NARRATIVE LIMITS AND OTHER POEMS

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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I believe the language of poetry always delves deep into the psyche of a writer to connect her history and culture with a larger but fragmentary body of language, literature, and lore that constitute identities. NARRATIVE LIMITS AND OTHER POEMS reflects on concepts such as borders and boundaries, insider and outsider, dispossessed and empowered, categorized and unhinged -- how the (geo)political becomes the linguistic and material.

Owing to my upbringing in Assam by parents of the Subcontinental Partition generation, issues of geography and belonging have been a constant question even while I was accorded a Western education. Given that many South Asians still struggle with fragmented identities marked by regions, religions, cartographic lines and other labels, I was encouraged to recognize the legacy of the modern Assamese poet-songwriter Bhupen Hazarika and the ancient Sufi poet Hasan Raja of Bengal in the same breath. The former’s vision of a world inspired by Paul Robeson’s show boat song and the latter’s mystic philosophy of all things disparate provide a narrative thread in this collection.
Édouard Glissant’s notion of the tout-monde (whole world) of human interculturalism and cultural fragmentation in the face of a totalitarian order is also a major influence on my poetry. Questions of ‘documentation’ and ‘orality’ – not just Glissant’s reference to a slave ship where the only written ‘book’ was the ledger containing exchange value of slaves, but also histories of the South Asian subcontinent – loom as important issues. These poems are a reflection on the interconnectedness of “narratives” that are shaped by identities and sometimes orally transmitted.

The collection is divided into three parts – 1. Moonlore from the East, 2. Newsroom Novena, 3. In Perspective. The first part deals with narrations of perceived tradition. The second part is an account of our times, while the third part aims to collate fragmented realities for the speaker as well as for the subject addressed.

NARRATIVE LIMITS is impacted both by deep imagism and realism, and owes its existence to diverse masters such as Kay Ryan, Lucille Clifton, Hiren Gohain, Czeslaw Milosz, Robert Hass, Wislawa Szymborska and Arun Kolatkar, to name just a few.
1. Moonlore from the East
Innuendo in the Cinema Theater

For Robert Hass

This a story of two opponents who face each other, count silence with just an ‘ahem’. One guesses very well something hanky panky went on indoors, curtained; while the sheepish other is embarrassed but sure that his mate of henna beard has cheated behind his back.

They believe, she can see, love and kingdom is a game. The trot of the horses and the thundering canons are only a few of the things that make her chest rise higher than the hillside on the tremulous silver screen.

With this scene where Satyajit Ray’s chess player is caught unbuttoned after returning back to the game from a quick love tiff with his silly wife, the girl knows there will never be such parables for her even in the twilight.

In the story, trumpets play in technicolor hands hundred horns hoot away. The magnificent blare ascertains someone has cheated and yet, has won.

Men and parodied mules, women fleeing with babies, roll like a carriage song.
It remains unclear who
will blink first to disentangle
overtures with their hands.
The script is in a language
she speaks but is remote
for an innuendo in her heart.

Elephants in gold brocades,
climactic chatter, tingly rosewater,
turn her lips butterfly wings
because she will see them
again and again on a screen
of her unbridled dreams.

Lastly, the soldiers march
in and the players stare:
two split fish stranded
unable to remember any
moments of lovemaking
or cheating on a pawn.
They half-rise, she waits.
Her lover leaves through
a door he takes with him:
like shadows mingling dark,
countries drawn in lines,
the two separate.
Aleph

The first sound uttered is always forgotten. Possibly it is never even a word. Just an interjection that derives from faraway fears or an anxious rhythm of speech. The first sound can be heard quite clear when groans and grunts are taken care of with mighty sweep of authorized hands that also stifle songs and smiles. If you were a baby or a doddering pair of legs, your first word would be despair not a calligrapher’s delight in dusky ink blinking away in the heliotrope night.

In one little fable the first letter was meant to be the first word of wonder but no one wrote it down and so later the ocean took it with fish and dead matter.
Thirteen Ways of Looking at Your Hands

After Wallace Stevens

I
When the evening came home
The hands were the only ones
That lit the warmth.

II
This hand and the other
With two of mine
Sometimes tell tales. Sometimes
Muzzle them.

III
When the pink man rode the train
Sitting a rhombus away from me
I thought I saw him with your hands.

IV
The hands have held tomatoes,
A few sprigs of fennel
My blunted chin, the pillow frills
Of our sleeps
Now they hold a memory bunch
Handed down in
Never-sound.

V
It was only in a dream about shopping counters
That the hands were stitched on to another hand
Shuffling plastics
Along my gliding arm.

VI
There’s a window with a tree
With many hands
That droop and call --
There’s a chair where eyes see and recall
Your dripping hands.

VII
If I see the tabletop talking in a loud monotone
I’d say your hands are busy arranging themselves, from
The past to the front.
VIII
I have loved those green
Hands
I have lived without those serene
Hands.
The vowels are too drunk to get away.

IX
In the paintings about
Life and little
birds
Your hands became the background
Their unseen veins and fine
Skin layer.
Now, it’s a downy rain through
Which the hands wipe my hair.

X
Oh these hands still go mining
Into my woman-
Pit
Sweet jelly and warm on finger
Tips
Once up on my coffee breasts
They mottle, oh so fast.

XI
Did I say your hands know embrace?
Did I see them raise
My hips in a velar fricative push?
I must have been laying
Lying or writing poems.

XII
It pisses me off to think
This hand could look like
A naked bird-head in
A fist holding a fork.
Drop it – lick those fingers,
We won’t talk Charles Simic over lunch.

XIII
Are you saying it’s all handheld--
Coffee cup, steering wheel, cell phone, Billy
Collins’ fast ones and the small of my back?
Tell me another way I
Could talk about your hands
As though they were blackbirds.
Etymology

These are rainy days stories, they sat on their hunches
Once our dinner was done of lentils and fried brinjals

My uncle’s home had lanterns even then, lit every night
The kerosene smell rolling over our nostrils, pungent
When the lady-not-of-the-house lifted the glass chimney

We traded tongue-shows with lax wall shadows to see
Who goes first naming the queen that loved a blue god
Whose husband brought her a poison cup, the jealous freak!

Outside, the river Bhorolu streamed her sickly frame
We obelisked our impatient questions: tell me, tell me
And grandmother’s bed grew weedy with our clamber

That’s when I learned that before my grandfather’s father
His grandfather and father, a few more fathers give or take
This whole clan – not so much the women – were thugs
In their turbans in the daytime, creeping to kill at night
Men, wearing the night, with tall pirouetting bamboo sticks
Slicing the light and breath of another body for silver-gold

The thugs were singers too, wooed dirges, drunken
Songs, sometimes lamented their own martial fate
While their wives gave birth to poetry in lantern light, soft
Thudding bodies they hugged within lush loose bodices
Oiled in neem. It’s lucky that poetry took across borders
The blacklisted clan. Journeymen made sane by women
Of unveiled heads. And they tongued them new names.
Homing In

Next to the cane, corner and our capers
The room has vine-twine in its own shoes
A footprint here, slide marks by the aisle of our eyebrows
It is you, you that paint the togetherness, its layers

When was it that we saw the rainbow curves
Of our backs in ember-y cheery winter’s light
Dappled sundrops on resurrected bins, coffee spots
Go bring them back before the beetle goes home

Two moons rose from your hips and sleep
The nakedness of floors and walls of our recess
Once you stuffed the pillow of the seasons, slow
To love the manliness, so dark, so homebound.

Oh you, only you can hold on to the evening lights
Longing shadows of canistered tropical roofs
Collapsing the ellipsis of silences after rains
TV noise from other worlds flooding our shores

Must I declare my pleasure of your brown arms?
Must my keyboard fingers tickle your neck’s delight?
For this body is the house where I dream of living in death
A slow pupal foldback, like womb, like mortar mixing in soul.
The First Apple Sings a Ruba’i

Although half-bitten, my senses still could see
Eve’s smitten look and the obvious transparency
between her dawn skin and the coy nervous air –
I lost my ruddy glow to what grew over her, uneasy.
Narrative Limits

He was holding baby-food cartons rotten eggs ill gotten perhaps and soggy scraps running from a plum-dark night into what seemed starkly bright starlight or searchlight flying with the power of bullets in his back horse powered from menacing police guns. He surely said truthfully he had a starving child, but he looked like an enemy, he did.

She was scared plumbed with interrogation, the tongue numb from an untranslatable fear skin shallow like swamps she jumped. Rising vapor or human crumb her hair or breasts. Take away my hemp clothes, she pleaded, my sentimental nesting flowers but don’t take away my books my looks no different from you in your cities of rapturous life.

They (drove trucks, labored, choked on dust, drank spit, came trudging here humanlike with cherries and berries of sweat to sweeten the world, also in anger or merriment cried, crossed creeks, counted reluctant tax money much like you or me and with care wiped mud from germinal faces and hands) were sent back across the nettled fence, embattled.

They held curdled milk beans dying seeds torn clothes our discarded marginal materials their faces like myth raked up from the bottom of our narrative limits of scatter and filth nametag dog-leash passport license branded on skin sizzling with fried-fish tan or tear standing at the razor lines that distance them because of the way they walk the streets.
Sem(a)ntics

Dear Europa,

a letter seems the best way to say how I wish to get
inside your ancient catacombs and modern plazas once again, be a good
Zeus this time, friends to the mythical queen, in your florid cities.

Amstel dam
shakes my hand with the wind weaving my hair on Dam
Square; we can’t go fishing anymore like they did in the 12th Century
before hopping on to the Dutch Golden Age when you showed off your
new blood diamonds; now your neighborhoods gesture, flash Rosse Buurt
on my shamed eyes and in your coffee shops of languor you sleep in peace.

History is
a lover never loved or known; your history, Paris, coaxes me
to call you "The craftsmen" of the heart as you pout: Moi j’suis d’Paname.
So take your lights, drunken squares, amorous nicknames hunched over
horsemen and whores crowding my eyes, lead me on with your soft
consonants trilling and tripping, try explain why you’d rather have the world
bring you bouquets of ideas, mirth, and still say: Moi j’suis d’Paname!

I do know
the Bonn joke outsiders like to make, historians too because they see
the truth in a relatively innocent way, no harm meant: Bundeshauptstadt
ohne nennenswertes Nachtleben! I’ll leave the translation to someone else,
drink Kölsch in noisy gulps, also laugh to the safer joke that Kölsch is the only
language one drinks in Cologne, the other non-drinkable being my brown sahib
grandpa’s imported odikolon, a habit dad picked up, he a rebel with good taste.
The Quataquatantankua

"The pigeons strutting freely in your courtyard
coo like exhausted porters
climbing the mule paths in the singing gorges.
Their guttural quataquatantankua --
they seem to be using human language,
a kind of hushed speech that robbers might use." -- ("Little Paradise Lodge" by Yuyutsu RD Sharma; Annapurna Poems, 2008)

Emeralded into the crevices
of words
our roads emerge with
coffee and brine
to fan out far towards a city
a peak, a town --
each an odd-eyed rooster
in one-legged patience.
I see one losing its blue
in the smear of newsprint
another being pocketed
by hands that grope --
grope my soft tissues
beneath the skin of gauze
but the ones bunched deep
inside my throat go untouched!
So, I can gurgle: "Quataquatantankua,
Quataquatantankua, Quataquatantankua."

Ramro chha, ramro chha, ramro chha?
And the reply bubbles
up in the foothill methane:
All is good, nothing's amiss
where gods sleep; we keep awake to
sharpen our verbs in the dawn.
Essence of Exhibits

Most of the canvases – gouache or oil – are wide to the point of distraction, left or right most of it a rainbow garden or just too apparent one appreciates them better with closed eyes

The terracotta is always standing, spirited arms or sabers raised, hooves high in the air ceramic orbs sport slithering lights on silken heads after a while they too melt in our infinite stare

There are of course those perky glass forms, bright like our eyes scanning them, not seeking at all they grow like vines on walls or kitschy pedestals forced to wait, until we finish skimming over the rest.
The Sea near Battery Park City

The Museum of Jewish Heritage talks to the gray gulls on a stone-man’s head right by the shingled jetty

It’s afternoon and children cheer at the sea, rolling waves that have something to do with time I realize, standing next to a waterside wall, a boat below banging against the base algae falling like the ashes of burnt limbs, in shapes ethereal, strange

The police have stopped traffic it seems some car has knocked down a man vending burritos unknown to the children here or the mist that hovers for attention

Nagged by the chilly winds you spot darkness under the seagulls’ wings, they’re still now, stoned with the torpor of fading siren chimes.
Tea with Reza

Little glasses warmed by steam
posing ballerinas pirouetting in silver holders
glassy eyes too from steaming tears in
tea-colored eyes.
The kettle whistled Reza said, like
the train whizzing past his little
Iranian township that sang
Khoshbakhtam, khoshbakhtam!
where poplars grew tall, very tall.
Reza’s arms ceramic and
bent bow-like from his time in jail
in a dark cell where he wasn’t given
books to read or
newspapers but just lashes and blows
now and then for reading Marx
at the university…
His tealeaf eyelids brimming up
with that memory
he handed us glasses on silver holders
held them tender, candles during prayer.
The Revolution was not for my
heart and soul, Reza cried,
O my dear comrades, my friends
I came to be with you for freedom
and manifestos and democracy
talks showering morning’s calm
on poplars I loved, my friends loved
friends who were lost and gone
for singing The Internationale
their arms bent too, cracked ceramic
backs scarred, resting in unknown graves.
Sometimes letters from prison came
once a year, till they stopped, mentioning
the smell of tea freshly brewed
just like this, verses of aroma
coiling over us during our tea
with Reza one nineties evening.
He still waits in exile.
Her Garden in Two Hemispheres

One place had a lotus pond, jasmines
that looked not as white as
the smile that brought solace
on my bihuwan's nights of shine.

This current one has bluebells
or forget-me-nots that sway
in summer's generous way
of rewarding their dovetails.

I used to name the taller trees
by their roots and fairy blooms
while picking flowers for my room
and quickly forgot about the breeze.

Now in this ornate little space
when frost alighted quick
growing a chill brick by brick
I remembered the season's pace.

Don't go nahor, kapou flowers
Seven Seas won't make you sigh
although their waves will get by
your nests near timid road bends.
It’s been long
letters did not arrive
in my name

Like time infinite
I packed lunch, tied shoelaces
set out to work

pointing to a bush
on my way, casually said,
it’s a goldfinch!

Just when I eyed star fruits
in the tropical backyard
a crow ate them up all

Such diligence wavers
my daily dithering
for it’s been really long

Lenin (perhaps) had asked Krupskaya:
do we need kids dear?
The Revolution is our verse

Likewise, it’s been long
I haven’t given birth
my verse has devoured my own.
Apples of Our Bodies

You can see them
Everywhere
On the body this sinuous tree
Growing
Ebbing
Whose spree for rosy ardor colors
Tastes of passion
Never grow out of fashion blooming on cheeks
Or along the creeks and valleys
Of
Breasts holding tender rotund joy
Abounding in sights that ruffle the leaves
Of our shoulders shining like moonlight
Through sieves at bent knees, jostling
Elbows

One never knows where else they grow, while
We mount them more in our
Hearts than on twigs
Lips, eyes, ample calves of splendor
Bodies small and big all gravitating
Towards the sepia soil of
Rest
Where at seasons’ behest one day
They’ll lie
Limb by limb, core by core, before they
Die telling
Autumn tales, sweetening the earth’s sore.
A Few Things of Consideration

“If we choose, we can live in a world of comforting illusion” -- Noam Chomsky

This a far off place where I am lodged between news-nights, a foggy web, shores of dawning illusion after the day’s rowing is done. Am a chalice half-full, half-seen.

This face is me, although another continent brown and mysterious earth, I tell all friends while they are nodding to the lullabies of globalization, reading and debating Stiglitz ad nauseum desiccated words that drink churned hopes.

Therefore, this has to be a mind that swims I have concurred, where waking lies under a Delhi sun or a New York cloud ever so languid from gaping at gregarious billboards: Pepsi, Nike and maximum mantras after a game of duck and hide daily on our wobbly sides as I can see: it is her neck, his body that wincres quite like mine cries from battles and for beans, in sincere scare and loathing, searches a reason to love and call everything by im-permanent names; for example: I am, or, we are.
A Soothsayer’s Dilemma

When she said prophecies make the sky spin like a roulette table, she meant while taking chances, they reach the end of palpability, each courting a few unexplored desires.

She said prophecies would let their winding hands circle my fleshy roots, digging amply inside Apollo’s oracles, welcoming a change in spring’s sparkled honeyed light.

I asked if Future is a scene, a fête where men and women bestow abhaya; laugh. Because they’re shown grand, animated, in prints of red and Sepia tones in books of prophecies.

She said because we can’t read the future we melt inside our tacky floors hopelessly shelled with sleep’s call. But they still come, the prophecies, like soft footfalls and infantile taps.

My mother’s disbelief, when I said prophecies invade my bark before turning into the ark when new rivers, depths unknown, are created, seemed like a verse. Prophetic overtures.
Summer in a Catskills Town

Standing maples
Perhaps singing
Next to white houses lined up on a hill crest where trees shouldn’t grow

Whistling hems
Likely swinging
Foxtrot on silken roads that belch loneliness where footsteps fall and melt

It’s a variable sky
Somewhat pale of hue
Unlike the indigo noon she knows where heady mogras motion themselves

There’s a corner park
Where old folks sit
Munching seeds with bubblesome coffee come from a faraway falcon land

Brownstones sneeze
Snooze in a sedated sun
Forgetting tongues they spoke when froths subsided from the Eastern Seas

Rusty pick-ups dream
For the corn season to dawn
Time they can leave silent streets, head for forgetful yawning rural roads

She sees a sad steeple
A couple of plaques
Houses with people, alien saints with fern-faces and gray everlasting seams

She spots a lively yard
Kids hop scotching as if
Nothing mattered after the last of the extant cargo trains had puffed and left

A gracious sidewalk
Holds her weary bags –
This is it, not so other, she says, walks in the surprised woods as the sun melts.
Bouquets

In very hot weather
flowers wilt like bouquets
as do kneeling gardeners
but no one hears them.

It is fashionable for us to
bring bouquets - not words -
to happy or sad rituals where
no one deciphers the flowers.

We can shade the buds
but that may deter buzzing bees
heavy with the delusion of summer
and the ensuing calm.
Stranded

The rest-stop is here
forgotten maybe, not forsaken
the breeze slices the highway in halves
dips and smells the yellow line
a never-ending salamander back

Construed of a bit of grass tufts
and mostly deep-rooted tar
uncharted pebbles in twos and threes

It’s because grass, hair
the same sallow color
tarred cheeks taut with grit
at the halt, glancing as far as the road goes

The salamander moves non-stop
heat coiling up like water spouts un-cooled
eyes touched moist

This is a road, not a sea
no waves or heaving bosoms
although water fowls cackle (from a nearby lake)

Rolling cars add the froth
to the constant garbling roar
while the curb watches with her

It’s because she was still
waiting on the highway that yawned
and scraped off dust from its shoulders
over the ramp and beyond

Spawned a distance too far to the mind
that she was stranded.
Othello’s Path

Butterflies dropped dead from branches
where they never grew
Dewdrops of nights that stifled dawns
lay on your path
Or were they tiny handkerchiefs
outlining a long sorrowful track?

White of course
Black with guile

Wordsmiths called
it green, envy
But when the foliage died
no one was left to pry
So, don’t walk that path dear Othello
don’t wipe your eyes with
Those thunderstruck fingers, they’ll teach
you rage and us a loss forever to linger.
Genesis Trilogy

I. What the Serpent Said to Her

You may follow me towards
A destiny of multitude
As I draw it
On the sand
In a tailspin

You may think I’m a green bough
And my eyes buds
Of a spring
That’ll not scorn you
Because you have bones
Shaped like a bow or harp
That shoots or sings

We can celebrate your footfalls
Give them the name of a music.

If you follow me.

II. What She Said to Us

These songs are not mine
Nor these epic stories
These rivers
Were dug elsewhere
No wonder the water’s gone brackish
This fiber is too coarse
For my bark and soul
This food does not nourish
These walls were built
For your cattle
Not me.

Don’t tilt your weights
Don’t strike your rib so hard
If you don’t
I will tell you if
Cloud walking is a virtue
And if, my talking, my waking, with you
Is a virtue you can hold on to
Like my arms.

III. What the Poet Thought

What came out during a revelation
On the state of the man
Is that He lacked wings
Though hundreds of years had passed and He
Never even bothered to be like Icarus
That mythical moron
The unfortunate but imaginative one
Who took a plunge for things most loved.

Besides, what She recounted,
He had already lost in his dreamless sleeps
The language of liturgy
Forgotten in His worships.

Like She was forgotten to Him
Like leaves rustled unheard
Like serpents laying their calm heads down, seeking
To warm their skin were not seen as bards.

I, only I was left to sing.
Tunes from a Migrant’s Song

There is a land
of not-plenty I come from

And another where milk flows

Like tiny flies on garbage rotting
in numerous strands

I close-fist my hand and watch the veins
for this is blood for giving and spending

In new fields and farms
till crows fly away home

She gives food and he dollar bills
and the meadows roll into

Spicy treats
my tongue welcomes like the dandelions of spring

No papers and fewer fears
of the unknown, I am delivered and my soul
to a bandage-unwrapped hand
blessing the spirit that brought me

Away, far away from boots kicks,
sidewalk pleas, homes that never knew roofs.
Ahalya Will Bless

Her visit made everyone run
fetch her special seat, water glass
a special plate, later scoured
separate, after her after-work snack

We kids ran in a tumult to see if
her teeth were different in number
than the last time, slurpy betel
juice soaked, scary monster-red

Mother made chitchat, served her
coconut candies in summer
black sesame ones in winter
with jaggery or handmade bread

Aunts poured her water slowly
careful not to spill, not to mop
once she cleaned the outhouse
a relic from an unknown rural life

Once she cut the shrubs, weeded, threw
the dead skunk in a ditch and cleaned
up, we kids asked her to pick a name
she’d like to be in her dreams so she
could be allowed to play with us
make us clay dolls of earthly shapes

Her dark forehead gleamed, no sindoor
the sari-end bunched at her sagging breasts:
don’t know how to call that luminous one
by her name, but I’d like to be made flesh.
“Feet first, I’ll bless everything,” she said.
Moonlore from the East

What if the man in the moon wasn't a man at all but a woman? A friend asked me.

I said it was always a woman to me, the moon for she charted our lives from inside and outside in cycles. That’s how we looked at the moon from towns by swollen rivers and eastern monsoon winds.

My first pets were rabbits etched on the moon seen from my bedroom window when storytelling was a rite and people sifted truth from lies. I wasn’t yet called a moon-faced siren then until it became a new moon.

If you’re a hunter, fisherman, farmer, gardener, you know what the moon does to you, your forests, noisy crickets and dreamy skies – she’s a jealous rival or a benevolent ladylove.

Earlier the fishermen of my coasts cast lines measuring phases of the moon if they found her moody and sad like their wives or doting like a mother they stopped wars in honor of the woman-moon even when she marched on through her waning left-handed gibbous.

They’ve forgotten that pride.
2. Newsroom Novena
Another Evening

When they brought back their street
carts of rainbow fare, they talked
in an even tone - one joked,
the other swore merrily. Both sprinkled
water on the dusty street corner at the busy market
set up little plastic dolls, cheap
household stuff, and a pile of scarves,
also T-shirts that say: I love NY! Viva Che!
They told me they had started this day
with prayers and flowers inside placid
empty rooms or in front
of tiny gods who smiled
while they both wept to think of
the day they didn't die.
Two years is a geological time
span of dust and dirt mingling
Exactly after the horrible event
when cars burst and cycles tore
but because folks read about it
long ago in newspapers
it was odd to see them both wipe
their eyes with collars sooty black.
Was it a blessing to be back?
To be in the place where memories rot?
One said he was having trouble
without his wife, an empty home.
the other repeated with sighs how he
never found on this spot his teenaged son.
It was the same street corner,
where they had settled down again
with their day's job, enticing adamant
kids and reluctant parents
to buy, from their friendly rainbow
fare, even if folks didn't care much for
a plastic comb, balloons from their carts,
pipe-horns, sunny hair clips, sundry things.
This is the only prayer now they sing
that they didn't die from that evening
blast but returned like moss over gray stones
after rains washed blood from wounds and sighs of loss.
Shuddhi from Every Living Thing

My faith gave me shuddhi
My ritual of being awash
In ideas that cowered on
Some porches scared to be told
Don’t touch that, don’t sit there
Be a shadow of no one ever

My faith gave me shuddhi from
Thermal springs sprung from myths
Full moon dips in ammonia streams
Avoidance from our liquid beliefs
Of impurity and the five elements

I won’t drown like Ophelia for sure
For my faith poured clear shuddhi
The water from every living thing
As they lay dying in heavens’ corners
Wishing for a stream of reasons to
Reverse course, enter them unsullied.
The Death Row Inmate Sings a Ruba’i

A night that held my hand and promised a day
to you, to field flowers and the sunshine of May,
is witness to my vice or folly
uncommitted. So, take this last letter and put it away.
Border Votes

We came across the paddy fields at dawn
Shall we then go back at night to emerge
The next day and stain our fingers with ink?
We can bring stale rice soaked in lime juice
To keep us going, paddy field to macadam
Counting tidy sums that’s yours; ours too
In sickness and hunger, bribing or buying
So that across another fence of otherness
We stand defenseless, watch this business
Of men and women calling us their kind
And then looking away at ballot stamps
To erase our hands, holds; stump our faces.
Dialogues with Delhi

night: I open e-mails from a bluegreenwhited screen
sort happiness and despair one by one and junk some
have to make up my mind between the stalker and the spammer.
not my lovers?

but first, Dilli do you love me?

it’s raining: a hand lathers my windowpane right at midnight
not my lover.
a rattle on the sidewalk behind hardens my urban jaw
at a shadow or an aimless wave of hand, harsh headlights.

morning: the hair from your thighs tickles my nostrils
your pinch in the crowded bus last night gives me a rash
and your uncouth body rubbing me from behind makes me
search for an unknown love letter flickering on my computer screen.

please say you love me, Dilli.

afternoon: Dilli, do you feel my soft bottom on your arms?
all I need is a knock on the door, a beeping mail
Shahdara to Lodhi Road is a long way to endure your stares
peppered with comments while calloused thumbs press my breasts.

it’s dusk: Your scorching summer wind breaths embracing the day
now fall over me like gulmohars shaking their clothes off
in a passionate frenzy, for I think they are in love
with noise and swears and glib and the moth-eaten stratospheric moon.

maybe this way you say you love me.

Dilli, it’s possible I’ll remember your torn golden gram-flour skin,
your choking sighs and catcalls behind somber public urinals
and your green armpits of restiveness when I’m gone.

although you did not own up as my lover

perhaps, you did love me.
Chakra Walking

This has a wood-scented flower-center bright like a
Peeping bird's eyes, awake

Also watery

From floating gas fumes of the bus
Station
Invading a space of always, ever where like pure water
The mother goddess’
Pupils flow with a meadow-rust

Gaze

And splits the day like egg-shells -- A grass-bride giving off stillness to my
Moldy brown hands
That keep tracing
A path, again and again
Stuck like a Greek mythical hero gone to slay

The Minotaur

When I tell this story to my friends
Disbelief and
Awkwardness take over
Because we know we walk chakras at homes, jobs and road stops
Just as we inhale unheroic opposition

Of fate, weather
Wood-scented flicker of other eyes to emerge from shackles.
Lost Landscape

Bamboo flutes
that my father had played once
the leather-jacketed book
that had always been a prop on my table
the borgeet from the Namghar
in sticky caramel noons
my teacher’s voice across the blackboard
that death silenced and
my mother’s rosebushes of hope.
What remains when blue hills weep
or the red river goes into hiding?
Even the goddess watches from the hilltop
squirming at slow blood oozing from
deep coves of deathliness that
Neelachal never for once has known.
what dies when new words are born?
Not the wounds, not the burning shame.
I wonder if I still should paint
those paddy fields, peacocks and skies
with my brush of golden taint.
Finding Foremothers

This is a day the family sits down
to a dinner for a festival remembering
ancestors they say hover disguised as
birds and animals – on the lawn, on garden boughs.

Is my grandma among the cows?
I knew she was feisty. Maybe
a crow then. And her own mother
Was she there too with her broken
Teeth and sad robes yellowed with
age in a photograph some gora had
clicked at her rich spouse’s gracious permission?

The sweetened tomato chutney on
my banana leaf plate seeping away like blood
dark dark red, blood of aunts, wives
who cooked and cleaned, sucked
blood from cuts, bore kids and bled till
they stopped; bled in their hearts when widowed and denied.

A few grains of paddy, holy water, forefathers still
Flocked outside, on the television a woman wails
I flip through an old photo album, sepia, forgotten clutter.
Buddha’s Children

Trusting faces, tremulous hands
the village trotted showering dust from its feet
ashes from clay ovens, dirt from worm-eaten fields
up, up and further up they went where

Tawang greeted them.

Their mules chomped the only dinner
radishes from turned up soil before snow came howling
yet they smiled and went over hill-grown stones
wiped sweat or tears from hunger pangs, and

Trekked heavenwards.

A stout monk chaperoned them on the peak
handed them tools to carve back beauteous Tawang
her old glory shone in the lamps of golden butter brought
by villagers, of milk saved from yak calves,

And naturally, wailing babies.

The wise lama, round as the lunch potato offered by
a worshipper, stood watching so Buddha might come back soon
to sigh at the toiling devout who knew not prayer or remorse
I pray, you work, the priest preached as weary backs

Rested on brick stacks.

Torn clothes are but worry of a mortal mind
they learned while polishing bright the holy courtyard
where romping dragon dances will predict the next cycle of crops,
plentiful yaks and potatoes for priestly gifts that only

Salvation can bring.

Evening gone, they climbed down the mountain
from paths tortuous, twisted like jumbled scriptural blessings
slowly shivered inside their crumbling wind-licked homes
to let sleep imagine these were warm bodies, still

Hoping, dreaming.
Buddha’s children.
And I saw Lotuses Out of Season

with the rain that collected like eyes
over city roads of many vigils and wrangles
with long lines of handholding kids and adults
the line punctuated with buckets, pots, jerry cans
with monsoon’s bloom of festering holes that deceived
a splash or a sip and diluted rivers of freshness to flow clogged

I saw lotuses out of season ready to take on the clouds.
When Langston Hughes Visited My Home

The name was strange and the book
was shiny dark
Thin, freckled jacket, like my angry
pre-teen face
on the table

The title kept calling in a
jingle-jangle Assamese refrain
I kept saying it out loud:
“Hey Xurjo Uthi Aha”!

Why it exhorted the sun to rise
accept the challenge of a new
dream that flamed
brighter and purer
And why the smaller typeface said:
poems by dark-limbed poets, a collection,
I had no idea then

Dark limbs were not seen
on our book covers
only limbs were, but then
Krishna is just not a word
for a god, it dawned on me
but skins and cheeks and
strong arms of poetic force
on my table

Also the end of crowing nights
when a poet came home
inside the covers of a book, smiling:
That day is past!
Releasing Rites by Water

Streams are known to be clean, even if we cross them hundred times,
Truly believed to
Be a sparkling source of unanimity
We have expectations that streams
And springs will deliver us
One day when rivers dry up or algae fills our oceans

Anyway I do not go to the ocean everyday
I am connected to a stream originating from a spring of ubiquitous freedom
That gurgles when all of us go to sleep after the day turns its weary page
Waiting to soak its heels. Slow, warm.

Springs and streams don’t have hope
They can foster some of it only
When we step inside their cooled souls
No wonder the ancients thought it was a purifying rite
To wrap streams around bodies whether in birth or death:

Moksha either way.
Ideals of a Fiery Past

Election nights during university days are topics
We discuss every November with the winter’s burn
On the skin and wood-charred star fruit-potato
Salads on the run also while tasting the yolk-warm sun.

Hands locked under shawls, from the gaze of Delhi
Kettles of faded coffee painted with powder milk
Slogans for Ho Chi Minh, posters showing Che’s beard
Lips of embers at night from the passion of life spilled.

If you look carefully, days were somnambulists then
Ideals a bunch of incense sticks I’d wrapped away
Now when I’m home I knock on my neighbor’s wall:
Turn it down there, sleep early, no more punk blare.
When Kali Speaks for Us

Our protests: a hint of a line
Tangential, broadstroked sounds

Gets to the point of geographical imminence
as the hidden, ocular.

Sounds from Kali’s tongue
Temporality in its soft sinew.

Our needs: like blood or beginning, mythical and florid
With tales of lines merging in
Never-ending elegies for the world’s wars.

Our poverty charts: a slight curve, entwining
Basking in eagerness, as all of our significations do,
To meet the other shoot that may not bloom.

Our oblong sounds: droplets of redness
From Kali’s tongue, a rustling of words
Rushing with streams of limbs of our bodies
Stern and standing, candle smokes waiting.

I pick a little dot on that verisimilitude of lexicon
My concentric speech burgeoning

And as I say this, outside our windows large and small
Hands and motions like rattling airwaves
Multiply in more lines curves spaces words

And when my fingers touch them one by one
I get to the point, learn beginnings, draw a center

Oblong as the sound from Kali’s tongue
A mesh of roots with no origin. Speech impure. Imminent.
It’s Showtime Now

You mustn’t worry whether the weather
Is fine or muggy in our cities these days
We’ll be inside the box, special seats
The Stateroom all to ourselves, we can
Sing in abandon in Jacques Brel’s voice
No wonder I hear people discuss Le Gaz
And this all when we can all have fun in a
Bunch, say yay to Hercule Yakko while
Crowding above our pothole of jibes and
Cramming into neighbors’ shoes spilling
Ammonia with love, only love, but wait!
Will someone say we wanted to spoil the
Fun? No, not when we sing and chant: Take
Me Out To the Ballgame! The rest will
Follow your imagination, call it chaos or
Disdain, it’s never too crowded to catch a sham.
Jeanne Moreau’s Song

Written on the body
The whirlwind hits the car after
The three of them visit a park

The spinster Saraswati, a jaunty scholar
And a bard called Purnadas
The men eat lunch, wink at her
We don’t know exactly who gets into her car

One man does because she has something to show him
Either a song for Purnadas
Or a book for the writer-scholar
One of them keeps watching
As they ride
And he hums the song she sang once
In her forked tongue mischievous

I finally finish writing this letter:
So you know why after songs are sung
We separate and forget yet reunite
Why we don’t go home while we

Still remain friends under a vanilla sky.
Love Story between Composing

You reached
out for the days
of waiting, still-live
cigarette butt-ends
on the expectant
ashtray (the smitten
one) that the Urdu
poet of lilting
lines and starry
fantasies puffed,
calling at you
with coiling capers:
Pick them up, touch
them to your lips
inhale your breath,
phlegm, desire
in and out quick
before someone’s
footfalls come
running in scrutiny
of what’s smoking
between hearts and
long days of wild-
fire imagination
of love’s ink-stained
heart of Amrita Pritam.
Writing Vaudeville

Because the days of
dreaming and imagination are so much a part
of the way we construct our existence, the way we pay
taxes, sign certificates to say
we haven’t cheated or
maybe have, our lives
in a way, became one of
revelation, Vaudeville, polite!

“After you folks finish
shopping in the box-stores, gulping Dr. Peppers and
belching out your frozen-at-birth-warmed
bacon-filled tacos…”
I asked this of all that I
passed by as a last try

(I have a trained dog
fetching my acidity pills
miracle elixir bottles
big-time billowing bills).
So, emboldened, I asked.
“Can you lead me to the eyes of the beast?”
“The eyes!” Retorted the portly
man who sits daily by
Lost Tribe Café, a café.
“Asking a blind man about
Finding the beast’s eyes takes
some nerve!” He muttered.
I stepped out gloom-wrapped
in low autumn’s vagaries.
“When you don’t see with eyes, you
start living with stuff around,
the things around you, not
in front of them, did you know?”
A woman from the café
emerged mournful yet mellow.
“Forgive my old man, he’s a Paul Cox fan, watched
his flicks when he had eyes, good ones.”
Motionless she stood, hands on
her old man’s shoulders –
a faded Pieta on a renovated
worship house shelf.
Indian Love Story: Message Tree

You’d passed on some words to me that quickly got splayed on sunny clotheslines washed crispy clean like new handkerchiefs stiff at first, starchy, then sudden wind floats kites that were eyes, your eyes.

I tied words around your wrist, threads from archaic ceremonies, unknowing how I tied up nerves in jasmine bunches hanging over our garden shades as you casually chewed sugarcane sticks taking back lost letters or words that meant a new beginning for us

Our love story was like growing up in a house with no telephones just soft knocks true, I had a home like that far away from glossy shop magazines, no sudden ringing tones of familiarity that jolted my listlessness when I rested under a pool of sleep tasting sweat with my swoon.

Look, I’ve grown branches now like it happened in a Bollywood tale once upon a time! I’m a message tree, my twigs just hang where white post-its make a beeline at the showroom flat-screen that belches out a song and we dance around the message tree talking in Eastmancolor tones.
Indian Love Story: Banglewallah

A sweet tangle
Of hands

Glass bangles
Adorning henna dyed desires

To slide on
Try on
Jingle jangle

Come back on afternoons
When the household sleeps

Touch that silky wrist
And look deep, press hard
Until one breaks, pierces terracotta skin
Absent-minded blood drops carrying a song with it.
Indian Love Story: Around the Champaka Tree

This her arm
smooth as silk
Not a pashmina branch
of wild fragrance
I come to her hovering
over the blossoms and fallen
Pollen
fallen on her cheeks left and right
Making her hair nightly bright
with Aguru
From old movie frames
where lovely black-and-white heroines
She an every inch, them,
smile with ivory finesse
While we go around
the Champaka tree
(That wonders at our spree)
in our dance of love
In a trance, half-true!

Singing:
take me my love, take me!
Indian Love Story: Romance under an Umbrella

it’s the rain
and your face that
streams
like the pain
of an inch-long separation
while we listen
together to

the road’s song churning under
an umbrella
in full monsoon cadence

no, fingers don’t touch
and you take back
the longing
of our heavy-breathing
nights
to the trill from a paan-shop radio

reciting the very
lines
I had memorized for
you.
Indian Love Story: Khajuraho Longings

The monk and the layman
order a cooled lemon drink
and talk about cafes one would visit
when they would visit new cities
New York, Paris or Buenos Aires
accordingly they’d pack their bags
one extra robe for the monk,
a pair of fine shawls the layman
buys with his months of pay

The monk and the layman
laugh at their own sculpted forms
sculpted by another eager layman
it captures their soft moment together
on that ancient temple wall
my hand on your chest looks great
your arm around my waist

The monk’s dress light, one color
no shoes, just wooden flip-flops
a small cloth bag across his brawny shoulders
his tan exciting and earthen the layman
likes a lot and they laugh and they touch
before they plan to set off for a worldwide tour
learn to eat anchovies and mix a gin

They laugh because they know immortality was at hand
scholars’ books, photographs and documentary films
meant just one-way ticket
surely more would come once they set off from that temple wall.
Newsroom Novena

Furry friends, a flamingo forest and a frosty treat
Begging for dough, zapping depression and musical condoms
Chained to the radiator? For our own good, dear reader!
Coveted, French and now in the super malls in your town
Find a life filled to the brim with still more to add
Dice-K on the gyroball, Dow averaged and more and more…
Goofball ‘Office’ salesman living a city dream, not me!
But a date with destiny on the 7th of July (oh, it’s just a date)
Hitting the road for some hot-man-on-bike action, you bet.
Meanwhile, Wallace and Gromit spearhead citizens’ project
And felons are allowed to work at school for the deaf and blind.

The setting is a gay bathhouse in the mid-1970s, you knew.
Is that an actress wearing her uterus on the sleeve? Is that you?
It’s a novena spending time with sound byte inside heads.
3. In Perspective
Dead River Longings

That was a poet who pined for a sickle-curved river
Golden perhaps or emitting a glitter through its ripples
The river name evoked glinted crop crowns; he wrote about
Jade paddy fields sliced by crow yells and bloodied streams.

That was a poet who walked the morose city streets alone
Uttering words usually unspeaking, like flow and tide;
In stumps of concrete habitats he did graffiti of a rising sea.
In such forgetfulness, some say drunken stupor, he died
Cut by a car when street cleaners came dusting the morning.
Or was he beaten unconscious and thrown by the police
Out on the dirt? Because the bugger wouldn’t stop chanting

About his mist-shadowed river of dying ivory dolphins
That buried incoherent songs in soft mud made softer by
Human waste. What haste hides is that he came back after
Moon’s wane, on his lips: that river, ujani, is still my bride.
Hidden

On the Seine:
summer’s heat wipes
shriveled faces of old
stories rising
in vapors

Boats swim
under sublime bridges
their golden domes blink
in the sun, fish
history with
a reluctant squint

On the slate-colored Seine:
someone tells me
of Papon’s dead
still floating at
the murky base

Hands clutched tight
some tied
their voices
a distant diesel-motor roar
perhaps gurgling
out: je m’en charge.
For Sukanta

Sukanta, do you hear us, this is when we need you the most so we can carve away with your pen of predictions even today the festering dereliction and warmongering in the grains

Sukanta, you told us of a stunned earth in your poem, a fruit, it grew on us full of seeds that planted hope, to never die or wilt strange how burnt still is the bread we dream as the moon

Sukanta you pleaded with time to stay by our side, timeless, so we could all walk free like they’ve sung in epics and lyrics let this verse be a mail runner for our faith to brim over, soon.

(Sukanta Bhattacharya, 1926-1947; he is one of Bengali literature’s most famous for his tone of rebellion and social change. This piece refers to his poems “Poetry and Being”, “Runner” and “Impression”.)
**History Lessons: 1950**

From rag-wearing villages  
of Bengal, they crossed mustard fields, dark  
swamps, small rivers in crowded  
ferries with a bit of Mars attached  
to bodies, a crater from that 1950s day  
of becoming history books  
when they rattled  
metal bowls & glasses  
told the masters there won’t  
be any compromise.

Won’t listen  
Won’t eat  
Will want

all rights to be restored  
to dialogue, to be heard  
they spoke & they smirked  
handholding their tiny fates.  
They stood behind iron bars  
with backs to a faded  
wall uninvaded. Stood in

Eight by eight  
Feet cell, angry  
Tired as hell

That was when, his cheeks  
smelled of fresh lime leaves  
the beard on his chin grew hard  
like lotus stalk the soldiers knew  
from childhood (they swam  
together in lotus ponds), yet  
they fired. Left uprooted trees,  
piles of jellyfish drying on a deserted  
seashore. The molten moon falling in  
a swift swipe, between porous  
pebble & muck, he saw  
the inside of his thigh a Martian  
blotch. A bullet. A red-hot cave of  
history lessons the land still hides.
Cayuga Lakeside Evening: a Painting

you would say it was a long blue sheet

for me a glass shard that showed the ducks
on its luminous underside

you would say the moss was green

it turned a highway gray with withering clouds
sailing away before the boats

would you say it was a white pine
that flanked a dock stuck to a deck?

i saw a hand, the cashmere slipped to the bass’ mouth.
Questionnaire

You may start with your name
They call me Alien, I come from the unclean hilltops

Specify your destination
Feel free to bounce with me and rise above the sham, you’ll see me there

State the reason for your visit
I noticed the man flip out a gun and shoot the woodchuck because he had no food

Show us your papers
Sucking my thumb is what I do when I am struck with anxiety, not fear

Have you a family?
They ask me if I have weapons in my hands or burp in my spleens

Do you intend to take up work?
Please let me know when you need to be scared, I’m good for such tricks

Do not trespass what is barred to you
Probably I’m fine with sleeping with the monkfish in your frozen boxes

This country is free and open, FYI
I love the landfills incinerators dirty lakes and the craven looks everywhere

Look at the camera, prepare to be photographed
You’ll see in me a person who lent me his intestines while he fell down and died

Place your index finger right here
If only I had the idea you love toenails better …

You may sign here, welcome dear alien!
I won’t pitchfork your neck, won’t eat your breadcrumbs
I toss my own head away in the crevice, show you why I preferred getting killed
The Korobi Song

Yellow our soil
Yellow the river’s flow, can you see?
It brings us the faces of water-weeds
Raccoons trapped under mudslides
Yellow with silt

There was a tree in your courtyard
Lighting up the night
Yellow, some white
Finger-flowers touched by none
Yellow and yearning for a song

The Korobi sings all alone
For a Korobi who never came back home
Yellow her skin, Korobi’s silk
The tree knows where the silt was sieved
Yellowing water, muddied hands
Sew limbs in the sludge, and look!
A dead rooster too.
Macadam

Beneath your shoes it lies flat, damp
smokes a bit under the car’s belly

Hungry, so we had to stop before the exits
take us to the other Interstate

The overpass sheds the dawn dew
its sturdy concrete spine and rail

Guiding ants into sheltered homes
like our city with a crocodile’s back

You throw the cigarette down and
sizzled early spring grass talks back

You munch at the deli door that says ‘Open’
before speeding away towards Holland Tunnel.
Poetry Forms

Wonder what witch was it that stirred a mix—
ture of petals, opium poppy and other leaves
Plato’s potion or an ointment
to help them all fly to readings recite verses with the other witches.

The Twilight Sleep is yet to dawn
numbing the meters deadly rhymes
burning the poetry man-grove with salt.

We know, do know that bella donna
taints the witch-craft of thoughts unpredictable, guilt-ed of toxic charms.
Goodbye to Ballimaran

I’ve heard about riled up days that despised names of verses
they preferred riding jaunty jeeps through the old town
earlier than the rooster, stopping for certain numbered doors

Possibly those sweaty days turned swear words into Molotovs
singed bamboo screens drying after summer’s whimsy and rain
left a few blackened posts under roofs where couplets lived

Possibly I imagined my footsteps would precede yours there
even now, waiting, a tender pastured horse munching rhymes
your leftover half-ghazals, their florid maktas, for this was love

Didn’t Ghalib live here? My rickshaw man pedaled and smiled
He bought his quarter peg here every evening, walked from there!
No wonder I imagined your beard hair on the banister, wind-tangled

If you still exhaled behind that cindered verandah I would not know
holding broken bangle pieces of a departed love, post intermission
Alvida, you must’ve said in a sad refrain, adding in English, “So long”.

Vanaprastha

Lenin’s angular profile studies the ceiling’s corner
Raised stiff, suitably elegant and intellectual
Photo-framed on the freedom-sky-blue wall

Lacquer bowls, Russian, with puckered faces not
Able to see their own multi-painted smooth bellies
In a melee of scores of seashells nestling in them
Short changes from long-ago family holidays

An office union calendar, don’t know who got it
Hangs urgent and fluttery in the semi-spring breeze
Mondays, Sundays, paydays, all days organized well
As in a spreadsheet, boxy dates to enable scribbles
About meetings, reviews and occasional lockouts

My parents did not have the heart to change the TV
The color tube’s a bit busted, spills green more
But the screen beams in Nat Geo & History they watch
In a silent slump from re-painted couches of Assam cane

The brass xorai is not for praying. True is it, your dad’s a Red? A neighborhood uncle had asked me, doesn’t pray
Do you know? I also know dad waited with us for prasad
From mom’s puja evenings of camphor, Lakshmi’s calm

That’s her favorite chair, those his books, cobweb
Under curtains long unwashed, my embroidered
Dancers, brother’s rickety racquet, the portly phone
Awaiting the ring of our brawls. Where will it all go?

We all laughed, sang, ate and told each other stories here
One of those about this house of memories now on sale.
Of Beginnings, and

My parents came from a place where people drank tea poured on saucers slurped really loudly, spat paan also said, “will be back” while going away They were from a soil that slept intently at the feet of lotus leaves bloated with certain delusions about belonging to histories

Not exactly the vision anyone would like, much less my parents.

Years passed, and I stood under a sheathed sky bequeathed with heat, dust and spent romance I went further into its deep belly of roadside hustle the bustle and sale of ten bucks-a-piece smiles and tears not known to dolphins and ducks, only rude men who stood tall, tall and gaunt, bluish cheeks who still offered me seats inside crowded rowdy buses.

And I haven’t stopped plucking flowers of yesteryears where no one had seen jackfruits or mangoes although what I’ve been wearing is a peeling skin jackfruit-hard or mango-soft craving to stick upon tongues wafting in a generous gait in another Ithaca of new myths reciting from our birth charts and rooting for stars Beckoning Telling Who we are And such things.
Gandhari’s Eyes

I
She had wrapped them, her eyes
so light wouldn’t invade them
and she wouldn’t have to say anything.
for words are eyes
our dilated pupils
looking at history
judging time
our words that rhyme
Pal-vipal-anupal
on our tongues
red and firm like quartered tomatoes.
But surely there came a time when Gandhari grew a stare
that seared through the tatters of haze
on her eyelids’ surface, the clutter and
bogs of apparent benevolence
because eyes alone guarantee
we have spoken
to sleeping gods
and our own kinds, she too knew.

II
Years ago while we practiced free fall
at a theater workshop, we fell
to nothingness
scripted in time
not seeing who’d catch us behind
and uttered with sweet delicacy
elegies to souls battered
homes looted and torn tomes
to never speak again
of a vision our eyes, our words
ingrained. Concurred.

III
Can you see now Gandhari
what poetry speaks?
Not simply with eyes
but with a gaze that the body
donates to layers of time
after mangoes bloom, limbs fall to the ground
sounds of bells tell the hour
in dusty scripts that epics discard.

We can perhaps pick
it all up as we go.
Wasafiri

First time at the Port Authority
bus station I learned
a new sound
looking at a couple
who braved the untimely
chilly August wind
selling books, magazines
and city guides to
wasafiri.
That's the word
I was one of the wasafiri
landing in this city
of million feet
and endless dreams
The man and the woman
their speech incoherent
syllables enmeshed
In long silences
they smiled between
the hair on the face
in high wind his robe bellowed
her hijab threatened to float off
still they stretched their hands and -
no, not begged - offered words
unpriced by lips
At the line of our
emotions converging
as warm hearths
of homes left behind
where the Manhattan
sun took a cold dip
I heard a prayer
for welcoming, sending
off and holding on
to our bosoms all that
A traveler holds dear
Faces of myriad colors
haloed hands of kindness
songs of easy serendipity
Wasafiri in a world
that lugged its bags
with us, counting words
as days notched on the wall.
Redness

When the summer storm rose from an eastern sky
The west looked red
Roses of anger heaped on a bush stuck in its thorns
Smarting faces, hatred.

You were watching Caché in the living room TV
Blood squirting from slashed up necks
Headless chickens scattered in an ungainly race
Backwards, forward, again back.

My finger touched a tomato skin shedding light
Of a red ink, darklike –
Wasn’t this what my father’s revolutionary friends
Brought, a newspaper wrapped tight

So not everyone would know how words tumble
Red and angry on our roads?
I thought I saw a word flutter open again, a hue,
Not a name or mundane things like odes.

You thought we’d lost our tongues, our attitude
Piled under the redness of shame
Peripheral to storms, deaths, news of constant ruse
And I realized, a color doesn’t need a name.
In Perspective

Earlier it was mile-long street-corner speeches
Popcorn peppered with stinging remarks

Holding hands standing close behind the bustle
Listening to arguments acrid as boiling oil

Partying after elders went home to sleep
Smoking, rehearsing lines for street plays

Riding a rickety bike through the outskirts of
Towns seen on TV - now cindered, broken

Lovemaking endlessly, sleeping in, sharing
News and rumors about paramilitary in town

How they called after lonely girls, after school
Clicked their guns, exhibited silly manliness

Before the cameras and boom mikes it was nice
Every one called everyone a friend, at least once

Nagaon, Baramullah, Imphal had weekend markets
Veggies, flowers, knick-knacks people loved

Before insurgency, everyone got happy and drunk
Now they have closed tea-shops fearing bombs

Clothes dried in the sun before threats were heard,
No one walks or plays in those courtyards now

Newspapers quote: ‘Things seemed calmer before’
And we wonder if they’re still stunned like the dead.