watching me

watch her. They emerge and melt, these wily beings—
show a wingtip, glitter of eye, flick of tail. Leave me
a feather to dream on, a map to follow. My mother
and I fed them scraps everyday. They jostled each
other on the ledge, fought for crumbs, always
hung around our windows. Then disappeared
into neem, peepul, or the banyan tree as big
as a city. Did they wonder where we'd gone?
Had they heard us weep? Had they pecked at the
shuttered windows and silence? Wild fig seedlings
now grow from cracked brick. A sudden whoosh

of wing beats. Listen! The air throbs. Three
trumpeters pass over me to land on the pond.
I wave. This is where I live. And there and
here and there. Crow, sparrow, finch, blue
jay, nuthatch, chickadee, cardinal, mallard,
cormorant, heron, geese, swan. They visit,
feed and fade. Return. They know their own.
I'm for the birds. I'm never alone.

Sparrows and Dust

I believe! I believe!—
In the sparrow, happy on gravel;
—From Roethke's "Praise to the End!"

The first time I noticed a cloud of dust rise up from the yard, I squinted my six-year-old eyes and saw sparrows burrowing in gravelly dirt. My mother told me, Look, they're having their daily dust bath! See how well they wash themselves. Such a cleansing! Dust with dust, letting what's broken, biting, or dead flake off. I have always loved house sparrows even when they drove us mad with their noisy fights and ferocious nesting inside our second-floor Kolkata flat. Raining dirt, twigs, eggs and just-born chicks on us when rival pairs fought for territory on tops of cupboards, chinks in clutter and junk stored everywhere. Our house was heaven, and a kind

of hell. Sometimes when streaking in from the hot sun, one would fly into the fan's spinning blades. With a soft gasp, it would die at my feet, a burst of brown fluff. Sometimes, how it struggled, poor thing, I would cradle its head as blood seeped into my hand, give it water, whisper comfort. Often, when I shut its eyelids, a vision of my own feathered body lying lifeless below would flash by, as I hovered above. As if

I have been somewhere else. Weeping, I willed them—Come back from the dead. Failed shaman, I never saved anyone or anything—my parents, the animals and birds we loved, the locked flat fallen to ruin. Now, years later, in short Michigan summers, I look for flusters of dust, feel a warmth thrill in my aching bones when I see the happy birds squirm in soil, then spring from a cloud, fluffing, cheeping, cleansed, whole. I think of the little-known tale I read—

about the precocious, five-year-old trickster Jesus and the twelve sparrows he shaped out of clay on a Shabbath evening as he played by the river. When his father scolded that he had violated the holy day, Jesus clapped, shouted to the birds to "remember me, you who are now alive," and the living sparrows rose and flew away.

The Rice Fields

Miles of them grow in my carry-on
and travel with me across continents

but the customs officers are suspicious
they eye my old suitcase and ask me to open it

Pickles? they ask sniffing deeply
prodding a packet or two
say *Sure ma'am you've got no jeera or chilies*
(now they've learned the Hindi word for cumin
so the new trick is to joke with us)? And one time

I saw three burly officers question
an elderly couple disheveled
as I was from 20 plus hours of travel
and as disoriented (and yes
as usual all the usual "foreign" suspects
are sent along to "Agriculture") and
they poked around in their overstuffed bags
(where some rice fields appeared but
they couldn't see them of course) and

one officer said *Duck? Bombay Duck?*
It's a fish?? Dried fish your son
wanted? Sorry no fish allowed

or birds (The officers looked
at each other again and again:
expressions priceless) So another time I land

at Detroit airport and I shake my head
at the silver-haired officer
say *Sir, no, no pickles meat or cheese*
I buy them here at Bombay Grocers
and Patels (Give them a sweet Colgate smile)
Yes, yes, sweets, only made of lentil No dairy, no dairy
The red-gold cardboard boxes of sweets he can see
but not the rice sprouting beneath
the young green shoots

no our rice fields he will never see
we carry them wherever we go

KIRUN KAPUR

Anthem

Love begins in a country
Where oranges weep sweetness
And men piss in the street.

Your hands are forever binding
Black strands in a plait. Your mother's
Childhood friend has steeped

Your skin in coconut oil, tucked
Her daughter beside you—the night
Is a womb, live with twins.

Heat's body presses every body.
Sharp chop of your uncle's cough
Clocks the hours; your sister's washing,

The rush of your thoughts. Morning
Is nine glass bangles hoisting sacks
Of sugar from the floor. I'm not talking

About a place, but a country:
Its laws are your mother, its walls
Are your dreams. The flag it flies

is your father waving.

History (with a Melon Cleaver)

—1947

They stood in line to buy a slice of melon—
My father and my uncle, in cantaloupe season.
When the boy in front reached out to pay,
The melon seller waved his cleaver.

This was Lahore in cantaloupe season:
Summer was working up its heat.
With one hand the melon seller waved his cleaver
Over a bright, thick slab of fruit.

Summer was only beginning,
But already the days had grown hot.
A cool slab of sweet melon
Was everything two boys could want.

But already the days had grown heated
When the boy in front reached out to pay.
Chilled melon was all two boys could want,
Or so my uncle claimed.

When the boy reached out to pay,
The melon seller brandished his cleaver.
My uncle paused before claiming,
With the other hand, he stabbed the boy with a dagger.

The melon seller brandished his cleaver,
Drawing all eyes from the fruit.
He stabbed the boy with a tiny dagger,
Putting his other hand to use.

All eyes flew to the cleaver—
The boy fell on our feet.
No one was watching the other hand.
This is how my uncle told it.

The boy fell on our feet.
My uncle's voice was full of wonder.
This is the way he told it—
As if a comet had passed overhead.

My uncle's voice was full of wonder:
The boy was reaching out to pay.
As if a comet had passed over
My father and uncle in melon season.

From the Afterlife

I wanted to be a bone—white like
the Taj Mahal, hard as a puritan—

when vein and wish are stripped,
still able to rattle the essential notes.

But no music gets made when you pit
your self against ideas of yourself.

Dust suits me better. Grey-brown fleck—
I can mix, move into the smallest space,

spark the grittiest tunes. Divide me
into fifty states: winsome, wondering, crazed, my face

scattered by teaspoon. Over the Great Basin
of played out mines and salts rising in a haze,

over hard farmed heartland, the bent
fair-headed wheat, the combine's cloud,

silt along the fat lip of river bed. Semis
hissing and grumbling in tongues.

I can still feel the hum of the telephone wires,
running from one life to another. I filled these lines

in case a story is a body, in case we lose our place.
Hello? Friend? I can touch everything,

but can't stop thinking. Turns out, thoughts
granulate. Turns out, I never was a girl, I was all

those girls, a girl statue, torch raised, you know the one—
standing in the harbor, wearing a sari.

The tide foams up. Now, I'm so much dust,
I am a continent, absorbing—a thimble full

of mother, angry powder, laughing specks, froth,
filth, lover, crying cinders, particles of mineral wind.

I'm proof that nothing is lost.
You can breathe me in.

SOPHIA NAZ

Hands

If your hands could smell you'd be an octopus
every surface scent a million stories
the stealthy stickiness of slugs would seep
epics in the drama of the underbrush
melting stalagmites show and tell
in your digits, earth as Mnemosyne

If your hands could smell, the suck
of subway cars would stop you
dead in your tracks to decode
teeming conduits, lighting up
nosegays on your fingers
newborn bouquets, archaic attar

Each night, etymology of odor
would allure you, greedy as Prometheus
but unable to steal
the summer of a firefly
the distant musk of a star

If your hands could smell, you'd speak
in canine, each pole and passing bush
whisper, each sniff you'd get the snitch
of neighborhood carousing in high fidelity

Until weary of invisible graffiti
scroll of metropolis unfolding
in endless olfactory braille
you'd head for the woods, hoping
trees were not such talkers
or at least would shoot
the breeze between sentences

How long did you walk? It's hard
to tell, but when you fell palms down
cupped hollow as a flute upon
the ground, you understood

How the void makes music possible
and history had it wrong
it was not Earth who bore witness
it was your hands, all along.

The Last Monarch

In your dream she is a setting orange
sun on the horizon, her wings windows
on a human stain. The last Monarch
lays her chrysalis to rest. History
the plenary of her pollened legs

Meets as constellations butterflyed
behind glass, or in the flicker
at longing's fingertips but missing
from countless palms, the dimensions
of this lepidopteran kiss
this waltz of light, that laced in its mosaic
the love-me-nots of daisies
the roses on their knees

A sign language to say
fruit of the smallest labor looms
a vast fabric, fills
hungry mouths with lyric
sweetness humming louder
than all the words
in the world.

Profession

I could have been a chemist
but no alembic captures
cry of a broken *bulbul*
in a calligraphic gesture

No loom to weave peeling
cartwheeling remembrance
and happenstance to knit
synonym or tourniquet

Daily hemorrhage of sun-
set or rise from writ of east
Instead of mapping metaphor
I should have been a baker

But look, a bird, hooked
on the bite, form as dough
Eucharist from yeast of hands
grows and seasons longing

As breath on a mirror conjures
mist-blurred Autumn moon
and birdsong's key unlocks
vaults of every mourning

But what do I profess?
I'll say only this
It's poetic-origami
no cuts to the paper

RALPH NAZARETH

Victor Jara's Hands

Two days after the coup, Pinochet's junta seized him and took him to the detention center at the Santiago sports stadium. He was singled out by the tormentors, who tortured him and then broke his hands.

They were delicate, his wife said
fingers slender and lithe
like those of an Indian dancer.
They soothed the cuts and bruises
their daughters suffered at play.

She did not say how
those hands held her face
or what everyone knew—
how they released song-birds
from the cage of his guitar
or how they held
throngs of *campesinos*
by the magic of their plucking,
or slapped out songs about hands
that brought in the harvest
fed the kilns
threw pots
delivered babies
blackened in the mines
hauled in the nets
boned the fish
raised a glass to say *Salud*.

She did not say
could not say
how they come to me at night
here in the north
twin messengers
who take me by the shoulders
and whisper it's all right
not to stop weeping.

Questions for Eleni

What's this they tell me about the light of Greece?
Why does your igneous rock turn to marble and alabaster?
What can you tell me about the birds of your land?
Do they all have the gift of prophecy?
Your lambs and goats, sheep and bulls--
do they turn into lovers in spring?
does their blood turn into wine?
And what about your little mosses, ivy and creepers,
do they speak of things your philosophers know nothing of?
What can you tell me about your gods?
Why would I care? Except, how can I not know
I am also Leda splayed on the ground,
my heart the opening for their shuddering torsos?
Would you believe if I told you I am Lysistrata's brother,
the one with unresolved sex who whispered into her ear
the secret of stopping all wars?
Tell me, do young men in Greece sleep with their mothers?
Is this why mothers tear their sons limb from limb
to guard themselves against the future?
Do fathers in Greece eat their own sons in their blindness?
Do sons, in turn, gang up on their fathers?
If you think there are more important things for me to know
about your land of the blue glass mirror
and the wine dark sea, please open the box.
Or are you going to tell me you'd rather not be Pandora?

I am more simple than you think I am.
I am more frightened than I let on.
I am more unknowing than mitochondria.

Like you, I also want to be able to speak
to ordinary people in diners and the marketplace.
I also dream of hills that return my song to me.
The sisters who stand entwined against the wind—
I know them well.
I am a baby crawling in a roomful of things
looking for a key, a hammer, a pen.
They are nowhere to be found amid the rubble of the world,
so I put my fist in my mouth and eat my heart out.

I know my India no better than I know your Greece.
Ignorance is my name and my belly's full of desire.

Song

I don't write until there's a song in my throat. Andrew Calhoun

I don't write until a shadow crosses my door
and old loves gleam, winking under waves
It's then I grip my pen by the neck, squeeze and say:
Yield, you parsimonious monk, and with gold leaf
quicken the stream lying frozen in my heart

SASHA KAMINI PARMASAD

‘The evidence suggests that there was a general build-up of resistance by Indians which culminated in the Hosea Riots in 1884. Between 1882 and 1884 there were twenty-five strikes... A significant feature of these strikes was the increasing tendency of the Indian labourers to strike for non-economic reasons... The Hosea on that day in 1884 was an opposition not to this or that planter. It was a direct challenge to colonial law, to colonial authority and, as it turned out, it was also considered by the government as a definite challenge to the security of the colonial state itself considering the military preparations which were made... The Riots did not change the fact that Indians existed at the very bottom of the social system but signaled their determination to change their social reality.’

-- Kenneth Vidia Parmasad, *The Hosea Riots of 1884*, December 1983

Commemoration: 30 October, 2009

[for Names Unknown]

Wide-eyed, they called us,
sweetie-suckers.
Yet my middle-part needled
straight back to indenture days,
oiled plaits roping tight my neck.
Your skin, outthrust of Indian, Nepoya,
Chinese, European, African—
one day a prison for the master;
next day, the slave.
Two girl children on a road holding hands,
sucking lollipops while watching a massacre.

‘What you bringing up, girl?’
30 October, 1986—Les Efforts, Mon Repos Junction.
‘I can’t remember.’
Palm trees, pigeons, the sun hot, sucking—
‘You hear me? I not into that again.’
—us, drop by drop, up into it?
White people scarce, black brothers played
officers in Queen Victoria’s colonial army:
boots? silver buckles? hard hats?—
‘Ask the photographs!’
—blocked the procession, aimed wood guns
at Indians making San Fernando
streets a monument,

hoisting ancestors' voices like jhandis,
Shoot him all man!

wielding frenzied
sticks like martyrs' bones—

Jaggernath

Gildari

Manoo

Eman Khan

Chaddee

Nabebocus

Dipchan

Moodit

Ameer Khan

Ramnath

Junglee

Chaydar

Abdool-Kunia

Seetal

Ramgolam

Chowtonic

Chotah

Sadarsingh

Name Unknown

Name Unknown

Name Unknown

Name Unknown

as the origin of that limp in your step, Sister,
years since I've seen you;
as the hunger of those birds corkscrewing
through dying cane,
of that crepuscular light sucking
this place like a sweet (into nothing)
until the arrival of Bal Gopaul Singh,
a gap between the teeth.

Father—since rainy boyhood days imagining
the hoof-print of a cow, a well,
a fallen leaf, a cone, to scoop
and sip the memory of our sweat
archived in clouds—
lashed his tongue to the ground
at Mon Repos Junction in '86,
delivering blood bright, after a hundred years,
Bal Gopaul Singh, sipaahi: 'straddling horse,

wielding sword, leading jahaajees
from Picton, Wellington plantations,
to storm the gates of Phillippine Estate,
mustering arms to thicken surge of twenty plus
five thousand? (figures unknown),
charhawaying breath like jal
on public streets prohibited,
earthen Gods to awake, sow
through San Fernando
clotted with colonial troops,
battleship in wharf to enforce:

*the Hosay may not leave the plantation
without written magisterial permission;
may not (without permission) be engaged
by those not residing on said plantation;
nor sticks, torches, firesticks & other offensive weapons
be wielded; nor non-Indians & their descendants (as before)
participate; nor licenses to celebrate the festival be granted
(as before) to non-Muslims; nor to Muslims
who are not headmen; nor—*

Father!

His flood-pants,
beard amok with wind,
eyes sunk deep from raking
dungeons of colonial documents
for clues to a history the old Indians kept
like cascadoo in the mud of their throats.
Revolutionary, some called Father,
freedom fighter—words not yet stained
with a subtext of terror—Bal (Gopaul Singh) some called him
in the Underground, through our childhood
a dark space without sound, sucking
as we pitched marbles, smiling
faces, masks, mouths aching red
from sucking sweets hard (knock? knock?)
into darkness emptying, filling,
without record. Can you picture him?
His red shirt, his father's: tattered sky.
Or perhaps I am mistaken.
That day he must have worn white.
There mustn't have been wind.
His beard must have been closely cropped,
gritty like stones marking a spot

where history in a concentrated burst
has happened.

‘Fish,’ you mutter, Sister,
‘is good for seeing memory.’
But carite slices coated in flour
blind-drop into oil spitting, *Hist! Hist!*
snapping at your fingertips.
And maybe you are right—
what can happen here, *Ha!*
History!?—Bal, a flimsy shore
abutting oceans vast, unspoken.
What can happen here, if you, Sister—
sweetie-sucker, participant witness—
flip fish without heart,
gaze placid at oil bubbles bursting your image,
shrug to sidestep the memory of yourself—
a girl child in shorts and sneakers—
running towards me shouting, *Pigs! Pigs!*
as actor-officers cracked buckshot back a century.
That blood, where you fell oozing, we agreed
was from the earth itself. History?—
(The photographs
like your hand in mine, girl,
I cannot find.)

The table dressed.
Our plates heaped.
Together like this, sharing carite
in silence
we commemorate the dead.
Our breath, a monument.

YOGESH PATEL

Hope

They planted the bones in this desert
And hoped for the trees

The rain never spoke here with
The tap-dancing on barren roads
They are the words children won't hear
Yes, the tears may rain
But the trees won't grow

History never had a heart, just rubble
The future has a tail, coils, runs away
The birds are the circling Mig-29s
Cloud-tails scratching a silver-line

Damask Roses have fallen to dust
In the only monsoon where bullets rain
The hands that can farm are bones
In barbarians' metal-mushroom farms

The buzzards are the circling Mig-29s
Their cloud-tails drag a smoky silver-line
Puffed straight from a hookah by an old man
A wish: the man-made clouds will rain
One day
Where they planted the bones in this desert
And hoped for the trees

The Mono Lake Flies

Two strangers sitting in a same room
Immersed in bubble-submarines
In a saline soda lake of deep silence
Even Marco Polo wouldn't have enjoyed
Watching these flies comfortable
As Mono Lake flies

The silence feels old as the saline lake
Now made shallow by reckless humans

Our room-lake also offers words-brine-shrimps
Sustains its ecosystem
Birds are not always poetry
We watch two million of them
Banqueting on the bubbled flies

I loathe a tribe of Kutzadika'a
You have assembled
Not realising they too gorge on flies

Now you laugh that
This fly has left the basin
And the bastard law has bequeathed
The whole salt lake to you

Let me let go the lake
Love is not always the salt of life

Translucent Whales

Poachers chopped the sea
Into Lego bricks
Stacked up as a spreadsheet
Remove one cell
The formula still works
In such liquidity
Someone added whales
To hear their songs

With this last poem
Carefree whales dive
Unaware of man's
Calculations

Emerge in my peace
As six paths of
Samsara as
Ishana Yamada's
Translucent whales¹

Let's swim finally
You in six paths
I in six senses

SALEEM PEERADINA

The Body in Question

Glorified at the hands
Of artists, feasted upon by poets,
Its praises sung by music-makers.
Dissected by physicians,
Its machinery exposed in
Anatomy textbooks.

In repose, its beauty drunk
In stillness. Desire awakened
In languor, the flesh animated,
Transported in slow motion
To bliss. From the bud of infancy
To maternal bloom. Pushing its limits

To perform daring feats. Body painted,
Perfumed, jeweled, and tattooed.
Wet skin in wet clothes. The veiled body
Kept in the dark. Body married
To Christ. Paraded on stage, dressed up
Or stripped down. Sold and humbled

Into submission. Bodies in whose soil
Is grown cotton, cane, corn, and tobacco
To make nations rich. Those bodies still
Slogging on, impoverished. Bodies from
Which coal is mined and gold is extracted.
Body rewarded, eroding with disease.

Migrating bodies washed ashore.
The body detached, its primal urges
Mastered by yogis; its potential sunk
In self-indulgence. Body behind bars.
In solitary. Body effaced in suicide. Body
Stopping bullets, blown to cinders by bombs.

In genocide, counted in numbers.
Body in pain, suffering blows, coming
To understand its frailty. Eventually
Betrayed by its own failure, losing muscle,
Bone, attaining stasis, shutting down.
The body home at last, laid out cold.

Blueprint

He wears the brick wall-paper of skin wound
Around his body like a crossword puzzle.

Taking baby steps to stand upright
Finds him crumbling to the ground
Like a pack of cards. Reshuffling
Hooves, spine, belly, neck, he rises
Like a pyramid on stilts. Ready or not,

This architecture of mismatched limbs – one of
Evolution's surrealist pranks–has equipped
Him with all the grace of a creature
Designed to race across earth's stage
Forever vertical. Giraffes are known
To graze, sleep, mate, even give birth standing up.

Since that is what they do best,
He is even better off standing still, posing
For a Dali painting:

A pair of horn-stubs mushroom from his head,
Ears cocked, for signs of danger. Yet, he's not shy
Eating out of your hand, furry tongue scraping your palm,
Jaws moving gently like a cradle rocking. Nose sniffing
The air, eyelids drooping; uncertain of being at ease
In this wilderness, the steeple of his neck arches skyward.

The Street Walks

The street walks hand in hand
With you.
The subway
Picks you up
For a ride.
Bridges bounce you
On their laps.
Traffic lights wink
As you pass.
The park spreads
Its arms
To receive you.
The sidewalk café
Waits
With an empty table
Where you will sit
To compose
A poem
That will make
Something
out of nothing.

DIVYA RAJAN

A House is a Center is a Sanctuary is a Man

Before Karen Brown embarks on a mission, she researches.
And so before signing the closing agreement, she made multiple trips.
Called her realtor umpteen times, checked the strawberry garden texture
In the backyard, tested the soil pH, whether it'd withstand
The glorious summer heat beating through the maple leaves.

She tasted the mulberries and the gooseberries, the pepper:
Roasted veggies, sprinkled them as nuggets on top of pizzas,
Pastas and mushroom soups.

She tapped the soil bed, its rhythm drenched
On the insides of upcoming showers and drizzles.

The house, she sniffed the Hershey Brown wall trims.
They weren't the kind Nachos, her four-legged alter ego, would chew on.
The roof nutmeg.

The color of sediment, walls a hint of bergamot. Years earlier,
While kohl-lining her eyes midnight blue, lying on
A stretcher, she dreamt of a wall print

Of a bicycle and flowers and glazed tiles, an obscure artist, over a shot of espresso,
On the streets of Amsterdam. The flowers matched this wall.

Blackheads Exist

Deformability is an inherent property of cells. —Jochen Guck

Ms. Rahaan, I'm not sure how to put it.
There's nothing to be concerned about.
But you've really... aiwly skin. —A helpful spa attendant

Like any other imperfection, it has a circumference
A glaring opinion staring at you
An open tongue
A deciduous secretion
Caked debris, craters
You know the rest

Hold onto your hat and brace yourself.
Try not to think too much about the diagnosis.
Try not to think about your cells, floating around in hot aiwl.
Try to be smug about it.
Open up your mind. Count the sheep. Breathe in.
Imbibe all of the goodness in Clorox lavender fragrance. Then breathe out.
Release. There you go.
Think about pastries, *feathery light pastry crescents filled with hot apricot jam.*
Be happy, *happy that you dyed your hair black.*
Try not to think about how you don't really write letters.
Feel the love, *love surge out of you like a sun.*
It is heaven to be liked for myself alone. Sing that to yourself.
Everything else sits in this frame of correctness.

An extractor'd know where to begin, you say?
Lisa'd agree. She's the helpful spa attendant. On the nonsurgical table,
Lay in askance, the following: extractor, cotton doused in rubbing alcohol, blackhead dissolving gel, sonicator.

Molecular identifiers are equalizers. They do not differentiate between cells.
Enlarged pores are the sole culprits.
I lay still, back *splitting open at my feet.*
Extraction is a painful art.

(Phrases in italics have been excerpted from Sylvia Plath's letters to her mother)

The summer when Marquez said, “No medicine cures what happiness cannot,” and I interpreted

It as There's no cure like madness.
That was the summer I frequented Brasa Rosa
in the corner of a busy alley; *Brasa Rosa* calligraphed
on a yellow matt cloth like a flag at the UN; debris
of generous cigarette stubs splattered across the curb,
beer cans strewn over trash cans, classic East Andheriisque;
chicken lined up on the rotisserie, smokes
bellowing, betraying salsa fumes, rotating as if to a sonata;
accompanied by chorizo stuffed plantains,
mounds of hot Guadalajara sauce.
Newly found interest in Marquez nourished the OCD in me,
I read his books, biographies, pamphlets; Zumba air sunrise in lungs.

Circling his fenced home and neat lawns, perched scarecrows on either side;
masquerading soldiers on an utopian campaign,
examining the green rivaling the greener,
a green hawk from outer space, vengeance of a landscape artist.
Apart from soliloquies at the cafe, topics up for discussions included
specific gravities, calibrations, meniscus errors, new entries on the café palate
wondering why Ms Carter bought watery soups every single day
when it only cost a few more cents for a hearty burger with fries.

He was old fashioned enough to write my name in cursive on post-it notes sent across the lab.
D'Nealian'd have wrung the oxygen out of D, pelican head
a neat mailbox filled with self-pity. Who could bear to look past faux pas like that?
He said he was least bit interested in prosodies, that he was “after all a man.”
Sentence formations eroded his Plebian claims, so did the ease with which he moved on
never once pausing to acknowledge the admiration it aroused.

Which also meant that our arguments never ended with intrepid allusions to granny panties,
mediocre driving skills or random, hasty references to bitches from the past.
Chimney allotropes atop an adjacent mall coagulated the lit skies
in sharp contrast with the orange luminescence that arose from rooftop bars.
A little girl in red waved at her heavily pregnant mom, polka dots in the maze of crossings.
As he struggled to get dimes and nickels at the parking lot,
a faded photograph of a smiling boy in his baseball hat, and a freckled faced woman
lay unsaid in his wallet. He asked whether I could write a poem about baseball
and I laughed.
Chlorine in the water tugged at sweat pores, hard knots of my hair heavy
and acrid.

VARSHA SARAIYA-SHAH

We Metamorphose in a Matter of an Hour

Youthful and lithe as a ballerina, she turns
to my side casually curious
about my children. *Grown,*

I respond with a leisurely stretch. An old woman
in her eyes posing as a child, I raise my torso erect
in the serene space of yoga studio.

Soon we are mountains towering side by side.
I grow a tree

from my arms shaking the leaves of
small talk, four limbs ready to make a plank
from my body

summoning an humble warrior. Arms
swords-like surrender. A crescent moon hangs.

We rise and raise our bridges,
each body building its own

perfect arch. Let the waters flow.
Let time slow. From under the breath
she makes her shelter. I, mine.

We go from plough to a wheel. Forms evolve.
Cobra to fish. Choosing to practice
impermanence. Crow, pigeon, eagle.

An elongated body risen, a bread-loaf
spreads like a chapatti, my warm offering—

the kind I took delight in cooking over and over
for children, my birds of distant skies.

Rocking side to side we come to repose
corpse-like. Still yet vibrant. Soft and re-born

each of us flies outside our forms
beyond mind's eye

gathering this hour's handout as if souvenirs
like a feather or two birds leave behind
transcending the form, the flight.

Then There's a Pair of Us

Tonga Ridge tapers up and off
in a circle where light ladders.
A sky unfolds over sparkling needles.
Blue spruce and red cedar enormous, showcasing

abundance with their girths.
Douglas fir on the trail assuring
it doesn't matter who you are:
an ordinary spider, purple aster, or tiger lily.

Like the magenta shirt I wear
with Emily Dickinson's face. Somber
and a simple hairdo, her gaze contemplative
like the stoic trees.

Fox gloves strut all around and succumb to dusk.
Mosquitos kick my ears.
Sing, sing with us, or march on.
My stooping and stopping to pick berries
seem to whet their appetite.

They don't stop reciting,
Who are you?
As if echoing Emily's verse,
I am nobody.
"Are you-nobody too?" I buzz back often
failing to zap them.

My thoughts frame this wordless bulletin
ordained yet free.
Wilderness underneath unquestioned.
The smoky, sunny providence beyond reach.

Summer's thimble berries are luscious,
reassuring
it doesn't matter who you are. This
bounty is yours—
a mouthful of delicate, tart sweetness.

Rumination I

“Be Empty of worrying.

Think of who created thought!
Why do you stay in prison
When the door is so wide open?”

~Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks~

As the day surrenders to night,
the month folds into a year,
the year to an era, era to something else,
I begin to see

my door flings open as if to break its falling
and suddenly
I drop out of my body’s sky— a moth exits
her flower’s brown edges
earthward— another life.

The muslin moon of early evening, a phasing face
watches me becoming translucent.
Together we circle the jogging track.
My feet take her energy as
a wren makes the last call to its mate
gathering their youngsters back into nest.

Hibiscus folds up her red umbrella on a distant patio,
once my home. I sense a quiet
glance pouring from rooms into my gait,
drip by drip the dissonance fleeing
pain’s prison,
turning into light in the pond of my palm.

Rumination II

“I AM all orders of being,
The circling galaxy, the evolutionary intelligence,
The lifting and the falling away...”
~Rumi translated by Coleman Barks~

Says Time:

Yesterday I was at the Eros cinema
sipping cold coffee, drunk with Gulzar's ghazals
pretending you were saqi
sealing my mouth
with sharabi eyes.

It was a crack in the mirror.
Or, was it a dream?
Lift your surahi and toast to who I am.
Come step into my beat and dance.
Let my arms be your galaxy.

Some call me death,
Some see me beside the river bank.
This vast you.

Wait not till you know me as *then*—
the surrogate for *today*.
Tomorrow is an empty shell, your pretense
for living.

RAVI SHANKAR

Thomas Jefferson in Kathmandu

“Experience hath shewn, that even under the best forms of government, those entrusted with power have, in time, and by slow operations, perverted it into tyranny.

– Thomas Jefferson, *Preamble to a Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge* (1778)

Packed in Thamel into a beat-up tempo, that minivan
which serves as public transportation in Nepal,
I’m thumbing your visage on a nickel near the tan

faces of seekers and trekkers, the various people
of foreign descent who throng the dusty road
in saffron shirts and rudraksha malas, the steeple

up ahead really a stupa where we stop to unload
passengers and accept others. Here, I think of you
TJ, in the faux-Gilbert Stuart portrait that stood

smelling of agar from petri dishes plus an old gym shoe
odour that never seemed to dissipate from the halls
of my high school named for you where I went through

facial hair, trigonometry, punk rock, soccer balls,
SATs, angst, in short the whole gamut of adolescent
failure and triumph. Now, standing in front of stalls

selling Himalayan masks, frozen in poses of pent
up animal rage and wood-carved rictuses of wrath,
I remember how many long hours I once had spent

under your unnoticed gaze, working on some math
problem or pining over the redhead I was smitten
with, carrying my dog-eared copy of Sylvia Plath,

dreaming myself a writer before I had even written
a stanza worth rereading. It would be much later
at the University you built where I’d be bitten

by the bug properly, a sensation made ever greater
in the walks I would take traversing your serpentine
walls, alone, at home in my own mind the way a crater

gives shape to a surface by suggesting what’s unseen,
what might have been once, still what is yet to come.
I traced the rim of my own unknowing, still so green

but ambitious, questioning everything, trying to shun

nothing, striking together stones to try to make a fire
that would burn brighter and deeper than a twinning sun.

Here now is Chitipathi the skeletal lord of the Funeral Pyre
and Mahakala, the great black one, personal tutelary
of Kubla Khan, with flared nostrils, bared fangs and ire

to spare. And here you are on your plantation, Mulberry
Row, where slaves worked as smiths, joiners, weavers,
carpenters and hostlers, each of whom has a story

untold on unmarked graves or in your writings. Grievors
mourned your death on Independence Day but of them,
what? Here I am in Alderman Library working levers

of the elevator moving in half-floors slow as phlegm
seeping down a basin drain. Here you are in Paris wearing
yarn stockings, velveteen breaches, the exquisite hem

of your waistcoat like wild honeysuckle baring
subtle blossoms. Here are all the dark bodies going
into ground after a lifetime of labour and you staring

from Mount Rushmore, me from under the flowing
rim of the Annapurna mountains. Here are the Bill
of Rights, where Sally Hemmings does her light sewing.

I'm on the other side of the world and still
can't see clearly what has succeeded and what failed
in the grand American experiment. I eat my fill,

no prayer bowl to beg from, yet have been jailed
and bailed out, slurred, even refused service at a diner
250 years after you were born. I know I'm not nailed

to a cross, but why is it that I feel so much finer
and more contented in a country ruled by Maoists
and Marxists than I do in the democratic, designer

shining city on the hill where all the Taoists,
Hindus, and Buddhists I'm meeting want to move
to regardless, *to start new lives in the USA?* How is it

possible that the Newari dancers' ancient groove
feels more timely than twerking, that I'd rather eat
dosas and dal than haute cuisine? No need to prove

an answer to those questions as they're mine to read
and puzzle out, but grown from a seed planted
at your plantation into a towering crop I now need

heed. Democracy is a fine ideal yet to be supplanted,
but does it coexist with capitalism? Today I was told
a Nepalese proverb which might be loosely translated

as “cumin in an elephant’s mouth,” meaning how all gold
shines valueless next to our own nothingness, how the priceless
figs we hunger for are impossible to be bought or sold.

I’ve secreted the nickel now into the folds of a torn dress
a woman with child uses to collect rupees. She is our
mother from another life and you and I are no less,

no more than brothers. If even in this late hour,
honesty is the first chapter in the book of wisdom,
then its epilogue must be compassion. Not power.

Ghazal Deconstructed

--for Rahini Shankar

Like a bird is its flight
through the tops of the trees,
the way a hand in the air
leads a bend of the knees,
the body can in its motion
embody several stories:

limbs are the world.

Waves break on the shore,
then surely recede,
air turns to rain,
shifts to mist,
zooms to speed
into night which hangs like a bead
on a necklace of days
that sways as we breathe:
limbers the world.

The dancer who dances
is subsumed by the dance,
the stories she tells
can be read through her hands
poised mid-flight,
from her ankles' rapid jangle.
The lands she evokes
are distant and spangled:

her limbs are whirled.

Each of us here in our body
is pent, legs crossed
or missing, arms open or bent,
in each gesture and inflection
a message is sent:

our world is limbed.

Sam the Super

--villanelle for K.H. Shankar

You wouldn't take my bald father for a quirky man,
since his bearing is quintessentially Tamil-Brahmin,
a *Tam-Bram* for the uninitiated, with the firmest hand

when it comes to discipline or studies. He leers at ham
and beer alike. Believes what genes conspire within
him makes him purer than you. Not the sort of man

you'd ever imagine would in top hat willingly stand
in a Chinese restaurant smelling of wet dog and Ramen
to pull silk scarves from his mouth with his own hand,

yet there he was, amazingly, like Borat in Kazakhstan
but without the parody and much to my young chagrin,
playing the part of Magician, much more than mere man.

I was his caped and turbaned assistant who he'd demand
tap on boxes, say magical phrases, hide in a flour bin
he'd saw in half. If not a spectacle witnessed firsthand,

I wouldn't believe it either. Soon as he'd pull out a cyan
hanky to mop his brow in the parking lot, his large grin
would fade to a frown. He'd warn me not to say "man"
or "dude." When I resisted, he pulled me to car by hand.

VIVEK SHARMA

Bhangolu or Grandma's Roasted Bhang Seeds

Nani's Bhangolu: the seeds of cannabis,
feature in a hazy childhood memory,
of a winter evening and six
or seven cousins lined-up
with the youngest in front.
The elders in the room (complicit!)
grin while we kids wait for a treat.
My mother wants me spared
but grandma shakes head, says:
"Bhangolu do nobody no harm".

Blowing air through a wood-pipe,
grandma rouses a crackling blaze.
Bhangolu, a fistful, sputter first
in a red-hot iron-wok, then
cool off in a large brass plate.
"Eat only as many as I give,"
she says, "or nightmares
shall haunt your sleep."
Bhangolu: to keep you warm."
I get four in my aged-four palm,
my cousins three or six or seven.

Maybe this memory sticks as it was
rare for our grandma to say,
"finish here, don't share"
or say, a treat she prepared
could cause us nightmares.
Was it the only time? Mother
shall deny it, cousins forget
such things, and my nani-ma
would say: "Who knows, I'm old,
can't recall a thing"... and wink!

Testimony of a Fourteen-Year-Old Almost Woman

She began in her mousy, sweet voice--
He said to me (in his dialect-tone):

“I own your lands and hands,
and your flesh and bones,
your feelings too. I sleep
each night with my wives,
I have four, I can keep
you as fifth. Or as a mistress.

Stay tonight, tomorrow go.
You'll see, I'll be touched.
I am a sentimental fellow.
Your Ma is a tyrannical sow,
Your Pa is a regular pimp,
but all that you already know.

Don't cry silly, a filly
as fine as you will fetch
a handsome beggar catch.
No one will dare to wince
to feast on what this Prince
tasted once and let go.

Your mother did not wince,
your father brought her first
four nights ago. She begged
that you be spared. My thirst
is deep little one. Don't weep!
We've done the deed. Sleep.”

He said all that and goodnight
and laid down next to me.
When he began to snore
I scoured his eyes,
with a butcher's knife.
HANG ME! Set me FREE!

Running Downhill with *Daadi*

Downhill, over slippery pine leaves,
gushes my grandma like a skating,
skipping ballerina. My city-feet totter,
hesitant at every step and leap.

"After rain, aroma of pine-leaves
intoxicates," she quotes someone
as she sways from a rock to the path
to a rock, finding footholds on wet grass.

"Walking downhill is like free-falling.
Holding yourself back will trip,
trick you. Be one with the slope,
says the river, says the Giver."

I follow, out of breath, scared:
a slip ends in an abyss
half a kilometer below.
"Why are you so fearless, *Daadi*?"

"*Bayta*! When a man dies, leaves
four forever hungry children,
a turpentine flame anneals
a mother's heart. When thieves
attack like buzzards, grief
disappears. Bravado begins.
Don't be a scared *kaddu*!
Don't hold back, jump."

She calls me *kaddu*, pumpkin,
for I am a chubby, city boy.
I am nine. I live in the plains
where no walks are as exciting.
Finally I jump and like it, and jump.
Though we're separated by fifty years,
together we go down the hill, laughing.
"See, it takes some harassing
and then fears give way, go away.
After your grandpa died, I learned:
what is gone, is gone. Don't look back!
Never hold back! Jump, *bayta kaddu*, jump!"

YUYUTSU SHARMA

Ghorepani

Is it incessant rain
or a mourning monsoon brook?

Is it a Yeti following
your trail in the desolate mountains

or a crisp leaf
rolling on the breath of icy winds?

Is it a mat rolled up
by a sheet of drying millet

or a newly born baby
asleep after an oily massage?

Is it a huge cucumber
left to dry on the rooftop by a busy housewife

or a fat rooster
dozing by a brown cat in the warm sunlight?

Is it blaze of
a khukuri in the emerald green glade

or fragrant
flash of her shimmering nose ring?

Is it a dragonfly
skittering through

the golden stalks
of ripe paddy fields

or a shivering sickle
reaping the misfortune of famished fields?

Are these crooked
limbs of a burly bear

or mossy boughs
of a juniper in the forest of Rain?

Is it an iridescent
feather shed by some blue jay

or a wandering

shaman's cruel craft?

Is it the cackle
of a lonely thrush

or my own breath
weaving a song of silence?

After Newtown Massacre, a Prayer
for Yugank

How can I forget you?

How can I forget you
on the edge of these shores

emblazoned from
the tears of the innocent

dripping like tar
in the fields of snow...

How can I forget you?

blue rivers that
flowed in your starry eyes,

soft airs
of the riverbeds that polished

the enamel
of my sparkling teeth

and sculpted curves
of my muscular limbs,

warm water wells of your breaths
that pulled the bow of my backbone

and sent me twirling,
your plaything, across the world...

Your blood that wove
the coat of my conscience,

how can I forget
the niche in the crevice

of our crumbling brick wall,
vermillion powder paste, grains of rice

and a blunt coin
tied up in a scarlet thread

where once you laid
a winged seed to sprout a deity from it.

How can I forget you,

maker of my forehead

horoscope of my mind,
sap of the lush tree of my body

the only earth
of my galaxies

quiet cosmic
engineer of my soul

How can I forget you
especially on these shores

emblazoned
from the tears of the innocent

dripping
like tar in the fields of snow...

You are a New Yorker

The day you learn to notice
sparkles of sullen silence snapping the darkness
of damp boroughs or stop taking notes
of wild blizzards racing along the signature shore,
You are a New Yorker.

The day you start hearing
Gaga songs in the screeching subway cars,
and stop saying, '*I don't know no Spanish*'
to Latino visitors seeking directions.
You are a New Yorker.

The day you start understanding
the thick jumble of subway announcements
or roadside pronouncements,
'You don't have to be a Rockefeller
to be a generous guy,
You are a New Yorker...

The day you stop taking the free
Staten Island Ferry to click a perfect shot
of the Statue of Liberty,
or stop visiting Times Square at night
and forget to find a way out of its labyrinth
or learn to walk the Brooklyn Bridge
without a secret desire to dangle
a padlock on one of its rafters,
or stop seeing Walt Whitman sitting atop
its edge, looking for his beautiful boys
and vagabond ferries entering the sheltered bay,
You are a New Yorker...

The day you stop fearing
the spy dogs at Grand Central, recognize
the homeless that hang out at Port Authority or Jackson Heights
the day you pass through the shrunken midnight
of Sutphin Boulevard and Jamaica subway stations
without holding your breath in terror,
You are a New Yorker...

The day you start 'loving'
Starbucks Coffee wafting along
the wide glassy Manhattan Malls
or learn to chew the Brooklyn bagel
or lap up the steaming loneliness
of chatty dog walkers around Central Park
or learn to make love and forget
the face of your partner,

You are a New Yorker...

The day you stop guessing
the origin of the blonde teenager
reading current issue of *The New Yorker*,
stop looking at the bare shoulders
of the Vietnamese girl sitting
at the free Wi-Fi table
near the entrance of S' Nice Village Café
opening and closing like her red lips
on the first day of the winter snow,
the day you pass by Magnolia Bakery
loaded from its famed cupcakes
and moon-sized cookies
the day you stop visiting White Horse Tavern
to pose against Dylan Thomas' drunken portrait
or stop hearing John Lennon's voice
climbing the Fire Escape Ladders
of Hotel Chelsea or stop looking for
the room where she gave
Leonard Cohen a blowjob,
You are a New Yorker...

The day you stop gawking at
the gay couples on L train romancing
like Bollywood couples or fervently discussing
pussy power, animal rights, or their ailing pets or parents,
the day you stop staring at the Hasidic Jews of Williamsburg,
their curls dangling out of their black velvet caps
like Lord Shiva's sacred serpents,
You are a New Yorker...

The day you learn to laugh
like a Latino bartender,
or smile like a Filipino waitress
standing beside her stuffed rose pig like a Queen
or stop looking at the cleavage
of the Nudist poet at Central Park
or learn to check your seat
in a subway for a stain of shit
a homeless might have left for you,
You are a New Yorker...

The day the girl
from Cleveland, Ohio
behind the counter of Greenwich Café
gives you her email
or offers a free top up on your coffee
or lets you take her out
You are a New Yorker...

ARCHANA VEMULAPALLI

Grim Reaper

For something so intangible
I've seen you in his body still
I've felt you as the cold ground it lay on
I've smelled you in the floating wisps
Of burning incense and camphor through the house
I've heard you in the chants and prayers
From the untiring lips of priests
I've touched you on her unused clothes
But most of all I feel you like a cold stab in the heart
In the blackness of every night
That puts out every golden ray of the sun's light

Spring

Forgive me

For this spring

My heart's awash with an ache^[SEP]The eyes are dry^[SEP]These pangs are but a memory away
from the surge of an overwhelming grief^[SEP]Forgive me^[SEP]For I am speaking out of turn^[SEP]Out
loud of my darling^[SEP]Of my blood, my soul, my sister^[SEP]Of death and her decade of absence^[SEP]
When instead I should be heralding this new season's change

Ten summers and winters have gone now

Autumns and springs, many moons, suns and evenings

I haven't heard a whisper, not a word from you

And yet the world's been spinning

I stand on the crest of my life's summer

And dream of your spring days

Flowering blossoms of your laughter

A spirit and wit like the fresh crisp air

Your youthful smile and energy

Brightened earth's every stage

You were lifted from us in the spring of your youth

I remember

But, how can I remember

When did I ever forget?

The Windmills of Zaanse Schans

Condense and colon your life into slats
Squeeze the linseed oil into vats
Your possessions, memories and emotions
Stack neatly side by side with little waste
Filtered and distilled fermented over time
The glint of the best of everything remains
Sharpened emotions of joy, sorrow and pain
Your legacy to remember and hand down
Wonders, woes and wishes wanton

PRAMILA VENKATESWARAN

The Long Journey

1

She bundled everything they owned: two skirts,
two blouses, a loaf of bread, dried

olives, figs, some meat,
a square cloth, two bowls,

Joseph's robe, an Old Testament,
and a small sack of earth

to remind them where they came
from.

2

The earth carried the scent of
trees, the light of the moon
under which she prayed,

the rippling of water:

She heard them call,
come back.

Centuries later,
her progeny heeded the call.

from *Kali*

you happen when i am not thinking

my dog at the foot of my chair

is unable to jump to my side

i look elsewhere

my desire on hold

the next moment she's on my side

a million times you happen

when our eyes wander

from the object of our desire

you offer it sweet wholesome

for us to savor

*

flowers bloom when I'm not looking

stars appear and vanish

sun and moon rise and set

clouds form and scatter

tides rise and fall blossoms

bud and wither leaves

turn color and shed

children grow taller

when I'm not looking you happen

The Milky Way

“Ganeshji is drinking milk,” a devotee proclaimed
& his words spread. The world over, every Ganesh statue
drank heartily milk spooned into the mouth behind
his trunk. Queues wound down avenues to view
the marvel in temples where large idols and Ganesh-lettes
were fed like babies. A furious traffic of photos and tales
from every shack and mansion jammed the internet;
the divine inhabitant’s thirst was unquenchable.
If gods can see the infinite, they must have infinite stomachs.
My neighbor Veena called me excitedly,
“My Ganapati bapa drank all the milk in the house.”
So I fed my papier-mâché statue. He drank gleefully!
Later, when I lifted him, I saw white ambrosia like protoplasm
spreading under him. Perhaps he gave in to my skepticism.

Poem For Meena

You came to me in a dream,
picking up where you left off, *how beautiful*
the flowers against a gray sky.

You nailed silken poems on survivors' walls
as if to say: This is how we must live now,
our skin held up against the light.

And the poems shed their petals
mixing into the walls' plaster
turning plaster into soil, sprouting
new verses—seamless address

to clothe exile, lucent
geography, seismic mouth
atmospheric embroidery to suture
a theater of distances.

Sita slipped into a manhole in Manhattan
collected her sari in 9/11 debris to appear
in the New Yorker singing of Kabir's loom.

You found cracks in the wall to sneak out;
bring back gems from your travels
to report your findings to the world.

"I was born in a woman's body"
you said to the man in the audience
who questioned the feminine slant in a poem.
"I can't help but write under its influence."
Your wisdom and quickness delighted me.

Birds still sing in the skies:
Not everything can be known.

I met you by Damascus Gate amid rumors
of the rise and fall of cities. "*We're strangers*
to this life," you whispered, "*I and you.*"
I stretch out my hand, brother to sister.
A fly skims undercover a mound of medjool.

Dark doors opened and you let the sun pour through.
Neela Marya you called yourself. Sister, I never met
how we name ourselves again, again, with bruised

tongues. We ask the angel with the lilies or the sword
what will become of us. I cross, re-cross
the quickly changing rivers. I'll find you there.

--Composed of stanzas contributed by the Matwaala Poets, 2019

PERMISSIONS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Usha Akella

“From Ghazal,” “On Turning 50,” and “Hyderabad Speaks Tongues”: by permission of the author.

Meena Alexander

The poem “Atmospheric Embroidery” from page 5 of *Atmospheric Embroidery* by Meena Alexander (Hachette India, New Delhi, 2015) is published with arrangement with Hachette Book Publishing India Pvt. Ltd.

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Indran Amirthanayagam

“Never Too Late (to write),” “a Strange Stillness, and “American Fitness”: by permission of the author.

Debangana Bannerjee

“midnight revealed the words I reserved for you”: permission of the author.

Ralph Nazareth

“Victor Jara’s Hands,” “Letter to Eleni,” and “Song”: by permission of the author.

Sasha Parmasad

“Commemoration: 30 October, 2009”: by permission of the author.

Yogesh Patel

“Hope” and “Translucent Whales”: by permission of the author.

Saleem Peeradina

“The Body in Question,” “Blueprint,” and “The Street Walks”: by permission of the author.

Vivek Sharma

“Bhangolu or Grandma’s Roasted Bhang Seeds,” “Testimony of a Fourteen-Year-Old Almost Woman,” and “Running Downhill with *Daadi*”: by permission of the author.

Yuyutsu Sharma

“Ghorepani,” “After Newtown Massacre, A Prayer,” and “You are a New Yorker”: by permission of the author.

Archana Vemulapalli

“Grim Reaper,” “Spring,” and “The Windmills of Zaanse Schans”: by permission of the author

Pramila Venkateswaran

“The Call,” “from Kali,” and “The Milky Way”: by permission of the author.

The following poems have previously appeared in the following journals some in different versions:

Rohan Chhetri

“Toward Some Dark”: first published in *Wildness*, and forthcoming in his second book from Tupelo Press in 2021.

“National Grief”: first published in *LitHub*, forthcoming in his second book from Tupelo Press in 2021

Kavita A. Jindal

“Faucet”: first published in *Feminist Times*, November 2013

“Kabariwala”: first published in *100 Great Indian Poems*, Bloomsbury, 2018

“Piccadilly Line Salon”: first published in ‘*Home Thoughts*’, *Cyberwit*, 2017

Zilka Joseph

“For the Birds”: first published in the *Michigan Quarterly Review* and republished in *Poetry Daily*

“Sparrows and Dust”: first published in the *Roethke Memorial Calendar 2018*, Saginaw Valley State University and Friends of Roethke Foundation

“The Rice Fields”: first published in *Poetry Magazine*

Kirun Kapur

“Anthem”: first appeared in *AGNI* and appears in her first book *Visiting Indira Gandhi's Palmist* (Elixir Press, 2015)

“History (with a Melon Cleaver)”: first appeared in the *Beloit Poetry Journal* and appears in her first book *Visiting Indira Gandhi's Palmist* (Elixir Press, 2015)

“From the Afterlife”: first appeared in *Arts & Letters* and appears in her first book *Visiting Indira Gandhi's Palmist* (Elixir Press, 2015)

Yogesh Patel

“The Mono Lake Flies”: first published in *The London Magazine*, February/March 2019 issue.

Divya Rajan

“A House is a Center is a Sanctuary is a Man”: previously published in *Mayday*

“Blackheads Exist”: previously published in *Eclectica*.

“The summer when Marquez said, ‘No medicine cures what happiness cannot,’ and I interpreted”: previously published in *After Hours*.

Ravi Shankar

“Thomas Jefferson in Kathmandu,” “Ghazal Deconstructed,” and “Sam the Super”: first published in *The Many Uses of Mint: New and Selected Poems 1998-2018* (Recent Works Press).

Varasha Saraiya-Shah

“Ruminations 1 & 11”: first appeared in *The Weight of Addition* (Mutabilis Press, 2007).

NOTES

Usha Akella

from Ghazal:

Radif: Refrain-Madingley

Matla: First couplet of the ghazal.

Maqta: Poet uses 'poet' as an emblem of self-identification instead of her name in the last couplet.

Beher: line length needs to be constant; not followed in this ghazal.

Qaafiyyaa: Rhyming pattern of words: threshold/manifold/cold/sold/boldly/old/hold/moldy

On the eve of turning 50:

On April 20, 2017, I awoke early this morning to write this poem. Reverberating with Vedanta couched in childish rhymes, it is a song of gratitude.

I can think it: Brahman, the architect of the drama

I think it: The warrior that rises from the ashes.

I thank it: Gratitude for it all

Sasha Kamini Parmasad

Commemoration: October 30

Epigraph—

Abstracted from my father's M.A. History Thesis (1983), the first research study to extensively investigate the Hosay Riots / Jahaajee Massacre of 1884.

'jhandis'—

Sacred flags used, particularly by Hindus, for a variety of purposes.

'Shoot him all man!'—

Let them shoot all of us if they can! This statement of challenge made by Indian labourers involved in the Hosay Riots of 1884 was recorded in colonial documents describing the event.

List of martyrs—

In the confrontation between masses of Indian labourers and British colonial troops on October 30, 1884, official records show that twenty-two people were killed on the spot. Only eighteen of these names have been discovered to my knowledge.

'sipaahi'—

Indian-Trinidadian word for freedom fighter.

‘jahaajee’—

Derived from jahaajee bhai (ship brother) and jahaajee behin (ship sister)—terms used by indentured Indians to refer to shipmates with whom they had withstood the hazardous journey from British India to the Caribbean (the British West Indies). In Trinidad, the descendants of these indentured Indian labourers often refer to them as jahaajees.

‘charhaway jal’—

The Hindu-Trinidadian practice of facing the rising sun and offering water to mother earth in homage.

‘cascadoo’—

A fish that lives in the mud. Legend has it that those who eat the cascadoo will end their days in Trinidad.

BIOGRAPHIES

Usha Akella is the founder of Matwaala. She recently graduated from Cambridge University with an MSt. In Creative Writing. She has been invited to many international poetry festivals and her sixth book of poetry *The Waiting* is expected to be translated and released in Spanish by the end of 2019.

Indran Amirthanayagam is a Sri Lankan-American poet-diplomat, essayist and translator in English, Spanish, French, Portuguese and Haitian Creole. He has been widely published and anthologized. His most recent work in Spanish is *Sin Adorno, lirica para tiempos neobarrocos* (Universidad Autonoma de Nuevo León, Mexico, 2013), and in French, *Ventana Azul*, (El Tapiz del Unicornio, 2016). He has also published *The Splintered Face* (Hanging Loose Press, 2008) and *Ceylon R.I.P.* (International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Sri Lanka, 2001). His poems have also been published in *Grand Street*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *Hanging Loose*, *BOMB* and elsewhere in the U.S. His poem "The Elephants Of Reckoning" won the 1994 Paterson Poetry Prize, and his poem "Juarez" won the Juegos Florales of Guaymas, Sonora in 2006. He has a Master's in Journalism from Columbia University. Currently, he is a diplomat in the U.S. Foreign Service, based currently in Rockville, Maryland. <http://www.indranmx.com/>

Debangana Banerjee is poet and a visual artist. She was born and raised in Santiniketan, India, and studied there up to her MFA (2005) in Visva-Bharati University. She received her second MFA in printmaking from Louisiana State University (2010), USA. Debangana has published her poetry and fiction in both Bengali and English languages in many literary magazines in India and USA, including in *International Poetry Review*, *Toad Suck Review*, *Unlikely Stories Mark V*, *Anustup*, *Prabas Bandhu*, *DuKool* etc. Finishing Line Press published her Bengali/English bilingual poetry chapbook *Come Back River* in 2014. Debangana's visual art has been exhibited in both solo and group shows in many countries including India, USA, Japan, UK, Canada, and Australia.

Vincent A. Cellucci wrote *Absence Like Sun* (Lavender Ink, 2019) and *An Easy Place / To Die* (CityLit Press, 2011). He edited *Fuck Poems an exceptional anthology* (Lavender Ink, 2012). *Come back river*, his first chapbook, a bilingual Bengali-English translation collaboration with the poet and artist Debangana Banerjee was from published by Finishing Line Press. *A Ship on the Line*, a battleship-collaboration with poet Christopher Shipman released by Unlikely Books in 2014, was a finalist for the Eric Hoffer Book Award.

Rohan Chhetri is a Nepali-Indian poet. He is the author of *Slow Startle* (Emerging Poets Prize 2015) and a chapbook of poems, *Jurassic Desire* (Per Diem Poetry Prize 2017). His second book of poems is forthcoming from Tupelo Press in 2021 (Kundiman Poetry Prize 2018). His poems have appeared in *Prelude*, *Wildness*, *Rattle*, *Vinyl*, *EVENT*, *Literary Hub* & was recently translated into French for *Europe Revue*. He was 2016 Norman Mailer Fellow.

Keki N. Daruwalla writes poetry and fiction and lives in Delhi. His last poetry volume (2018) was *Naishapur and Babylon* (Speaking Tiger) and last of his three novels is *Swerving to Solitude: Letters to Mama* which spans a period from Komagata Maru and M.N.Roy right to the Emergency of 1975. He was awarded the Poete Laureate award at the Literature Live Festival in Bombay in 2017.

Phinder Dulai is the author of 3 collections of poetry - *dream / arteries* (Talon Books, 2014), *Basmati Brown* (Nightwood Editions, 2000) and *Ragas From The Periphery* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 1995). His latest collection, *dream / arteries*, is a fluid time response to the documented

records of the Komagata Maru and current public images of the South Asian community in BC, Canada. Phinder serves as the Poetry Editor for *Canadian Literature Journal* and sits on the poetry board for Talon Books.

Kavita A. Jindal is a prize-winning writer and editor whose work has appeared in literary journals and anthologies in the UK and around the world. Her short stories have been broadcast on BBC Radio 4, and her poems on Zee TV and European radio stations. She is the author of *Raincheck Renewed*, published to critical acclaim by Chameleon Press. She won the Brighthorse Novel Prize in 2018 and the Foyles-Vintage 'Haruki Murakami' Prize in 2012. She received the Word Masala Award for Excellence in Poetry in 2016. She is the co-founder of *The Whole Kahani* – a collective of British Asian writers whose anthology of poetry and short fiction *May We Borrow Your Country* was published by Linen Press in January 2019. Kavita also serves as a Senior Editor at Asia Literary Review. www.kavitajindal.com @writerkavita

Zilka Joseph was nominated twice for a Pushcart. Her poems have appeared in journals such as *Poetry*, *Poetry Daily*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Frontier Poetry*, *Kenyon Review Online*, *Asia Literary Review*, and *Review Americana*. *Lands I Live In* (Mayapple Press) and *What Dread* (New Womens Voices, Finishing Line Press), her chapbooks, were nominated for a PEN America award and a Pushcart respectively. Her book of poems *Sharp Blue Search of Flame* was published by Wayne State University Press and was a finalist for the Forward Indie Book Award. She was awarded a Zell Fellowship, the Guterman prize, and the Elsie Choy Lee Scholarship from the University of Michigan. She has an MFA from the University of Michigan, an MA in Comparative Literature from Jadavpur University, and a BA and BED from Calcutta University. She teaches creative writing workshops in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and is a freelance editor and manuscript coach. www.zilkajoseph.com

Kirun Kapur is the winner of the Arts & Letters Rumi Prize in Poetry and the Antivenom Poetry Award for her first book, *Visiting Indira Gandhi's Palmist* (Elixir Press, 2015). Her second book, *Women in the Waiting Room*, was a finalist for the National Poetry Series and is forthcoming from Black Lawrence Press (2020). Her work has appeared in AGNI, Poetry International, FIELD, Prairie Schooner, Ploughshares and many other journals. She has taught creative writing at Boston University and Brandeis University, and has been granted fellowships from The Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Vermont Studio Center and McDowell Colony. She was recently named an "Asian-American poet to watch" by NBC news. Kirun serves as Poetry Editor at The Drum Literary Magazine and currently teaches at Amherst College.

Sophia Naz is a bilingual poet, essayist, author, editor and translator. he has been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize, in 2016 for creative nonfiction and in 2018 for poetry. Her work features in numerous literary journals, including Poetry International Rotterdam, The Adirondack Review, The Wire, Chicago Quarterly Review, Blaze Vox, Scroll, The Daily O, Cafe Dissensus, Guftugu, Pratik, Gallerie International, Coldnoon, VAYAVYA, The Bangalore Review, Madras Courier, etc. Her Urdu/Hindi poetry appears in the anthology *Raushniyan*(2018). Her poetry collections are *Peripheries* (2015) *Pointillism* (2017) and *Date Palms* (2017). Naz is a regular contributor to Dawn, Poetry Editor and columnist at The Sunflower Collective, editor of the journal City, as well as the founder of rekhti.org, a site dedicated to contemporary Urdu poetry by women. Shehnaz, a biography on her mother's life is forthcoming from Penguin Random House in 2019. Her site is www.trancelucence.net.

Ralph Nazareth is a poet, teacher and publisher. Born and raised in Mangalore, with a brief spell in Bombay, Nazareth got his Ph.D. in English Literature from the State University of New York at Stony Brook in 1974. After forty years of teaching at SUNY Stony Brook & Purchase, UT Austin & Nassau Community College, he retired from academia in 2015. He is now in his second decade of volunteer-teaching in maximum security prisons in New York State. He has published four books of poetry. In addition, his writing has appeared in books, magazines, and journals in the US and abroad, including the award-winning collection *Indivisible: An Anthology of Contemporary South Asian American Poetry*. He has participated in poetry festivals in Palestine, Ecuador, Colombia & El Salvador. The Managing Editor of Yuganta Press, he currently also heads GraceWorks, Inc., an international nonprofit charitable foundation.

Sasha Kamini Parmasad (MFA, Columbia University), author of the poetry collection *No Poem* (2017), began professionally engaging the space of Consciousness & Culture at age six, performing songs and poetry on a national scale in Trinidad and New Delhi, India. Sasha's childhood poetry was published in Equality (All India Democratic Women's Association Journal), and she has been giving public lectures since her teenage years to catalyse inner-outer transformation. Her novel *Ink and Sugar* placed third in the national First Words Literary Contest for South Asian Writers; her poetry placed first in the annual Poetry International competition and has appeared in various publications. She has designed and taught academic and creative writing courses and led meditation/personal development projects in programs at Columbia University, UN Women, in leadership/government circles, underserved communities (NYC, Chicago, Washington D.C.), and internationally (Caribbean and UK). With more than 20 years of meditation experience, she is a Specialist Transcendental Meditation Teacher and a Director of Special Projects at the David Lynch Foundation (NYC).

Yogesh Patel, a co-editor of Skylark, having published international poetry since the seventies, runs Skylark Publications UK and a non-profit Word Masala project to promote South Asian diaspora literature. A founder of the literary charity, Gujarati Literary Academy, he has been a Fellow of the International Poetry Society and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. Honoured with the Freedom of the City of London, he has LP records, films, radio, children's book, fiction, non-fiction books and three poetry collections to his credit. In 2017, he was presented to The Queen at Buckingham Palace by The British Council to represent the best in poetry. A recipient of many awards, his recent collection of poems is *Swimming with Whales*. His poems have appeared in many magazines, including PN Review and The London Magazine, and anthologies. He has read in the House of Lords and the National Poetry Library. www.patelyogesh.co.uk

Saleem Peeradina, born 1944, is the author of *First Offence* (Newground, 1980), *Group Portrait* (OUP, 1992), *Meditations on Desire* (Ridgeway Press, 2003), *Slow Dance* (Ridgeway Press, 2010), *Final Cut* (Valley Press, 2016), and *Heart's Beast: New and Selected Poems* (Copper Coin, 2017). He edited *Contemporary Indian Poetry in English* (Macmillan, 1972), one of the earliest and most widely used texts in courses on South Asian literature. *The Ocean in My Yard*, a prose memoir of growing up in Bombay, *Meditations on Desire* published in Arabic translation by Kalima Publishers, Abu Dhabi, UAE, and his upcoming book, *An Arc in Time: Cultural Chronicles from the Last Half Century*, a book of essays, reviews, and conversations, are the highlights of his oeuvre. He is widely anthologized, most notably in *The Oxford India Anthology of Poetry* (1994), *Living in America: Fiction and Poetry by South Asian-American Writers* (1995), *Contours of the Heart* (1996), *Uncommon Wealth* (1997), *Vespers: Contemporary American Poems of Religion and Spirituality* (2003), *The Bloodaxe*

Book of Contemporary Indian Poetry (2008), and *60 Indian Poets*, Penguin Books (2008). Peeradina is Professor Emeritus at Siena Heights University, Adrian, Michigan.

Divya Rajan is a Chicago based poet and regulatory scientist who was formerly associated with The Furnace Review as Poetry editor. Her works have appeared at Asian Cha, Rattle, MayDay, Missouri Review, New Poetry from the Midwest anthology, Silk and Spice anthology, Berfrois, The Missing Slate, After Hours, and several others, and have been nominated for Pushcart and Best of the Net multiple times. Her poems were recently translated into Chinese by the good folks at Voice and Verse magazine, HK.

Varsha Saraiya-Shah, an Indian American, earned an MBA degree from Cal Poly Pomona, California and has pursued a financial career as CPA in Texas. Varsha's poetic roots lie in her mother tongue, Gujarati. Her chapbook of poetry, "VOICES" was published in 2016 by Finishing Line Press. Her poetry has appeared in journals/anthologies including Borderlands, Cha-An Asian Literary Journal, Convergence, Echoes of the Cordillera (Photography - Jim Bones), Right Hand Pointing, Mutabilis Press, Texas Poetry Calendar, and UT Press poetry and photography (by Wyman Meinzer) Anthology edited by Naomi Shihab Nye. Her work has featured on local Public Radio, Public Poetry, and been presented in a multi-language, multi-century classical/modern dance program: "Poetry in Motion" by Silambam, Houston. She serves on the Mutabilis Press Board as member and treasurer.

Vivek Sharma's first book of verse *The Saga of a Crumpled Piece of Paper* (Writers Workshop, Calcutta, 2009) was shortlisted for Muse India Young Writer Award 2011. His work in English appears in *Atlanta Review*, *Bateau*, *Poetry*, *The Cortland Review*, *Muse India*, among others while his Hindi articles and verses appear in *Divya Himachal* (Hindi newspaper, India), *Himachal Mitra* and *Argala*. Vivek grew up in Himachal Pradesh (Himalayas, India), and moved to the United States in 2001. Vivek is a Pushcart nominated poet, is published as a scientist and he lives and teaches chemical engineering in Chicago.

Yuyutsu Sharma, a recipient of fellowships and grants from The Rockefeller Foundation, Ireland Literature Exchange, Trubar Foundation, Slovenia, The Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature and The Foundation for the Production and Translation of Dutch Literature, is a world renowned Himalayan poet and translator.

He has published ten poetry collections including, *The Second Buddha Walk*, *A Blizzard in my Bones: New York Poems*, *Quaking Cantos: Nepal Earthquake Poems*, *Nepal Trilogy*, *Space Cake*, *Amsterdam* and *Annapurna Poems*. Three books of his poetry, *Poemes de l' Himalayas* (L'Harmattan, Paris), *Poemas de Los Himalayas* (Cosmopoeticia, Cordoba, Spain) and *Jezero Fewa & Konj* (Sodobnost International) have appeared in French, Spanish and Slovenian respectively. His latest work is *Eternal Snow: A Worldwide Anthology of One Hundred Twenty-Five Poetic Intersections with Himalayan Poet Yuyutsu RD Sharma*.

Archana Vemulapalli lives in Austin with her two daughters, husband and puppy. She's a Program Management Consultant by day and a writer when she finds the time. Her family, especially her sister are her biggest sources of influences. She is drawn to all forms of literature, poetry and writings ranging from Urdu compositions, works by Sufi romantics, Shakespearean/Elizabethan era novelists, 19th & 20th century essayists and humorists from Oscar Wilde to Wodehouse to R.K Narayan. She also enjoys a good dose of fantasy fiction and sci-fi. You can read her work at www.myasays.com

Pramila Venkateswaran, poet laureate of Suffolk County, Long Island (2013-15) and co-director of Matwaala: South Asian Diaspora Poetry Festival, is the author of *Thirtha* (Yuganta Press, 2002) *Behind Dark Waters* (Plain View Press, 2008), *Draw Me Inmost* (Stockport Flats, 2009), *Trace* (Finishing Line Press, 2011), *Thirteen Days to Let Go* (Aldrich Press, 2015), *Slow Ripening* (Local Gems, 2016), and *The Singer of Alleppey* (Shanti Arts, 2018). She has performed the poetry internationally, including at the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival and the Festival Internacional De Poesia De Granada. An award winning poet, she teaches English and Women's Studies at Nassau Community College, New York. Author of numerous essays on poetics as well as creative non-fiction, she is also the 2011 Walt Whitman Birthplace Association Long Island Poet of the Year.

a collection of works from:

USHA AKELLA
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DEBANGANA BANNERJEE
ROHAN CHHETRI
KEKI N. DARUWALLA
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