

**THE YELLOW NIB**  
**MODERN ENGLISH POETRY** *by* **INDIANS**



SUDEEP SEN [www.sudeepsen.net] is widely recognized as a major new generation voice in world literature and one of “the finest younger English-language poets in the international literary scene. A distinct voice: carefully modulated and skilled, well measured and crafted” (*BBC Radio*). He is fascinated not just by language but the possibilities of language” (*Scotland on Sunday*). He read English Literature at the University of Delhi and as an Inlaks Scholar received an MS from the Journalism School at Columbia University (New York). His awards, fellowships & residencies include: Hawthornden Fellowship (UK), Pushcart Prize nomination (USA), BreadLoaf (USA), Pleiades (Macedonia), NLPVF Dutch Foundation for Literature (Amsterdam), Ledig House (New York), Sanskriti (New Delhi), Wolfsberg UBS Pro Helvetia (Switzerland), Tyrone Guthrie Centre (Ireland), and Shanghai Writers Association (China). He was international writer-in-residence at the Scottish Poetry Library (Edinburgh) and visiting scholar at Harvard University.

Sen’s many books include: *The Lunar Visitations*, *New York Times*, *Dali’s Twisted Hands*, *Postmarked India: New & Selected Poems* (HarperCollins), *Distracted Geographies*, *Prayer Flag*, *Rain*, *Aria* (A K Ramanujan Translation Award), *Ladakh*, and *Blue Nude: Poems & Translations 1977-2012* (Jorge Zalamea International Poetry Prize). He has also edited several important anthologies, including: *The HarperCollins Book of Modern English Poetry*, *Poetry Review Portfolio of Indian Poetry*, *World Literature Today Modern Indian Writing*, *The Literary Review Indian Poetry*, *Midnight’s Grandchildren: Post-Independence English Poetry from India*, *Wasafiri New Writing from India*, *South Asia & the Diaspora*, and, *Lines Review Twelve Modern Young Indian Poets*.

His poems, translated into twenty-five languages, have featured in international anthologies by Penguin, HarperCollins, Bloomsbury, Routledge, Norton, Knopf, Everyman, Random House, Macmillan, and Granta. His words have appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*, *Newsweek*, *Guardian*, *Observer*, *Independent*, *Telegraph*, *Financial Times*, *Herald*, *London Magazine*, *Poetry Review*, *Literary Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Hindu*, *Hindustan Times*, *Times of India*, *Indian Express*, *Outlook*, *India Today*, and broadcast on BBC, CNN-IBN, NDTV & AIR. Sen’s recent work appears in *New Writing 15* (Granta), *Language for a New Century* (Norton), *Læla: An Erotic Play of Verse and Art* (Collins), *Confronting Love: Poems* (Penguin), and *Initiate: New Oxford Writing* (Blackwell). He is the editorial director of AARK ARTS and the editor of *Atlas*. [www.atlasaarkarts.net]

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# SUDEEP SEN

## CON|TEXT / FOREWORD

*Ink runs from the corners of my mouth.*

*There is no happiness like mine.*

*I have been eating poetry.*

— MARK STRAND, 'Eating Poetry'

Contemporary English fiction by Indians is now well known and widely established as part of the mainstream national and international literature with authors like V S Naipaul, Anita Desai, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Vikram Chandra, Aravind Adiga, and many others. They have won a range of prestigious prizes and awards including the Nobel, Booker, Commonwealth, Pulitzer, Sahitya Akademi, among others.

"Indian poetry in English has a longer and more distinguished tradition than Indian fiction in English," asserts literary critic and novelist Pankaj Mishra in *The Times Literary Supplement* (December 3, 2004). Bloodaxe, a leading UK poetry publisher, in a catalogue item states, "Many Indian poets were mining the rich vein of 'chutnified' (Salman Rushdie's word) Indian English long before novelists like Rushdie and Upamanyu Chatterjee started using it in their fiction."

Historically all that may well be true, but the ground reality of the story of Indian poetry in English is completely different. Very little is known about Indian poetry and poets, within and more so outside India. If some are known, they happen to be within very tight and narrow confines of the poetry circles and university reading circuits. Beyond the initiated groups, not many follow or read contemporary English poetry, though ironically a great number write it.

There are not enough discerning anthologies of contemporary Indian poetry published in India and even less abroad — and the few that exist [and not easily available] have tended to be rather narrow, inward-looking, and unsatisfactory. The lack of comprehensive poetry anthologies is something of a major surprise considering the vast cultural power of the world's largest democracy, and India's position as the third largest English language publisher in the world.

Anthologies of new writing serve as perfect vehicles and repository that showcase and highlight the best in current literatures. They also capture the pulse of literary culture, and act as good sources for archival material for future generations. Many fine single-author individual volumes of poetry have appeared, but their scattered appearances does not add up to what one would think of as a body of contemporary work that reflects a movement in new English poetry by

Indians. This special issue of *Yellow Nib* hopes to redress some of the shortfall or near absence.

I have chosen to focus on poetry written in English, as a wider selection that includes India's many official languages would make this volume too voluminous and unwieldy. This is just the start and hopefully there shall be more such anthologies representing Indian poetry, including those in translation which in itself is an extensive and huge area.

The history of contemporary English poetry by Indians is well over 60 years old — it has been 60 years or so since India became a Republic in 1950. And to celebrate this occasion, the contemporary poets included in this volume are all born post-1950, and all use English — one of India's many official languages.

The range of style, preoccupation, technique, is vast, various and impressive — each poet stamping their own signature and subtly displaying their own vision. The poets who are presented in these pages live in India and the broader Indian diasporas such as the United States and Canada, United Kingdom and Europe, Africa and Asia, Australia and the Pacific.

This diversity and multicultural representation allows the poets to have an internal dialogue between themselves and the varied topographical cultural spaces they come from or are influenced by. Therefore the poems create an inherent syntactical and historical tension — one that ultimately celebrates the written word, imagination, artistry, intellect, and humanity.

The editor, during our early discussions, hoped that I would write a suitable foreword so that this project has my imprimatur — I am happy to have done that. Ordinarily one would be expected to provide a long, historical, and academic introduction to a book-length project such as this — but having given it much thought I decided that I want the poems themselves to primarily create their own aesthetic and critical discourse without the aid of someone hand-holding the reader. I believe that eventually only the printed word and its success as a piece of creative text or artifact on the page matters — and no critical jargon, contextualization, footnotes, and explanations are really required. It is easy enough to find bibliographical sources, existing anthologies, critical essays, scholarly studies, and poetical histories of Indian poetry, if anyone is inclined to do so for research, background knowledge, and further interest.

I have arranged the poets alphabetically using their first names so that there is a further sense of intimacy and a community-feel among fellow poets. This would hopefully break traditional barriers that come with formal arrangements when using last names or age as hierarchical arcs. What matters in this book are the well-crafted passionately-felt poems themselves and their unique, intelligent and artistic qualities — and not reputation of the poets perse. So you will find the stars and established poets sharing the same platform with

relatively newer promising writers in a large room without walls where both individual and collective echoes are equally eloquent and important.

The subject matter of the poems and their poetic concerns are staggeringly large and wide-ranging. There is introspection and gregariousness, politics and pedagogy, history and science, illness and fantasy, love and erotica, sex and death — the list is centrifugal, efferent, and expansive.

There is free verse and an astonishing penchant for formal verse — so you are likely to encounter a pantoum next to a ghazal, a triolet juxtaposed against an acrostic poem, lyric narratives and prose poetry, Sapphic fragments and Bhartrhari-style shataka, ekphrastic verse, sonnet, tanka, haiku, rubai, poem songs, prayer chants, documentary feeds, rap, reggae, creole, sestina, ottava rima, rime royale — the Indian poets are in full flight.

But most importantly, this substantially generous selection of nearly 200 poems by 40 poets — spread over 300 pages in this volume — significantly shifts, remaps, and expands the existing topography and tenor of contemporary English Poetry by Indians.

My purpose as a practicing poet, translator, and literary editor, is to offer you a judiciously selected bouquet of modern poetry written by Indians in English, one that presents an unusual and original wordscape of a vastly multilingual, historic and artistic terrain of the variousness of India and the Indian diaspora.

Peruse and enjoy — in this volume — the fine work that displays the poets' individual and collective palette, a palette that contain what is arguably the best post-1950s-born Indian poets in the contemporary English literary scene.

— S. S.

*New Delhi, Winter 2011*

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— S. S.

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# AMIT CHAUDHURI

AMIT CHAUDHURI was born in Kolkata in 1962, and grew up in Mumbai. He read English at University College, London and Balliol College, Oxford. He was Creative Arts Fellow at Wolfson College, Oxford, a Leverhulme Special Research Fellow at Cambridge University, and was on the faculty of the School of the Arts, Columbia University in 2002. His fiction, criticism and poetry have appeared in *the London Review of Books*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *Observer*, *Spectator*, *Granta*, *New Republic*, and *New Yorker*. Chaudhuri is the winner of several international and national awards for his five novels — *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991), *Afternoon Raag* (1993), *Freedom Song* (1998), *A New World* (2002), and *The Immortals* (2009). He is the editor of the *Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*, author of *Real Time* (2002) [short stories], *DH Lawrence and 'Difference': Postcoloniality and the Poetry of the Present* (2003) [criticism], and, *Small Orange Flags* (2004) [essays]. His two poetry collections are titled, *Insomniac* (Aark Arts, 2004) and *St Cyril Road* (Viking, 2005). Amit Chaudhuri is also a trained and critically acclaimed singer in the Hindustani classical tradition.

## **AMIT CHAUDHURI**

### **Death of a Bust**

*Written on hearing news of Chintamani Kar's death*

This child came of age years ago;  
her eyes, once unseeing, became bright  
as irises; they looked at the world.  
A flicker of a smile moistened the lips.  
The plaits fell behind her, a motionless pair.  
They were what was most dead about her  
but even they had a bright, obedient newness.  
She was sixteen; she looked with a sixteen-year-  
old's composure on the world.  
She transcended the small town she came from, but  
always remained of it, rooted to its maze.  
Then, one day, for no discernable reason, life  
left her; she stayed where she was, transfixed, but  
was clay only; had turned into clay –  
the lips were the same, expression identical,  
but we saw how easy it was to reduce, how soft  
the material was. Let it take place  
somewhere outside our vision. She, whom we'd glanced at  
infrequently, was removed from our midst. She was clay;  
so we opened the earth and returned her there.

## The Writers

*On constantly mishearing 'rioting' as 'writing' on the BBC*

There has been writing for ten days now unabated. People are anxious, fed up. There is writing in Paris, in disaffected suburbs, but also in small towns, and old ones like Lyon. The writers have been burning cars; they've thrown homemade Molotov cocktails at policemen. Contrary to initial reports, the writers belong to several communities: Algerian and Caribbean, certainly, but also Romanian, Polish, and even French. Some are incredibly young: the youngest is thirteen. They stand edgily on street-corners, hardly looking at each other. Long-standing neglect and an absence of both authority and employment have led to what are now ten nights of writing.



## Insomniac

There is that crack of light  
which becomes clearer after a few moments.  
Though you shut your eyes  
that clarity neither develops nor changes.  
Then you move in and out  
with your breathing.  
And, not sleep, but a whole universe comes to you,  
newsprint, an unfair observation,  
the twilight of characters.  
Until even that fades  
and you are left with the spaces it occupied,  
the false, heavy calm of waiting,  
and, that crack of light,  
now become mortal, become vulnerable,  
announces to you the safety and comfort of what is to come.

## **Cordless**

*for Sunetra Gupta*

Here, in this new house in Old Headington,  
with its aroma of new fittings,  
it slips from your mind, it is easy to forget  
where you have kept  
it; in the cellar, down the stairs,  
in the small, main corridor,  
in the sitting room or the floor of the garden?  
Small polished object, in a small house in a clean street so far from home,  
in your second life,  
it begins to ring, makes that muffled but insistent cry,  
and, for a period, you are searching for it  
in the cellar, going down the stairs in the electric lights,  
or discover it in the bathroom,  
purring, whining,  
or find that you had misplaced it, that it is nearer you in this place  
than you had imagined.

## Education

As soon as I could dangle my legs  
and sit at table  
I learnt to use a fork and a spoon at lunchtime  
in the proper way.  
They hung from my hands  
like limp pincers.  
Cornflakes, toast, milk;  
the shape of these words  
on my palate.  
And the mud-like stain on the toilet  
paper I'd scrape my backside with  
and consult daily: dark yellow,  
unlike the pale shit I'd seen left  
in the toilets by the English boys.

## The Fall of Baghdad

Strangely, there was a gale that night  
which started as wind — the usual  
Nor'wester. We went to sleep, watching  
the news, our lives in our stomachs.  
We slept badly; the French windows shook  
and she and I woke from a dream, thinking they  
had come, and our city was taken. The door  
banged shut; I walked to the balcony to see  
if anything was broken. The familiar rooftops  
of daytime, hours after midnight, were unwoke.

# AMITAVA KUMAR

AMITAVA KUMAR is a writer and journalist born in Ara, Bihar; he grew up in the nearby town of Patna, famous for its corruption, crushing poverty and delicious mangoes. Kumar is the author of *Evidence of Suspicion: A Writer's Report on the War on Terror* (Picador India, 2010), *Home Products: A Novel* (Picador India, 2007), *Husband of a Fanatic* (Penguin India, 2004), *Bombay-London-New York* (Penguin-India, 2002), *Passport Photos* (Penguin India, 2000), and a book of poems, *No Tears for the N.R.I.* (Writers Workshop, 1996). In addition, he was the script-writer for two documentary films, *Pure Chutney* (1997) and *Dirty Laundry* (2005). Currently, he is Professor of English at Vassar College. He lives in upstate New York with his wife and two children.

## **AMITAVA KUMAR**

### **Use Scissors to Cut the Map into Four Scenes**

#### **1. Good Morale**

The Colonel dreamed that when it rained like this snakes crawled inside the tent. Their length, and the mesmerizing torpor, filled him with disquiet. He killed one by slicing it with an old sword that used to hang on the wall above the mantelpiece in his father's home. His great-grandfather was a cavalryman in the Second World War and the sheath displayed the regimental colors, a faded ribbon that once might have been blue striped with black and orange..

The snake's death was so easy that it filled him with regret and vanished only when his bearer brought breakfast. The Colonel was sensitive to the changes in his mood; it made him alert to what could be happening to his men.

On sunny days, the soldiers played volleyball during the afternoon. One day he had found one of them taking part in the game instead of standing guard. The man was older than him, with five or six kids in a village near Samastipur. Like a schoolboy, the soldier took excited, bouncing steps on court; he was playing with the Kalashnikov pressed on his left like a crippled hand.

The Colonel felt the surge of sudden anger. He asked the soldier to take off his jacket and sit in a crouch on the ground while holding his ears. The platoon was called to attention near the court, the sagging net hanging like a shroud between two tall chinars. The wind cut into them from the surrounding mountains.

If they were careless when they stepped near the perimeter, a sniper using the same rifle that the soldier had held useless at his side could kill them from a distance of 1,350 meters. The militants waited for fools to wander into the open to take a piss, their dicks in hand. The lecture went on. "I'll have to write the letter of condolence to your wife or your parents, behanchod, and I have no interest in doing that. Don't turn your back on your duty or you'll soon be lying dead on the ground, your feet up in the air like a woman who enjoys getting fucked."

But for the most part the men didn't disappoint him. They followed all the rules. The Colonel had never thought it was some crap about their love for the country

that earned his men's loyalty, although there could be a bit of that too. It was only the strict adherence to discipline that kept them alive. There was no doubt in his mind about that basic truth. His own task was to ensure that his men remained faithful to their training and never lost their morale.

His great-grandfather had fought in Europe, in the British Army, exchanging the wheat-fields of Uttar Pradesh for the fruit orchards in France. The food was strange but plentiful. The women in skirts and scarves were enticing and their children looked like little angels. But the men were homesick and terrified of combat and by the prospect of dying on foreign shores. Several of them used knives to make terrible cuts in their foot that they then filled with copper. The doctor knew what was happening, but was helpless, and signed the papers for discharge.

In this camp, the men could forget that they were not fighting in another country. When the convoys roared out of the gates, they could see painted on the bridge right outside the words "Go back, Indian dogs." He ordered the words painted over but, each time, they reappeared in the morning. In one of the letters that had once been preserved in his family, the Colonel's ancestor had written about pears being offered to soldiers by the children in France. It was different here. Every day, the kids shouted slogans in the streets and were capable of quite cheerfully tossing a grenade into the camp.

The rains meant that there was no volleyball today. At two, there was shouting outside the gates. The wooden bridge upstream had lost a plank and a boy had fallen in the swollen river. The boy's mother wanted them to find her child's body. In the middle, the current was strong but the water was only waist-high in most places. Twenty of his men, in their uniforms but wearing caps instead of helmets, spread from bank to bank. They held a thick rope in their hands, advancing in a slow line, haltingly, like students at their first dance lesson.

Three months ago, there had been the incident of a young woman who had been hit by a truck at night. The people in the area believed that her death had another cause, that she had been raped and killed in his camp. But the inquiry commission had done its work. It had declared that the rumors were not true and yet there was little that he could do to kill them. The hostility against his men and the attacks outside had risen dramatically. It had been a nightmare, and morale had suffered.

The Colonel was standing with the toes of his waterproofs resting on a tussock. He surveyed the crowd that had gathered to watch the operation. The men from the village shouted suggestions, and even encouragement, to the soldiers. The skies were still grey. It would soon be evening. The Colonel saw that his fingers were turning raw in the cold but he felt his spirits lift. He was going to order his bearer to give each of his men who were in the water a bottle of rum from his account. He could already see, as if in a dream, what would happen tomorrow or soon thereafter. The dead boy's father would appear at his door. He would speak of his older, surviving son, who had lost an arm in an accident, when he stepped on a mine. The Colonel would listen patiently.

“He is strong and his heart is of gold,” the father was going to say, with maybe spittle or real tears collecting on the side of his mouth, “please save us and give him a job at your camp.” The Colonel would take his time but he would, of course, say yes and make everyone happy.



## 2. Postmortem

The nurse left work at five o'clock.

She had seen the dead woman's husband sitting, near the entrance, under the yellow sign that Doctor Ahmed had hung some months ago. "While You Wait, Meditate." He was sitting with his arms crossed, elbows cupped in the palms of his hands, and hadn't looked up when she passed him on her way out.

Just after lunch, a convoy had come from the Army camp. Two uniformed soldiers carried in the body on a stretcher. One soldier, a small rifle in his left hand, threw open the office door and announced the Colonel. Doctor Ahmed had automatically stood up.

The Colonel was plump. He looked calm and extremely clean, the way bullfrogs do, gleaming green and gold in the mud. He put his baton on the table and asked the nurse to leave the office.

When Doctor Ahmed rang his bell, the nurse went back in and was told to get his wife, Zakia, from their home on the top floor. Usually, he just called her on the phone. The nurse hurried up, guessing that she was also to give the news about the Colonel.

Doctor Zakia was a pediatrician but she immediately understood why she was to do the postmortem. The soldiers put the stretcher in the operating room and left. The doctor removed the white sheet and then, choking, recited the Fatiha. It was difficult for her to continue the examination—she had a grown-up daughter.

Then the nurse was alone with the young woman for over four hours, cleaning her of the blood and the filth, and then stitching her up. The abdomen and thighs had turned green, but this was expected. There was a pronounced swelling of the tongue and lips.

The nurse wondered whether the body would last till the funeral. If there was a protest, it would take the entire day in the sun for the procession to reach the cemetery.

A year ago, a doctor in the north had announced that the corpse brought to him was of a woman who had been gang-raped. This was a mistake. The Army put

out the story that the woman used to come to the camp for customers and that her husband found out and had probably got her killed.

In the warm and stuffy room, the nurse realized that her teeth were chattering. She stopped and for a long while stared at the back of her gloved hands. Then she turned them over, as if she were praying, and studied the film of dark coagulated matter on her fingers.

There was no slippage and still it was hard work. Doctor Zakia would probably tell the family that the body had been washed thrice. The women would nevertheless insist on doing what was proper. How was she to save them? No one teaches you in nursing school to cover cigarette burns on the privates or to stitch torn nipples.

When she finally stepped out of the room she was startled to see a dozen soldiers in the hallway. She met the eye of the one closest to her and flinched, but he was quiet, even shy, like a dog that has brought in a squirrel and dropped it on the carpet.

At six, she was sitting in front of the television in her tiny living room. And there she was, the young woman in her wedding photograph. The newsreader said the body had been found in a ditch after the woman had gone missing for twenty-six hours. She had been struck sometime at night by a speeding vehicle.

### 3. Milk is Good For You

The boy is barely seven. He tells his teacher that if he looks long enough at the sun, he can make his sight go black. His teacher slaps him on the head, not with force, but still it stings, and the boy smiles.

He is a good boy. The teacher has known him since he was a baby. The boy's father is the teacher's first cousin; he is also older than the teacher by at least ten years, and has been the village-tailor for as long as he can remember.

Once, when the boy was four, he was peeing in the teacher's front yard and announced that he was going to start drinking more milk because his pee was coming out yellow.

Milk?

"Yes," the boy said, "milk is good for you and can make your pee white again."

A little over two years later, the teacher had started the geography class in the afternoon when someone brought the news of the explosion. They raced to the hospital on his bicycle, the boy sitting behind him on the carriage, the small hands clutching his teacher's shirt. In the waiting room, he noticed that the child had peed in his pants.

The boy's elder brother was inside. He had stepped into a millet field three miles north, where the Army had planted mines and marked with a red strip of cloth and a painted sign. Doctor Ahmed tried his best. He stitched the injured leg but was unable to save an arm.

Before the summer was over, the older boy dropped out and began to work in the tea-shop at the bus-station. He was a hard worker. You can see him there at all hours of the day, working with his one good arm, boiling the milky mixture till the dark tea-leaves rise to the top looking like dead ants.

The younger one still comes to school. He is clever. Just the other day in class he collected the snow from the windowsill and asked if they could sell it in packets in other parts of the country where it is hot.

The teacher later repeated this story at the tea-shop. A customer joked, "Maybe the Army can help with that. Their trucks can take the snow back to the plains."

The one-armed boy looked up from the kerosene stove. He said, “Or the snow could be used in the coffins in which we could send back all the soldiers.”

#### 4. Forty Takes

A white sheet, only slightly unclean, was spread out on a table that had been placed beside a pomegranate tree. On the table, thermoses filled with tea and also a tray of small, surprisingly elegant, sandwiches from the hotel where the film-crew was staying. Near the top of a distant hill, the hotel's bright white façade and orange flag were visible from the ramshackle building where the shooting was in progress.

The young actor who was playing the villain, a one-armed terrorist, had his right arm wrapped under his shirt. His right sleeve hung loose. He was impatient, full of irritation, a cigarette dangling from his full lips. He said to no one in particular that forty takes of a single shot, however important, should be left to people in Hollywood. People laughed when he added, "After so many takes, it really does begin to feel like acting."

For an earlier generation of actors, this valley was the place to shoot romantic songs. But all that had changed in the last twenty years. The film crews had returned to make films here about terrorism. You could still shoot a love-story here but it at least needed a bomb blast. That is what the viewers now expected when they saw the snow-capped mountains on the screen.

The actor playing the terrorist wanted to know how he could pretend he was murdering someone if each time the victim had picked himself up and wandered away to talk on his mobile or take a leak. Forty takes!

From the middle distance came an assistant's voice, asking for silence, but the actor who had been complaining paid no heed. He said, "I can feel my false beard growing longer while I wait here." He looked at the new actress from Delhi who was also said to be an ace tennis player. She didn't act as if she had heard the joke. She had been given the role of a nurse in the movie.

The actors had begun to arrive over the last few days. Before then, the director had been shooting crowd scenes. A funeral procession for a young woman was fired upon by the Army because it feared that unless the crowd was dispersed a riot would start. The firing, and the riot that resulted, were important parts of the script. Each day now scenes requiring smaller number of people, mostly professional actors in important roles, were being blocked and shot. Today they were shooting a scene in a rundown school for children. A young man who had lost an arm and become a terrorist had come to get help from his

old teacher. The two talked, and argued. At last, the teacher would shoot the youth, first aiming badly and hitting him in his good arm, and then right between his eyes. This scene would appear at the film's end.

Swaroop, the director, was from a city near the southern tip of India. He had been trained at the film-school New York University and then served as assistant to a Mexican man whose film's name had been mistranslated in English as "Love's a Bitch." Swaroop had developed the script from a report he had read in the news about a young woman's body found in a ditch near an Army camp. He had contemplated a love-story for a while and then given up on the idea. The script now turned on the relationship between two men, an older mentor who was the teacher, and a younger, damaged man who becomes a terrorist. The film's cinematographer was a Chinese man from Hong Kong. A stuntman who was good with fight scenes and bright explosions had come from Australia and was to be found sitting expressionless all night in the hotel bar.

At last, it was time for the young man playing the villain. As he walked toward the school with the assistant who was holding the clapboard, he practiced by saying to no one in particular, "The priest, the policeman, anyone with any power, wants to know your name, your religion. But a bomb doesn't care what —." He stopped in mid-delivery and asked the assistant, "Do you know what I'd kill for right now?"

# ANINDITA SENGUPTA

ANINDITA SENGUPTA'S full-length collection of poems *City of Water* was published by Sahitya Akademi in 2010. Her work has previously been published in several journals including *Eclectica*, *NthPosition*, *Yellow Medicine Review*, *Origami Condom*, *Pratilipi*, *Cha: An Asian Journal*, *Kriya*, and *Muse India*. It has also appeared in the anthologies *Mosaic* (Unisun, 2008), *Not A Muse* (Haven Books, 2009), and *Poetry with Prakriti* (Prakriti Foundation, 2010). In 2008, she received the Toto Funds the Arts Award for Creative Writing and in 2010, she received the Charles Wallace Writer's Fellowship for the University of Kent, England. She has contributed articles to *The Guardian*, *The Hindu*, *Outlook Traveler* and *Bangalore Mirror*. She is also founder-editor of *Ultra Violet*, a site for contemporary feminism in India.

## ANINDITA SENGUPTA

### Brink

The meaning of quiet — those corridors  
knew it well. *Softly girls. The building is old,*

Mother C lisped up stairs, her wimple  
flaring like a halo. At table tennis, we twirled spins

like neat habits. A single smash could dismantle  
our world. Outside school, a man with a cleft lip

spiced slices of raw mango. Red chilli  
burst into our mouth like explosions of sea water.

The heat moved us to shower. We limp-toed  
into womanhood in spotless socks,

a generation afraid of bringing things down.  
A backyard of bramble and weed was where

we found noise. It wandered knock-kneed  
and had a tongue full of pins.



## Lift

Glancing past the slum at noon, they shift quick,  
lift faces to sun like stones. Blue tarpaulin

gaudies houses in squalor. Inside, children celled  
in dust and smells — fish blood, gutter water, rain —

chanting A for apple, B for bear like prayers  
for promised land. They plug their ears, glide up.

Everything's relative, ma says. Her smile  
browns at edges like meat roasting on low flame.

Fingermarks, like forks, crisscross her back  
in red. They close their mouths at dusk

so nothing escapes, not even anger.  
Behind closed doors, they fling their bags down,

stamp and kick them with hard feet  
as if they're living bodies, aching and silent.

## Bheeshma

Fog roils by the riverside,  
stooping and white-bearded

as an ancient curse. Two girls  
in red leggings sit on the ledge,

swing their legs. One turns her face  
to the wind, freezes into a moue.

The other falls into blind alleys  
of water. There is a third who waits,

smoking a cigarette in the corner  
where even sailors don't dare.

A ship hulks in, mooing.  
He wakes. The digital blinks 4.

He limps to the loo, fumbles strings,  
drizzles drops, thinks *there must be*

*a better way.* The night thumps  
his pillow, an impatient hand,

and his head is a basin of dark water.  
He plunges in, finds again

the same revolve of time, a picture  
of days to come, each day exactly

like the one before. His eyes  
are pinned to the window

with waiting. On the walls,  
shadows hunch like whales.

## Testimony

*for Gujarat*

The scar that filigrees my cheek reminds  
of fires that missed my eyes. Sometimes, the dead  
smell squirms up from a ditch or field. I'm blind

in morgues again, bow-legged, sifting heads  
to recognize. A decade — I still see  
orange flames rise like pillars near my bed.

My piss is kerosene. I know that trees  
can part for men like waters part for gods.  
I sign my name with fingers shaking. *Please*

*excuse.* Someone shits blood, others applaud.  
In dreams, mother croons a *Sholay* tune  
like Jaya ash-lipped. Father smiles and nods  
along, claps in time. Our windows frame the moon.  
She's whole — flat feet, hair like fern, leafy strands —  
and he's not a limp kurta, crushed cocoon

asleep through screams. He tills a farm. The land  
furrows in stripes like zebra skin. We are  
alive. I wake with hurts weighed in my hands.  
I wake to find what I've carried so far:  
these words, this face, this ornamental scar.

# ANITA NAIR

ANITA NAIR was born in Shoranur, Kerala in 1966. She grew up in Chennai and later moved to Kerala where she did her B.A. in English language & literature. She worked as an advertising writer before opting to write full time in 2001. Nair is the author of three works of fiction: *Satyr of the Subway & Eleven Other Stories*; *The Better Man*; and, *Ladies Coupé*; a collection of poems, *Malabar Mind*; and has edited *Where the Rain is Born — Writings about Kerala*. Her books have been translated into several international languages. She lives in Bangalore.

## **ANITA NAIR**

### **Ministry of Deceit**

Was it a Sunday evening  
When you left a window carelessly open  
You rang first that gong of betrayal?

Was it one high noon  
When you thoughtlessly fed her bones of the lamb  
You sang first that litany of duplicity?

Was it under a moonlit sky  
When your face flowered in surreptitious joy  
You knew first that triumph of transgression?

Was it under a kitchen light  
As you lay bare fish bones of guilt  
You exorcised first imprudent trust?

A Saturday, a Monday,  
Pearly light, yellow light, in the dark  
Eighty six thousand four hundred ways exist.

To baptize the fool  
Smug in the knowledge  
She will never be deceived.

Halleluiah

## This House Mine

I saw in the rock  
my father's lower lip  
unable to hide the pout of countless sweepings  
of wind, water and all that is time.

It trembles, see how it trembles  
I saw in the rock my father.

So I called men to carve me steps  
ordered the sun to splash it ochre.  
Build for me a sandal plane of repose  
Still the tremble and his fear  
I saw in the rock my father

From the hill, a butterfly lifted  
my mother's soul, yellow green  
unable to pause in its yearnings  
to drink deep of honey and all that is here

It flutters, see how it flutters  
I saw in the butterfly my mother.

So I called men to trap the light  
ordered the clouds to halt in its path.  
Rain in here all you have  
For her to drink her fill of content  
I saw in the butterfly my mother

Now there is me  
a coil of scales, one upon one  
diamonds unfurl as it slithers  
and seek to bury itself alive.

It shies, see how it shies  
I saw in the serpent, I

So I called men to build me a burrow  
ordered the earth to lend its hue.  
Spread wide your green hearts, palm tree  
sing for me, bamboo  
weave your dreams spiders, I urged.

Thus I laid to rest doubts, dissipation, and  
relentless wanderings of the vagrant heart.

## **An Ostrich's Love Song**

Fight your own battles  
If you win, I'll rejoice  
With you in your triumph and glory.  
If you lose,  
You have the solace,  
Of hiding your head between two pillows.



## Transgressions

This is for real  
the weight of this hand  
that gathers me to the curve of a hip  
and so as I lie  
in this nest of bed clothes and slumbering flesh  
I tell myself  
this warmth is content.  
The rest —  
the foolish leaping of a vagrant heart  
at a look exchanged  
across a room crowded  
with people and objects;  
the feel of fleeting skin;  
the ripening of hunger  
will not transgress into tomorrow.

\*

This must  
be it then:  
the derangement  
of all senses...  
when you breathe  
the Giorgio  
pulsing my pulse points  
and I am drunk  
on the whisky  
you sip  
between mouthfuls  
of espresso.

\*

Words crawl  
And hiss  
between us.  
What  
we dare not...

our syllables do:  
with abandon  
with naked joy,  
they arch their necks  
a ritual  
to consummate  
this intensity  
so much more  
than mere  
desire.

\*

I give you  
my hand  
to clasp.  
I give you  
my cheek  
to kiss.  
I give you  
my dreams  
to remember me by.

# ANJUM HASAN

ANJUM HASAN's first novel, *Lunatic in my Head* (Zubaan-Penguin India) was short-listed for the Crossword Fiction Award, and her second, *Neti, Neti* (IndiaInk), long-listed for the Man Asia Literary Prize 2008. She published a collection of poems, *Street on the Hill* (Sahitya Akademi), in 2006. Anjum's poems have appeared in national and international magazines and anthologies including *Atlas; Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from the Middle East, Asia and Beyond* (Norton); and *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast* (NEHU) that is co-edited by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and Robin S Ngangom, among others. She has also published short fiction, travel essays and book reviews. Anjum Hasan was Charles Wallace writer-in-residence at the University of Kent in Canterbury (UK). She worked for many years for the India Foundation for the Arts. Currently, she works as the book reviews editor for *Caravan* magazine. She lives in Bangalore.

## **ANJUM HASAN**

### **This Biography**

My heart beat fast or did not beat at all;  
I could not say all that I thought and thought  
till words deserted me. I loved too abstractly.  
I dreaded how all there was to give was me —  
like water, this biography. I unravelled far too easily  
then fled to selfish deserts and slept on the hardest rocks.  
I couldn't make what others made and broke and broke  
and made, that sweet choreography. I went alone  
and missed the world continually. I misread smiles;  
I stuttered before open arms, but time passed too fast  
for disappointment's imprint on the glass of memory.  
I sought the future even when the blood swirled now,  
I let the past decide too greedily. I kept searching out  
the window, I tried to stay half hidden by the light.

## This Train

You can leave the burnt tar smell of rail yards at 2 am and cities shuttered under sodium lamps, sleep for four hours on a bare table in the upper class waiting room, sleep a thin, rocking sleep for six, thinking he's watching for land mines whenever we slow, sit dazed on a platform in the afternoon, seeing a man in a yellow hard hat secure the luggage van, train timing fever, train memory talk: "Aur Purshottam ka ye aalam hai ke sleeper mein Muzzafarpur ke baad aap let nahi sakte." One of two paunchy guards in white waves the green flag in the figure of eight; you're sleeping again with your boots on, I'm sleeping without my clothes in a burning high-ceilinged retiring room, wrapped in dirty sheets, the soot from the steel plant drifting, waiting for the chai-wallah, waiting for the onion-mustard announcement of the jhal-muri wallah, in Bengal again where even the hijras are gentler; open wagons full of red gravel go by perpetuating the science of the railway line. My slippers are stolen; a wedding party brings on nine canisters of food and a bridegroom with complex henna foliage on his arms, I am eating cold puris alone in a railway canteen, you take a picture of bicycles strung upside down by their pedals to the window bars of the Gomoh-Chopol-Allahabad and then we go where the accents of wheels on bridges will not follow nor suspicious bank manager's wives from Rourkela. "Didi paanch taka deben?" I wake up in my 24-hour home and it's raining soft yellow and rice green in Gamharia, the tank in the toilet drips on me when I piss, this train is sick with wanting to leave everything behind.

## The Day No One Died

*after Frank O' Hara*

It's a day to drink a large soda  
in Bangalore, gulmohar flowers livid on the left  
and there on the right. I take the creaking 278,  
a woman with one cataract eye's handing a bag  
of bananas to the conductor at Mekhri circle.  
She knows it too, today's the day  
no one dies. The soda bottle's  
hissing a bit like laughter in my hand when  
I pass through Cantonment railway station  
without a platform ticket, the policeman watching but  
maybe too hot to move. I'm predicting the overbridge  
will collapse soon but I walk on it every time.  
My doctor's back from Bombay, yawning, henna  
on her hands. Ma planned to boycott the wedding  
but didn't, she says as she watches  
the inside of me on her screen  
and then I'm in a rickshaw to Lavelle Road  
to see photographs of empty lots in the gallery,  
alone with them, not sure why they're all sunny lots.  
Someone in the guestbook has written, 'We were fooled.'  
I like it that I can sit in Koshys, eat peach melba,  
read till the waiter brings back the afternoon menu.  
Then I'm out again, drizzled on by the big wet men  
sculpture on Mallya Road, turning  
onto Kasturba Road and there in the May dusk and 6 o' clock  
traffic, the black leaves of a rain tree are, I'm not exaggerating,  
like a thousand small quivering birds about to take off.

## Dear Poet

Haldiram's Aloo Bhujia, manufactured  
in village Gumthala, Bhandara Road.

Dear poet, with your elegant poet worries about  
line breaks and vowel sounds: kiss the asphalt.

The Armed Forces Special Protection Act must go.

Every day the world disappears into your lines  
and comes out, poem-shaped, right on the other side.

Look, dawn's breaking, I stay selfish,  
this love is cutting me up.

There's nothing here but us. No special poet language  
and no special poet sound and

Rekha Rani's been eating grass since her husband's gone.

# ANUPAMA RAJU

ANUPAMA RAJU is a corporate trainer and writer whose work appears regularly in various sections of *The Hindu* newspaper including The Literary Review section. She has read at the Prakriti Poetry Festival, Chennai in 2008 and at the Kritya Poetry Festival in 2007. Her poems have been published in *The Little Magazine*, *Indian Literature*, *Pratilipi*, *Kritya* and in anthologies like *Poetry with Prakriti 2007-2008*, *Mosaic* and *Winners-2* published by Unisun and the British Council. She has won prizes at the 2008 Prakriti poetry competition and the 2005 Unisun-British Council poetry contest. Her other interests include translation and she moderated a discussion with Malayalam writer M. T. Vasudevan Nair at 'Translating Bharat', a conference on translation preceding the 2008 Jaipur Literature Festival. She lives and works in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala.



## **ANUPAMA RAJU**

### **Monster Poem**

Let me wake you up, creature of silence  
breathe into your waiting body, feed you drops  
of night blood so that you will survive the day.

You will survive, dearest spirit, in words  
lying in cemeteries poets built long ago  
to remember dead muses for centuries to come.

Your muse remembers you, beloved child of darkness,  
as a brooding bundle of images, recalls how your five  
limbs crawled into pages waiting to be stitched up.

I see you crawl now into this page, your ears alert  
to the cries of a new born metaphor, your eyes  
watching its fragile fingers curl into meanings.

But you are not fragile. A swift move and four stanzas  
later, you swallow the unsuspecting ideas. Deed done,  
greed fulfilled, you live again. While I die.

## Eclipse

I shall not think of you these damned days  
but let longing wet silences thrive in rain  
like moss-eaten lines brewing on my face.  
I shall not think of you these damned days  
but let lusty moons swallow January sunrays  
when diamonds of night shine, quite insane.  
I shall not think of you these damned days  
but let longing wet silences thrive - rain.

## Tree

That night the heart grew into a giant tree  
building its nest on birds fleeing a tree.

Dreams lost their way climbing your body  
born of a banyan seed buried under my tree.

Nightmares ate up the grass in my garden  
freed demons beneath the haunted tree.

Snakes crept back into secret skeletons  
hanging like bats from what was a tree.

Rain rose from the ground, sending rivers  
skyward, washing away homes on the tree.

Limbs floated in night sky searching for life -  
gift from gods who killed, fighting for a tree.

Your eyes sprouted wings, beat on my breasts.  
That night, my heart became the giant tree.

## **Name, Place, Animal, Thing**

Letters stuck. Meanings  
born. Identities emerge.  
What isn't in a name?

Journeys begin, new soil  
invites, aromas swim.  
Take me to that place.

Have everything it doesn't have:  
Literacy, language, bank accounts.  
Still, not as happy as an animal.

Touch, hold, smell, taste.  
Made of memories and desires.  
The thing is: I need.

# ARUNDHATHI SUBRAMANIAM

ARUNDHATHI SUBRAMANIAM writes poetry, edits the India domain of Holland's *Poetry International Web*, and writes on culture. She is the author of three books of poetry: *On Cleaning Bookshelves* (Allied), *Where I Live* (Allied), and *New and Selected Poems* (Bloodaxe). She has co-edited an anthology of Indian love poems in English, *Confronting Love* (Penguin), and an anthology of nonsense verse, *A Pocket Full of Wry* (Penguin). She is also the author of a prose work, *The Book of Buddha* (Penguin). She curated 'Chauraha', an interactive arts forum at Mumbai's National Centre for the Performing Arts, for several years. She writes regularly on literature, dance and spirituality for various publications; and lives in Mumbai.

## ARUNDHATI SUBRAMANIAM

### Textile

Some days  
nothing in your wardrobe satisfies

not the heat-maddened ikats, the secular pastels

There's no season you can call your own.

Like everyone else  
you wait  
in queues  
for the drought to end

although you know everything  
there is to know  
about the guile and the gristle  
of the heart –  
its handloom desires  
its spandex fantasies  
its polycot, its wear-and-tear  
polytheism.

And you know  
that when it finally  
happens,

the whoosh

of textile, versatile,  
emulsified by sun

it will feel big enough  
to put an end  
to all the throbbing questions  
forever.

But the winters -  
they get colder each time

And so you return  
reluctantly

to digging  
through the seam  
and stretch and protest  
of tattered muscle

deeper  
into the world's oldest fabric

into the  
darkening,  
widening  
meritocracy  
of the heart.

## My Friends

They're sodden, the lot of them,  
leafy, with more than a whiff  
of damage  
mottled with history  
dark with grime.

God knows I've wanted them different  
less bizarre, more jaunty,  
less handle-with-care

more airbrushed  
less prone  
to dreams of rancidity

a little more willing  
to soak in the sun.

They don't measure up.  
They're unpunctual.  
They turn suddenly tuberous.

But I keep them  
for those days.

For their crooked smiles  
their sudden pauses -

signs that they know  
about the sound of mulch

and how green stems twist  
and thicken  
as they vanish  
into the dark

finding their way  
through sticky  
vernacular tissues



of mud

improvising

hardening

improvising –

## How Some Hindus Find Their Personal Gods

*(for AS who wonders about ishta devtas)*

It's about learning to trust  
the tug  
that draws you to a shadowed cornice  
in your life  
undisturbed by footfall  
and butter lamps

a blue dark coolness  
where you find him  
waiting patiently  
that perfect minor deity -

shy, crumbly,  
oven-fresh, just a little  
wry, content to play a cameo  
in everyone's life but your own.

A god who looks  
like he could understand  
errors in translation  
blizzards on the screen  
lapses in memory

who might even learn by rote  
the fury  
the wheeze  
the Pali,  
the pidgin,  
the gnashing mixer-grinder  
the awkward Remington stutter  
of your heart,  
who could make them his own.

After that you can settle for none other.

## Catnap

This shoebox started out  
a stiff-upper-lipped quadrilateral,  
Upholder of Symmetry, Proportion, Principle,  
sanctuary to an upright couple  
of pedigree leather moccasins.

This week  
shoebox learns  
to sigh  
de-  
cant,  
contemplate

gravity.

Old idealist softens,  
grows whiskers,  
paw,  
drowsing chin,  
slumped tail,  
Arctic eye.

*Form is emptiness  
Emptiness is form, Shariputra.*

Shoebox abdicates  
shape  
and Gucci worship,

secedes from  
nostalgia.

Pukka sahib  
learns  
to purr.

## A Shoebox Reminisces

I renounced shape  
a long time ago,

chose  
bagginess,

endless  
recess-  
ivity,

but there are days  
when the longing  
returns

and I cannot abide  
the sterile cynicism  
of the Anti Couples Club,  
the smug peddlers  
of Uni-sole Advaita.

I know it means  
the saga of  
two old shoes  
all over again,

their grubby leather unions,  
tales of childhood,  
prejudice, toe jam, politics,

laces in a perpetual snarl  
of knots,

footprints,

footprints.

But some days  
I'm idolater enough

to want it again:  
that old charade,

otherness.

## Epigrams for Life after Forty

Between the doorbell  
and the death knell  
is the tax exemption certificate.

There are fewer capital letters  
than we supposed.

Other people's stories will do.  
Sticky nougatine green-and-pink stories.  
Other people's stories.

Untenancing is more difficult  
than unbelonging.

The body? The same alignment  
of flesh, bone, the scent of soap, yesterday's  
headlines, a soupcon of opera.

But there *are* choices  
other than cringing vassal state  
and walled medieval town.

And there is a language  
of aftermath,  
a language of ocean and fluttering sail,  
of fishing villages malabared  
by palm, and dreams laced  
with arrack and moonlight.

And it can even be  
enough.

# BHANU KAPIL

BHANU KAPIL was born in England in 1968, to Indian parents, and grew up in a working-class, South-Asian community in Greater London. She came to the U.S. in 1990 and currently lives in Boulder, Colorado, where she teaches at Naropa University. A writer forged by this history of migration who has come to understand the border as a site of both transformation and loss, Kapil's work crosses genre and subject borders. Her books include *Autobiography of a Cyborg* (2000), *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers* (2001) and *Incubation: A Space for Monsters* (2006). She has recently completed a long prose work, *Humanimal: a project for future children*, a creative non-fiction account of the Wolfgirls of Midnapure, two children found living with wolves in 1920s Bengal.

# BHANU KAPIL

## 1. Schizophrene

I threw the book into the dark garden. The account begun mid-ocean, in a storm.



Immigrant. Nothing happens. *Immigrant.*



Below the aeroplane is the river.



Someone who could weight me down, whether physically or with language, in all the ports of call: Athens in January, Munich in February, London in March! Immigrant, there's nothing erotic about the ten rupees in your pocket. The account begins mid-ocean, where even your boarding pass is knotted in a handkerchief in your broken-down suitcase in the hold. Dazzling you, I select your suitcase. You watch it float over the railing and into the air. Yellow lightning in the silver sky, and the three sheets of rain, so bamboo, so cream. Stupid man, you watch your suitcase sink, burning up it's requisite energy simply by breathing. Everything breathes, even you. Breathe, immigrant. Fly, immigrant. Sail, immigrant. Blue.



When I opened the door, there was a weird blue light coming off the snow. I  
threw  
the book into the snow.



The ship left Bombay at dawn, a pink smear, the sunlight both a position and an entity.





The ship docked. The ferry left Calais at dawn, a green sky, I kept drawing the horizon, the static line somehow disc-like.

Near seven, I saw an intense set of orange, red and gold lines above the place where the sun would be.

The ship docked, and I found my home in the grid system: the damp wooden stool in the bath, a slice of bread with cheese on it, and so on. All my life, I've been trying to adhere to the surface of your city, your three grey rectangles split into four parts; a red dot; the axis rotated seventy-six degrees, and so on.



But then I threw the book into the grid. It was a wet grid.



The snow wet the book then froze it like a passive sun. These notes are directed towards the region I wanted to perceive, but could not. Notes for a schizophrene night, a schizophrene day, a rapid sketch.



The book before writing, arcing once more through the crisp dark air. And the line the book makes is an axis, a hunk of electromagnetic fur torn from the side of something still living and thrown, like a wire, threaded, a spark towards the grass.



A line for someone on their first voyage, a non-contemporary subject, the woman, or even the man, the person with an articulate gender, a flux where the body always is, who asks what's forbidden and what's expected in the annular zone. In the airport. On the earth.

*A veil. A harness. A rope.*

Do psychiatrists register the complex and rich vibrations produced by their dreaming subjects? The indigo or emerald-green *crowns* that coats the hair and

shoulders of an *interviewee*, erasing distinctions between what is outside, the sky, and what's beneath it? That digs into the head?

The "emanating structures appear in the light that comes from the body, and it is these structures that perform a rudimentary narrative." *A memory or two?*



Writing, I notice that the schizophrenic narrative is not split, for which an antidote is commercially produced in quantities that exceed populations. Rather, it cannot process the dynamic elements of an image, any image, whether pleasant, enriching or already so bad it can't be tendered in the lexicon of poses available to it.

I need a new pen.



An idea for a novel before it's shattered, there on the bench next to the fountain, which is frozen, deconstructed, in the air.



I walk the long way to the Tate from the Pimlico tube, a fact more intense each time I repeat it in my mind. An erotics. A mad progression that exceeds a central frame, like seeing something then falling down.

I break my walk at the fountain, as I've done since childhood, which is chromatography. The white panels, then a livid black. It's already late. A black world coming down from the heavens. Black with stars.



They're walking into that, the darkness pouring into their mouths when they reach the hills. Coming down over the two of them: a man of about sixty, that red afternoon into evening, the dirt of that place a kind of orange-brown, and his grand-daughter, eight years old that July. A Londoner, she's wearing a blue and yellow dress with a daisy print. As for the man, he's dressed in a white cotton dhoti and a kurta, with an almond-cake pale shawl, embroidered along its narrow border with maroon and turquoise paisley swirls.



The upwelling of philosophy attends to we can't see. A light tent over the text.



Nevertheless, re-reading these words, I can't have them in my house. And so I open the door, flinching from the blue fire of the individual blades of grass, the bonds of the plant material that release a color when they are crushed. I saw something flare when the book hit the ground. That sub-red spike without a source.



“I was born in a country that no longer exists.”



When India broke, the wings of the golden eagle torn from her body by their roots, he broke too. When he arrived at his brother's house in Delhi, he collapsed, screaming, insensate to the arrival of his wife a week later, her sari covered with blood. Straining and bucking in a makeshift cage. *We kept him in a cellar for a year.*



A rose. Its stem wrapped in a blue and white checkered tea towel of the sort used to wrap the earthenware pot of unset yoghurt, again and again. Arriving. The rose. Like a color, just ahead of them, a kind of stick, or torch, she thinks, held there and upright, in her grandfather's grasp.



When they reach the jungle, the luminous stands of bamboo sway in the rain, creaking and popping at their touch, at the brush of their arms. Darkness has truly fallen now, obliterating the city below. Its population.



A man comes to the gate where they stop. He walks into the fragrant gloom of the garden and snaps the stem, a green still visible at seven. And I reach out my hand.



"Tea?" And when the chessboard appears, diamond-shaped from where she's sitting, and copper edged in the Russian fashion, the girl drifts. I don't see her, I feel her.

Then, as if he, too, can feel the mountains pulsing through the walls of the house, her grandfather gets up. She gets up. And they go.



### 3. A Healing Narrative

Fragments attract each other, a swarm of iron filings, black with golden flecks but without a soul. I stroke them with my finger so they scatter then relax.

In correspondence.

In the involuntary response to being touched.

On a plate.



Against the tree, a woman is pinned, upright and strung with lights or gunpowder flares and nodes. Who stuck her there?

Her body is covered with mud and at the same time it possesses the invisible force of an architectural element encountered in a post-war structure. Did I literally give her life?



I wrote about her body, the vertical grave she created in my mind, and in the minds of anyone who heard about her, this anonymous and delicate "box." This imprint. This metal animal. This veil of charcoal and vermilion powder, smudged to form a curtain of hair falling over the face. Like an animal almost in flight, but possessed, restricted to the band of earth that precedes the border or follows it, depending on which way you cross; the woman stares, focusing on a point. Someone else is staring too.

Can you smell her burning fur?



## 4. Abiogenesis

Abiogenesis: to flux, to squat: a conjunction of living and non-living matter: [3]: from *Schizophrenie*, a book without purpose/with a dead start. But with the body displaying signs of early spring: *pink bits* sensitive to being touched, like a Jain woman crossing the street in her linen mask and with her pole.



And in *blanked-out jungle space*, where all I could do was stare. From the verandah, the view warped. The river flowed out of its given shape and into my eyes. Even the sky was a volatile, all-powerful parent. I fantasized about having larger breasts than I do. Just beneath the mesh, on a divan, *in the sun*, I fell asleep even as ashram life unfolded behind me, the rustle of the women's saris as they cleaned the bell. Each god was dressed with marigolds and a fresh trap of white cloth, folded and creased like a chrysalis around the eight blue limbs.



On a crisp Easter morning in London, I stripped down. Over the years, I received my society's support. In the States, I worked hard at waitressing. I read *Ava*. I sold things off when the time came and though, if I'd waited, I would have made an even greater profit, I'm glad I did. Without any real feelings, I returned to the United Kingdom, where it was all "Fish and Chips, then?" "Let's go to Blockbusters and get a video." "What do you want to watch? Die Hard 3?" "What? With what's his name? Nah, hate him. What about Spooks? We can watch it from the beginning." "No, I fancy staying in. Do you?"



I *denuded the garden* of its branches. I chewed them up. *You put me down*. My ashes found their spot on the mantel and no-one moved them. In some sense, I was still your *friend*. My body kept yours safe on the long nights when your body drowned itself in the habit of the dream. Its green.



*Abiogenesis*: to flux and squat in an inhabited place, risking something. What? I loved that scene next to the car in *The Piano Teacher*. When I was a child, I used to strip down and beat myself with a stick. Is this, *a root distinguished from its*

*branching plant*, kept in a jar on a shelf to grow, watered, schizophrenic? Is it a right thing or a mad thing not to want to re-connect, to avoid reading or writing because of what those will bring?



Dreamed I forgot my coat on the aeroplane.



Once again, I give you a tiny cyborg as a kind of fluid immigrant appearing in many places at different times and as such: a somatic structure with the ability to process many different kinds of memory at once.



## 5. Electroblion

Partial Solar Eclipse , India , August 1, 2008 . 5.02 pm . On my bedside table, “electroblion” appears on the plastic, orange mat of the sort used to protect the table-cloth from the cup; there’s a word for this, I can’t recall....



Turmeric plants, lemon tree, amrooth tree, pomegranate tree, mint, tulsi, and some ragged flowering herbs: green chili, gold...gold flower? But they can’t translate, and do not know the word in Hindi. A girl, and two boys, the daughter and grandsons of the priest in the garage, with whom we share this kitchen garden. At the end of the street is a Shiva temple. Its massive Shivling towers above the Le Corbusier vibe of this Asian city; a black geo-oblong with three white stripes on what I suddenly understand to be a “forehead.” *Ye kia he?* “It’s the unseen face of god.” Sometimes, the English I get back is crisp, more accurate and emotional than the English I would use.



These electroblion notes, which are not really notes but dreamed up, basic observations which belie the facts, the following fact, which in turn destroys a content as yet unwritten: *I don’t exist.*



We shift our chairs to avoid the sunlight, eclipse light, which could damage us forever.

The diagonal shadow in the lemon tree, diamond-edged by five, is a product of moonlight as much as sunlight.



The priest’s brother, visiting from the village, comes out of the garage to pray, a plastic blue mat rolled up beneath his arm. He slips off his shoes and finds a spot by the basil to sit down. We offer him tea and oranges but he waves them off, closes his eyes and sings:

*I’m waiting for you beneath this tree. Why don’t you come?*





In the neighbor's garden is a palm with torn metallic paper peeling from its radial trunk. A girl of about fifteen sweeps the patio, as she does each morning at seven and each late afternoon. I quell, in my body, the knowledge of what she's paid to do this. She gestures with her rough broom to the marble stretch beneath our chairs, and so we move into the house, which is netted, barred and where the danger increases, if you're paranoid, and diminishes, when you sleep.



I lie down beneath the lemon tree then stand up, leaving an outline in the soft pink earth. I re-fill my silhouette with glossy, bi-color leaves creased down the middle, their seams bulky with dust; tiny lemons from the lowest branches; bunched garlands of marigolds from the sloped shelf next to the Shiva temple, emptied from a white plastic bag; and *divas* from the shrine, still flickering, like cakes. And hemp. The hemp is pre-biotic, activated and repelled by the smoky flame.

What wets it down?  
What makes it clean?



## 6. Vertigo

A ghost mutates through intensity, gathering enough energy to touch you through your thin blouse, or your leggings, or your scarf.

A ghost damages the triptych of ancestors composed of descending, passive and synthetic scraps.

But what if the ghost is empty because it's making a space for you?



Vertigo is a symptom of profound attraction. An excess of desire.



Once, after a long shift at KFC, during which we ran out of baked beans and the manager sent me across the Birmingham New Street plaza with a twenty pound note, to Marks and Spencer's, for a family-size tin, I didn't go back to the flat in Selby where my boyfriend lived. I went to the cinema in my red and white striped shirt and watched *Au Revoir Les Enfants*. A Londoner, I blinked in the rainy quiet darkness that had fallen by the time I left. I ducked into a bright room. There, I was picked up by a Muslim man with a thick Yorkshire accent, who bought me a Malibu and orange. I was conscious of having wasted my entire summer on a boyfriend. My parents thought I was interning as a trainee journalist on a regional broadsheet. I'd told the KFC manager my mother was dying, and that I had to take every weekend off to be with her in the hospital. On Saturday mornings, my boyfriend would drive us to the sea in his refurbished Nash Metropolitan. Once, he drove us to France. I drank coffee on the ferry, staring into the blazing pink sun while he slept, his head on my lap. But that night, a Thursday night, I ended up in a graveyard with the man from the bar, and his friend, who had arrived as we were leaving. A ghost is a duplicate, a tall and handsome man who contracts then dilates so swiftly, you can't refuse. In fact, you don't say a word when a ghost, when two ghosts, lead you by your upper arm into an empty place, verdant with cypress and elm.



# CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI was born in Calcutta in 1956. She graduated from Calcutta University and Wright State University in Ohio, and received her Ph.D. in English from the University of California at Berkeley. Her four volumes of poetry are: *Dark Like the River*, *The Reason for Nasturtiums*, *Black Candle*, and *Leaving Yuba City: New & Selected Poems*. She has published four books of short stories and novels, including: *Arranged Marriage*, *The Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of my Heart*, and *The Vines of Desire*; as well as edited *Multitude: Cross-Cultural Readings for Writers*. Her poetry is included in various anthologies, including *Twelve Modern Young Indian Poets* ed. Sudeep Sen (Lines Review, Edinburgh). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has won numerous awards for her writing. She teaches English and creative writing and lives in the USA.

## CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

### After Death: A Landscape

*after Francesco Clemente's Indian Miniature—6*

Fire on one side, wind on the other.  
I stride over the hill's green  
body. I have no legs.  
At my touch the shy leaves open  
into the shapes of eyes. I have  
no mouth. At my breath  
fruits ripen to crimson silk.  
No hands. So the stars  
float down like fireflies and pass  
into me, the calm moon  
hangs in frail fullness where  
my face might once have been. I move  
across the prickly-pear skin  
of the earth. I bless  
the fish, the stiff, silver-slender  
cranes. They bring me  
to the cupola, its dome  
mother-of-pearl, its crest  
gold as longing. Are there lotus blossoms  
in the air? They bring me  
to my newborn body. It is wrapped  
in the red of beginning. Or is it  
ending? I hold  
in my right hand the pale kite  
with its clear dark eye. The string  
lifts me. I fly.

## The River

*after Francesco Clemente's Indian Miniature—12*

I lie on the grass and listen  
to the river inside me. It  
pulses and chums, surges up  
against the clenched rock  
of my heart  
until finally it spurts from my head  
in a dark jet. Behind,  
the clouds glide along  
on paper wings, the palace walls  
grow taller, brick by brick, till they rise beyond  
the painting's edge. The river

is deep now and still, an opaque lake  
filled with blue fish. The  
ground is tilting, the green touch-me-not plants  
angle away from my body. I  
am falling. The lake cups its liquid fingers  
for me, the fish glint  
like light on ice. Evening,  
and the cool river rocks gleaming

pink as new pearls. The water rises.  
I am disappearing, my body  
rippling into circles, legs, waist,  
armpits. My hair floats upward, fine  
as water-weeds. I give  
my face to the river, the lines  
of my forehead, my palms. When the last cell  
of my body has dissolved, the last cry  
of the lake-birds, I will, once more,  
hear the river inside.

## Arjun

*after Francesco Clemente's Indian Miniature—13*

Wall. Rock. Field. Sky.  
From the high balcony I watch the land  
open and fall away  
beneath my drawn bow. Pattern  
of mosaic. Point of roof. Hieroglyph  
of cloud. My arms are white as stone,  
slender as the hope of love. My thighs  
smooth as the peeled silver trunks  
of eucalyptus. Brick on magenta brick. Flower  
on crimson flower. I breathe in

the taut elastic smell  
of the quivering bowstring. Aim  
at the unrisen sun. The grass is splashed  
with the memory of light. The palace  
is dappled by the thought  
of dawn. Wave. Spire. Hedge. Arrow. Eye.  
I have split in three and recede  
further and further from my original self. Now  
I am minute as the circle-centre  
of a target against a distant

haystack. The wind is visible and curls  
whitely around my head. I lift my hand  
to catch it. Smell of Jacaranda. Thorn  
of the blackwood tree. I release  
the string. And am flung  
forward. Time parts for me as water.  
Blood. Bone. Wet earth. Sunlight  
on a speeding metal tip. When I reappear  
it will be as lightning  
into your innocent future.

## The World Tree

*after Francesco Clemente's Indian Miniature—14*

The tree grows out of my navel. Black  
as snakeskin, it slithers upward, away  
from my voice. It spreads  
across the entire morning, its leaves  
tongues that drink the light. It has ground  
its heel into my belly. I  
can no longer tell its roots  
from my dry, gnarled veins. And when it knows  
I will never forget the pain  
of birthing, it parts its branches

so I can see, far  
in that ocean of green,  
a figure, tiny and perfect, pale  
as ivory, leaning  
on his elbow. He looks down and I know  
that mouth, those eyes. I  
raise my arm. I am calling  
loud as I can. He gazes  
into the distance, the bright, rippling  
air. It is clear  
he sees, hears nothing. I continue  
to call. The tree grows and grows  
into the world between us.

## On Opening a Box My Mother Left in My House

Softened by her wearing, these white saris,  
yet stiff with reproof. You? still here?  
while in Bengal the jasmined widow moon  
paces insomniac outside my bedroom sill,  
and from chill ricestalks the jhi jhi chants  
a prayer for the dead, or the old — the same thing.  
White is the color of futility, foam on flood waters  
(did you know twenty thousand died this year?)  
It is spittle dried on the lips of ghosts doomed  
to tell and retell a story no one hears.  
In childhood too you were disobedient. Once,  
running from me you tumbled down the stairs,  
had to be taken for stitches. I held you still —  
your father never could stand blood.  
Under the doctor's lamp your lips were  
bruised oleanders. Now my eyes are going,  
that shade returns to me more and more,  
your outraged gaze. You wanted me  
to save you, like I want (as though such things  
are possible) you to save me. After she fell  
Third Aunt was bed-prisoned seven months.  
When they dressed her for cremation,  
the sores were rash crimson, huge as  
king hibiscus. Why is it that as lives fade  
memory brightens its steep, stubborn tints?  
White is what I pray for, a graceful erasure,  
color of the bel flower I've asked them  
to dip in sandalwood and drape on my body  
so that you, reaching a still house too late,  
will be faced only with fragrance.



# DALJIT NAGRA

DALJIT NAGRA was born in 1966 in a Sikh Punjabi family and grew up in West London. He studied English at Royal Holloway and Bedford New College (London University). His first collection, *Look We Have Coming to Dover!* appeared from Faber & Faber (2007). His second volume, *Tippoo Sultan's Incredible White-Man-Eating Tiger-Toy Machine!!!*, is due out soon from Faber & Faber. His pamphlet, *Ob My Rub!* was a Smith/Doorstop winner in 2002, and was selected as the PBS's first ever pamphlet Choice, as well as chosen by Robert Potts in *The Guardian* as one of his Books of the Year for 2003. His poems have been published in magazines such as *Atlas*, *Poetry Review*, *PN Review*, *The North*, *Stand*, *New Writing 10*, *Poetry London*, *Poetry Ireland*, *Magma*, and *Tabla*. He has read at Poetry International at the South Bank, the Aldeburgh Festival, the Cheltenham Festival and the Essex Poetry Festival. I have read poems for Radio 3 and 4 on several occasions. He is a school teacher in Brent and lives in London.

## DALJIT NAGRA

### This Be the Pukka Verse

Ah the Raj! Our mother-incarnate  
Victoria Imperatrix rules the sceptred  
sphere – she oversees legions of maiden  
'fishing fleets' breaking the waves  
for the love of a 'heaven-born' Etonian!  
Smoke from cheroots, fetes on lawns,  
dances by moonlight at Alice in Wonderland –  
*no* the Viceroy – the Viceroy's ball!  
Lock, stock and bobbing along on  
palanquins to gothic verandahs where dawn  
Himalayas through Poobong-mist,  
the twelve-bore or swagger stick topi-and-khaki  
bobbery shikar, *Tally ho!* for the boars  
in a dead-leaf hush and by Amritsar  
what a *bang!bang!* bagging the flamiest tiger!  
Jackals, panthers, leopards, blackbucks  
and swanny bustards, pig-sticking, Kipling,  
Tatler, Tollygunge, High Jinks and howdahs  
for mansion whacking banks, and the basso  
profundo of evensong, frog song, poppy-pods,  
housey-housey and hammocks under the Milky Way...

Tromping home trumps – here come the cummerbund  
sahibs tipsy with stiff upper lips  
for burra pegs of brandy pawnee,  
pink gin and the *Jaldi punkawallaabbbb!*  
on six-meal days with tiffin and peacocks  
and humps and tongue and the croquet and polo  
and snooker at Ooty and yaboos, and sabre-  
curved mustachios twirling for octoroons  
panting in gunna-green fields, and ayahs  
akimbo and breathless zenanas behind  
bazaars where the nautch and the sun never sets  
when mango's the bride-bed of lingam-light,  
in a jolly good land overflowing with silk and

spice and all the gems of the earth! *Er*  
*darling, it's not quiite the kob-i-noor*  
*but would you...* (on a train that's steaming  
and hooting on time through a tunnel) *Ooo darling*  
*a diamond! You make me feel so alive.*

## Tippoo Sultan's Incredible White-Man-Eating Tiger-Toy Machine!!!

To flesh a poem  
you rifle through  
your store of imperial  
Word – dying  
to blood that hoard  
swotted since foreign  
kid of the class  
who chewed the fat  
of the raw meat minty  
tongue that English  
is  
nowadays your wrought-up  
state where you won't  
repose having thrashed out  
some lines. Instead  
you're awfully scary  
once in your stripes  
you're Tippoo's toy,  
his tigery accessory,  
clawing the mirror –  
a man overcome  
by the camps of history!  
Thus  
you whip up each score  
for your game at speed  
so you're galloping for that  
top-hat sahib!  
Just look at you pouncing  
on beats, when that gentleman  
screams your eyes  
are ablaze, you're no longer  
mankind! O God,  
you've become a Sher  
of Punjaaab on the wallahs of the

rrrrraaaaaaaaaaaaaajjj!!!

## Phallacy

How oft do mates bang on at length about  
how well they're hung, they grab their crotch then slash  
the air, then chuck an arm at will around  
a chum while necking Stella till they're lashed.  
To tell the truth, I'm really not well hung  
and thus I hide from mates my prince's state,  
this conk is king of my poor frame, no trunks  
would lunchbox find to bank a lady's gaze.  
And yet I hope the guys won't feel too down  
when I recount my lover's hardly wimpish –  
watch her stiffen over *corrrrrs!* from louts  
who check her out too long (for she's that fit!).

In bed, most nights she'll sigh: *O love, I love  
the woman's way you work your subtle touch.*

## Have I Got Old News For You

You've been mapping the best mortgage deals  
for our first house, recalling the latest  
tracker rate you hint we play it  
safe with a five-year  
fixed.

You're by the telly when Dubya flashes up,  
he's safely in the past yet twitching a smirk  
in his cowboy gear like he's verged  
on a mind-blowing  
thought.

I'm sorry Love, in the head to head, my head  
had gone astray so you were second best,  
it's just that I banked on a dead cert  
gaffe to raise us  
a laugh.

You don't hand me another Bud, but quiz my smiles  
at this sniggery ad-lib game of gags  
(that won your broken  
laughter back then).  
I'm thrown

to our courtship years when we lived in the clouds  
of *Guantanamo*, *Eyraq*, and of course *Aff-*  
*ghanestaan* freed by John Simpson  
for the Crusades, way before  
our daughters

trod the earth.

# DEBJANI CHATTERJEE

DEBJANI CHATTERJEE was born in 1952 in New Delhi. She has written and edited over thirty books; and won many awards. Her poetry collections include: *I Was that Woman*, *Albino Gecko*, *Animal Antics*, *Jade Horse Torso*, and *Namaskar: New & Selected Poems*. Her edited anthologies include: *The Redbeck Anthology of British South Asian Poetry*, *Rainbow World: Poems from Many Cultures*, *Generations of Ghazals* and bi-lingual books like *The Snake Prince* and *Who Cares: Reminiscences of Yemeni Carers*. Twisting Yarn Theatre toured her multilingual play for children 'The Honoured Guest' in 2000 & 2001. She has chaired the Arts Council of England's Translations Advisory Group, and currently chairs the National Association of Writers in Education. She lives in Sheffield, England.

## **DEBJANI CHATTERJEE**

*Two Tankas*

### **My Cup of Tea**

Both hands cup my mug  
as I sip my future dreams,  
swirling its contents.

My cup runneth over with  
rich liquid satisfaction.

### **Sheffield Tanka**

Passage to England  
for a writer's life - and more.  
Green dreams at eighteen.

The hallmark 'Made in Sheffield'  
shines fiercely at fifty-six.

*Two Rubai*

### **Asylum?**

Behold this asylum we call the Earth  
where pain and sorrow are objects of mirth  
You are our Keeper and our Healer too  
Help us change before you measure our worth.

### **A Lowly Trade**

Like headless chickens running round and round  
we follow those we know to be unsound.  
Politics has become a lowly trade  
Elections leave us in apathy drowned.



## **An Asian Child Enters a British Classroom**

Before she stepped into the classroom:  
she removed coat, mittens and *chunni*;  
mentally undid her shoes for entry  
to a temple of secular mystery.

She also shed her:  
language, name, identity;  
donned the mask of neat conformity,  
prepared for lessons in cultural anonymity.

# HIMALI SINGH SOIN

HIMALI SINGH SOIN's work has been published online on *Kritya*, *Pyrta*, *Muse India*, *Art Concerns*, *Art Slant*, *Asia Writes*, *The Enchanted Verses International Poetry Journal* and *CNNGo*; and in print in journals such as *ArtEtc.*, *New Quest*, *Take on Art*, *Madness Mandali* and *Quay*. Her book, *egg notes*, sponsored by the India Foundation of the Arts, Bangalore was shortlisted for the Toto Funds the Arts Poetry Award in 2010. Soin also writes on the arts and occasionally curates poetry into galleries or theatrical spaces. She lives in New Delhi.

## HIMALI SINGH SOIN

### The Affair

A woman's arm, festooned with maroon bangles, clinks *tin tin tin tin* as the 419 bus bumps through crowded streets, leaving in her wake, beads of sweat that rub against the rotund, mustached man who replaces her a few stops later, eagerly awaiting his own departure, knowing that his wife and child will be waiting at his house on Shah Jahan Road with open arms and in the case that both were away, well even better, for his mistress would be at home, lying on his bed, plump freckles creating a red smile, and long nails that seductively turn up the radio to the crude brash songs of Bollywood from the 90s, silencing life outside, as he would unbutton his shirt and come up to her from behind, unravel her sari, undo her blouse, spread her legs then muffle her scream by letting her teeth boar in his wrist like a hungry ghost, knowing that very soon the doorbell would ring and they would have to rustle a pause, her bangles clinking *tin tin tin tin* when she ran down the escape ladder to the servant's room as he hurriedly got dressed then complained to his wife about his tiring day at work then the sweaty bus ride back home, and she would comfort him gently, put their son to sleep, polish his shoes for work the next morning, offer to give him a massage, make dinner, all the while smelling women's perfume and using all the strength in her arms and in her mind to wash off the red lipstick from the breast of his shirt, blood on his heart, applying ointment on the scabs on his wrist, choosing to stay silent for fear of disequilibrium, then visiting the temple the next morning and praying, still silently, for her husband's prosperity and her child's education, which maybe his mistress better than she would be able to support, and with these excuses, she would return home, on a crowded bus, her arm glinting with sweat, her maroon bangles clinking *tin tin tin tin* every time the bus tread on uneven ground.

## Mathematics

When I re-read  
The poem that  
You wrote about  
Me, I wonder about  
Design +  
Defiant  
Clumps/ mir-  
Aculous= How  
your every word is deliberate:  
Mathematics.  
And I wonder  
If perhaps  
X I too, fit in

-----  
00000Some  
    Grid.

## The Cherry and The Spoon and The Cherry and The Spoon

— *Ode to Claes Oldenburg*

You drive  
From east to west  
In a small red car with  
Nothing but a spoon in your pocket  
Into whose mirror you scour the corn  
Expanses; from whose slick surface you scoop up a

Cherry and  
Nibble on the  
Tops of a ghostly cake  
You take accidental bites of  
The sky, or the earth depending on the  
Way you look at it. As you munch away your spoon

Grows grows  
The earth and the  
Sky slide slip into a  
Silver centrifuge and you, alas,  
Miniaturized, reach for the clouds which  
Drown in the shallow concave spoon puddle. Plus, with

The cake  
Long gone, the cherry  
In your mouth is not so  
Red cold and so sweet anymore.  
You leave the spoon behind upturned, the sky  
And the earth bend grow smile: chuckling follies  
Of travel, palindromes of their previous selves.

# IMTIAZ DHARKER

IMTIAZ DHARKER is a poet, artist, and documentary film-maker. Her five poetry collections are: *Purdab* (OUP), *Postcards from god, I speak for the devil*, *The terrorist at my table*, and *Leaving fingerprints* (all Penguin India & Bloodaxe UK). Her poems have appeared in many journals, magazines, and anthologies, including one in Macedonian translation: *Midnight's Grandchildren: Post Independence Poetry from India* ed. Sudeep Sen (Struga Poetry Evenings, Macedonia). Her poems have also been broadcast on BBC Radio 4, BBC Radio 3, BBC World Service, and BBC Television. She has had ten solo exhibitions of drawings, pen and ink on handmade paper, often on a large scale. She scripts and directs documentary films, many of them for non-government organisations in India, working in the area of shelter, education and health for women and children. She grew up in Glasgow, worked for many years in India and now lives between Mumbai, London, and Wales. [[www.imtiazdharker.com](http://www.imtiazdharker.com)]

## IMTIAZ DHARKER

### Out

*Get me out*, you said. *Now*.

*Get me out*. The unfamiliar bed  
a prison, your body behind bars,  
your bright spirit locked away.

I say I am better now, I was lucky  
to have you for that precious time  
even if the years escaped like  
a single day. But as I pay

at a till for milk or bread,  
as I board a train, as I turn and turn  
on the pillow where your head should be  
*Now*, you say

and it slams shut around me, that last day  
when I chose not to understand you,  
when I tried to keep you, keep you  
in my custody, walled in by my will,

when I tried to make you stay.

## After

We have done all the things you  
would have liked us to do.

Your brother has been across the country and back  
to fetch your comfortable shoes.

We have dressed you in your black wedding suit  
and the ironed shirt. Someone has combed your hair.

*This is exactly as I wanted it*, you will say,  
after the tributes have been paid,

when the organ has been played  
and the hymns have been sung

when all the well-wishers have gone  
and we settle down to talk.

*Exactly*, you will say  
when it is all over, when you come back.



## Vigil

Your eyes open, blaze silver  
for one second, close.  
Your hand stops, falls still.  
You send me no more messages.

The machine by your bed  
is saying prayers for you.  
It keeps watch, tenderly interpreting  
your body's needs.  
It listens and records your every breath,  
the turning of your blood, your heartbeat.

All night, all night, it pays close attention  
to you. At dawn it stops.

I try to read its face.  
The machine is blinking back  
its tears.

## ***Signs of life***

If I were to write a pineapple like a poem  
I would look at its eyes to see  
what it wanted to be, and then I would  
make it what it did not expect to be.  
I would slice off its crown  
and its thorny skin, slash it and cut it  
down, turn it inside out and around.  
I would examine it for signs of life,  
hold up a mirror to see if it still  
had bite, check for pulse or rhythm.  
If its heart was still beating  
I would eat it alive.

If I were to dig up a poem like a potato  
I would root it out of cold soil  
and bang it hard against a rock  
to shake off the dirt. I would wash it,  
gouge out its eyes and look at its skin  
to decide if this poem was worth  
baking or boiling or mashing or roasting  
or cutting in cubes and frying with cumin.

Then I would give it to you to read  
and you would say, 'That was a good potato.'

## **Saying nothing**

Our clothes are amusing, tangled  
on the floor, thrown into improbable  
positions. Outside  
people are asking where we are,  
passing notes through letter-boxes,  
ringing, sending text messages  
and your lips are at my ear  
saying nothing  
but I can feel you smiling.

# JANICE PARIAT

JANICE PARIAT is a freelance writer now based in her hometown Shillong, Meghalaya, after many years away in Delhi and elsewhere. Her poetry is informed by many things: her mixed Portuguese, Khasi and British ancestry, the Northeast of India, literature and travel. Her writings have appeared in *Tongues of the Ocean*, *Ultra Violet*, *Smoking Poet*, *Soundzine*, *Caravan*, *Poetry Friends*, *Art India*, *Biblio* and *Timeout Delhi*. She is the editor of an online literary journal, *Pyrta*.

## **JANICE PARIAT**

### **Fences**

in there the rituals of belief  
spin endlessly, a blind thief  
dashing around the corner  
colliding with the mad men  
and cold sisters.

inside,  
god is contained in clammy  
hands and sour droppings,  
in fat-rich breast coats and  
voices raised to drown out  
all others.

in there  
the rituals of faith  
spin a silken cocoon with  
strands of stained-glass light,  
a plaything for the altar.

outside,  
merely thousands of heavy,  
mythical stones pushed daily  
to the mountaintop.

nothing  
better nor worse.

inside,  
and out. the world careens  
towards a quiet emptiness.

## Her Silver Bangles

two in a red faux-velvet case  
deep inside a wooden almirah.  
a cave's forgotten treasure guarded  
by ghosts of the sea.

two perfect outlines of an empty moon  
that infinitely ringed your wrists.

since they fit, I like to think I am your  
shape. imperfectly preserved creation,  
travelling down the century like them  
and you from Lisbon by the sea.

two vacant circles of light, halos  
around the heads of saints you  
prayed to at night. St Anthony –  
to keep you safe on long journeys,  
to find what's lost. like I did.

They fill in for you, my hands,  
parcels of dust that do not  
fold in grace. Nor long for  
the touch of salt in the sea.

two hollow eyes that stare from  
a resting-place, across unfamiliar  
landscapes and unknown faces.

two perfect outlines of an empty noose  
infinitely ring your wrists and mine.

## The Visit

The smell is stale-sick camphor,  
rooms that haven't seen daylight –  
only tube-long glares of ice on  
blank-faced walls. This kingdom  
is peopled by the sick who wander  
like lotus eaters. Sit, stare,  
knead hands, furrow brows, twist  
fingers. Heavy as antiseptic is an air  
of hushed patience and careful  
considerations. Confessions run  
behind doors of lightweight night,  
where there's a steady plunging  
into secrets – held aloft like birds  
and stabbed with needles. Nothing  
here is delicate anymore. All becomes  
blood lines on paper, test numbers,  
levels of death – a slow burning  
iron on skin that marks when  
and how soon.

# JOHN SIDDIQUE

JOHN SIDDIQUE is the author of *The Prize* (Rialto), *Poems from a Northern Soul* (Crocus Books), editor of *Transparency* (Crocus Books), and co-author of *Four Fathers* (ROUTE). His children's book *Don't Wear it on Your Head* (Peepal Tree), was shortlisted for the CLPE Poetry Award. His new book *Recital—An Almanac* was published by Salt this year. He gives readings, mentors, and teaches creative writing around the world. He is currently commissioned by Lancaster University to write a suite of poems looking at migration; and he is The British Council's Writer in Residence for Los Angeles. [[www.johnsiddique.co.uk](http://www.johnsiddique.co.uk)]



## **JOHN SIDDIQUE**

### **Name**

Put your hands on me to remind me who  
I am, put your hands on my face and heart  
and say my name to stop me still, make me  
human, teach me to wait until I can open  
with self blessing, as a rose buds to the sun,  
as a seal on a rock sings the sea.

All it would take is a word, and day  
and night would separate, the oceans would  
move back to reveal the land, until one day  
a figure would emerge from the tall grasses,  
he would look out from his own two eyes  
- the seed heads ripening, the wind causing  
them to hush, the hills in the distance,  
he would stand in the newly made  
and know his own name again.

## Adultery

Finally I reached across the table  
to touch your face, the pads of my fingers  
on your forehead first, drawing down near  
the inner edge of your ear and under  
to hold your chin, lifting your head slightly  
as if I'm about to kiss you.

We are burning as if we are adulterers.  
The table is between us to keep us apart.  
I think if we are going to have to pay for this,  
I want to have at least touched your skin.  
We do not kiss, don't go home, or make love,  
we drink tea – green for you, regular black tea  
for me. I eat, you say you can't.

We are adulterers of talk and desire,  
pretending that by not coming together  
we are somehow still standing on the good side  
of the line.

We sit amongst other lovers, no one knows  
we are not supposed to be, *say my name*, you say,  
and I say it. *I want to show you so many things*,  
you say to me, it goes right into the place  
I have covered up, armoured, and pretended  
didn't exist anymore.

## Via Negativa

I could have loved each of you so much better  
than I did. You remained sitting at my table  
and sharing my bed for so long.

For so long I heard my own voice instead  
of each of yours. I had not learned  
to make anything, to put a brick  
on top of another brick, to plant seeds  
in a field, to put one word up against another.  
To know a day and to name it summer.

Each of us choosing and chasing  
the reflections that suited the feeling.  
We could not be other than we were.

Dark trees before bud.  
Hands reaching for hands.  
Blood seeking blood,  
voice for voice, and bodies  
looking to quench themselves  
without learning seawater  
from freshwater.

We could have loved so much better  
than we did. For so long we sat at the table  
waiting, while not one of us served the other.  
For so long our voices were filled with only  
the words we knew. Without knowing what lay  
between those words. Brick by brick, seed by seed,  
body next to body, summer day by day.  
Without knowing who lies behind each feeling.

The bud before blossom.  
An open hand.  
Knowledge of the sanguine.  
Waiting for the other to speak.  
We could not be other than we were.

Four Wishes:

A leaf with knowledge of the root.

Hands working with love then taking your hand  
at the end of day. A moment rather than  
more words. A jug of clean water on the table.

## Memorial Day

Sunday late Spring sun ascends  
over section 60 of Arlington Cemetery,  
as girl-scouts plant small plastic flags  
on the rows of graves.

Music of bugles, silence of prayers  
learned especially for today.  
Drums strike the air,  
a beautiful warm day across these States.

Sections 1 through 60; there could be  
generations of families here,  
great-great grandfather down to only son,  
perhaps a daughter now.

The sun ascends to fall over the years  
which march forward in dignified rows,  
war by war, and white stone by white stone,  
peace by peace, ending by ending.

## **Afghanistan 1970, stopped**

We're somewhere  
in Afghanistan. The 5 year old in me  
can't remember the town's name.  
Our minibus up high  
on a police transporter, for our own protection.

The hill bandits  
are raiding, kidnapping at random.  
We don't know the roads.  
We're stopped for the night. Father climbs down  
the lorry, finds seehk kebabs  
from somewhere. They are hot and flecked  
with green chilli.  
An illicit midnight picnic in a country  
that's closed for take-away.

The shutters are down.  
There is no news on the news.  
Night, dust and heat still in my mouth.

# JUDITH LAL

JUDITH LAL was born in the Cotswolds in 1975. She moved to Norwich to attend The Norwich School of Art and Design where she completed a BA in Cultural Studies before going on to do a MA in Creative Writing at The University of East Anglia. She received an Eric Gregory Award in 2001. Her poems have been published in various magazines including *Poetry London*, *The Rialto*, *Ambit*, *Magma*, *Mslaxia*, *The North*, and *Aesthetica*. Her collection *Flageolets at the Bazaar* was a winner in The Poetry Business Book and Pamphlet Competition 2007 published by Smith/Doorstop Books. It was chosen as a Poetry Book Society recommendation.

## JUDITH LAL

### Loleygaon Leeches

The good leeches  
hooked on the world  
suck bad blood,  
know my feet by their mouths,

know them mindful on wet white marble  
not far from Bhutan,  
entering where two deer meet in unspooked air  
because where Buddha talked the animals gathered,

where a grain of rice  
under my fingernail  
is a smooth kind of pressure,

and leaving past a lama's  
red robes left out to pocket  
the last of the monsoon,

through teak forest,  
great diameters of well fed green,  
leaves doubling up as plates,

on a route built around small important creatures,  
wool caravans tacking the edge,  
past The Old Silk Road signs,

keeping in mind the face  
of a young boy, features  
above gompa butter lamps.

The dream will give us the house  
known only by where its doors face,  
the house will give us the boy  
known by his blood and his goodness.



## Flowers Of Kalimpong

At home with hybrid teas,  
the English rose rings for chai  
to steam past datura out in poisonous blooms

like something angels would play,  
begonia, dahlia, lily,

the puppetry of  
bird of paradise,  
folds bright and clean as origami,

squashes beam  
across the road  
on running low electric cable.

The garden outside the garden mists over,  
mirrors breathed upon by baize mountains,  
time known only by what's brought forward,

crumbling jaggery and slow carving glacier syrups.  
The land slides into tourmalines.  
The month gives its weight, one moon's worth in

ganglions of ginger,  
rare black cardamom on hairy inclines, out-and-out  
thresholds pitched well above the price of gold.

A state of Himalayan balsam shoots off,  
runs wildly away with itself.

## Monkeys of Mahakal

The old plays have monkeys in  
and here are the monkeys seriously playing.  
The prayer flags carry long murmured wishes

on the wind, they catch on the  
wide comb of teeth, punctuated on  
points of Frey, Simvo, Pandim.

The prayer flags carry monkeys  
and the monkeys carry babies  
with minute heads filled up to the brim with eyes,

until the string bridge shakes like a oud  
plucked with long fingernails  
reaching the footsteps of each quaver.

The dextrous monkeys sew themselves  
through this world  
then give it the slip up a lode gold stupa.

Food is offered to the Gods  
and the monkeys eat it with  
soft clicks believing themselves to be Gods.

Sunlight hits the entrance bell,  
the Gods are pleased to recognise  
themselves in monkeys

and you who leave to collect  
your highly polished shoes with stepped up shine  
that have been kept safe from monkeys.

## Oolong

In a dance with two fingers  
they pluck the first two tips of camellia  
when the season is a sterling flush.

A sometime heat finds out green  
humming a recipe to itself.

No time for the Krishna butterfly  
to smoke into the concentration of perspiration.

With their crèche of babies  
rocked high further on  
they must fill the quota and over.

Delicate, where foothill rings  
step close together  
under layers of a wide skirt,

ghats where the sun is still young  
before the pukka guesswork of rain,

where an umbrella is a basketed idea  
in service to monsoonal silver.

A few rupees flow down. Needs must.  
They laugh with us who drink dust.

# KARTHIKA NAÏR

KARTHIKA NAIR was born in Kottayam in the southern Indian state of Kerala. As a child of an Indian Army officer, she moved and lived in many different Indian cities and states such as Delhi, Kolkata, Assam, Kerala, Meghalaya, and Uttar Pradesh. She moved to France in 2000 to pursue a master's degree in art management, and stayed on in Paris thereafter, where she has worked for institutions like the Grande Halle de la Villette, the Cité de la musique, and the Centre national de la danse. In 2007 she switched sides to manage choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui's projects. Her poems have appeared in *Atlas, Indian Literature, Saint-Denis, portraits sensibles*, among others. Her first book of poetry, *Bearings*, appeared from HarperCollins India last year. She lives and works in Paris.

## KARTHIKA NAÏR

### Soléa: from Lyon to Angers

(a *ghazal*)

Phoenix in front, dragon on your back; both soared in that dance of solitude.  
A wingtip shattered the moon that night: shards illumed your dance of solitude.

Onyx, obsidia'n glacier for muscle, bone and blood: in which chasm  
was he forged? Whose the arms that raised him, this necromancer of solitude?

Delhi, Detroit, Forbach, Sydney? No, by a sleeted airstrip in Annecy,  
on an aquamarine noon was first blood drawn by the lance of solitude.

Look carefully and you can spy them everywhere: in bedrooms, on beaches  
and battlefields. The time has come to globalize the brands of Solitude!

There were so many roads from Lyon to Angers – highways, bylanes, and some  
seasonal tracks through dreams – but none detoured the greyygreen strands of  
solitude.

Chiselled with the heartbeat of her dancers are Sevilla's streets, her heavens  
arched by a spine; days spiralling back to flamenco's trance of solitude.

Another age, another sphere. In Gent, Tomorrow flared in high-octane  
whirls: half-faun, half-unicorn, tethered by a ruthless glance of solitude.

Across latitudes and almanacs they have prospered – poets, peddlers, priests,  
palmists, songsters, also publishers – on the high finance of solitude.

We might have met under Dhaka skies, beside a marché in Nantes, Marseille?  
But the E.U. in Brussels had blueprinted our romance of solitude.

*Shrek* it was, at the Cigale, that spilt amber from laughing eyes on the path  
of velvet sparklers: their alloyed gaze dashed the happenstance of solitude.

Once more morning, once more Montreal: the words were calligraphed, then  
branded  
on memory's skin, "There will be no stemming the advance of solitude."

Daughter of the Pleiades, born nomad, whom fate leads far from hearth and kin:  
stellar forces play sentinel as you embrace a France of solitude.

## Two Triolets

### 1. Montreal: Fall

Tell me it must be the weather  
that dyes my mind white, congeals thought –  
not meltdown of that myth: *Together*.  
Tell me it must be the weather  
not your ire, nor eyes that ether  
memory, blaze the words we wrought –  
tell me! It must be the weather  
that dies: minds in flight can seel thought.

### 2. Rome: Winter

We drove to Rome to unreel pride  
and pain, staunch the blame, drain dissent,  
graft content. The last galactic tide:  
we drove to Rome to anneal pride  
with 'art and rain. When the Tiber died –  
riven blue-black by rage misspent –  
we drove from Rome to unreel, ride  
the pain, staunch the blame... feign consent.

## **Song Shan in 36 shuffled slides**

### **I.**

Traversed two sunsets,  
six time zones, tongues – to carve you  
in blithe silhouette.

### **II.**

Mount Song, the first sight:  
his tonsured peaks crowned claret  
by a dying light.

### **III.**

They unlace the skies,  
stride indigo earth by night –  
deep freeze at sunrise.

### **IV.**

Paris, Amsterdam  
Beijing, Zhengzhou... we vetoed  
the Three Gorges Dam.

### **V.**

Dark and day arrive –  
without pageants, or war cries –  
fully clad, alive.

### **VI.**

Shaolin's phalanx:  
monk-mountains in mute vigil,  
but uneven ranks.

### **VII.**

English, Polish, French,



Belgian, one Indian: cloudburst  
of brogues, a guide's drenched.

**VIII.**

Here, light the crescent,  
seek the God of Verse – chthonic  
spirit or volitant?

**IX.**

It isn't just hearsay:  
we meet the Six Perfections  
on temple pathways.

**X.**

Dusk, hour of still thought.  
You become the Eightfold path:  
transient, but unfraught.

**XI.**

Remember 'Lulu'?  
Almond milk: chemical, canned.  
Cravings caught from you.

**XII.**

Tongues tumble forth, vexed  
(nine-selves-ten-square-feet-three-hours);  
vote hot showers next.

**XIII.**

Forest of Steles sieves  
from cedar trees the essence  
of Light for cursives.

**XIV.**

More chapels, eastwards.  
Steles in Pali beckon me –  
my roots glint in words.

**XV.**

You will never know:  
I owe you this day, belief  
touched in granite flow.

**XVI.**

Dying feels easy  
in Song Shan: the breath, like breeze,  
chooses when to be.

**XVII.**

Back at the hotel,  
Winter lingers; the State bid  
him to melt pell-mell.

**XVIII.**

That's you, Szy, Ali,  
while sunbeams corps-de-ballet  
over dreams in glee.

**XIX.**

You walk scents of pine,  
cypress, oak to Wuru Peak –  
Boddhidharma's shrine.

**XX.**

“No fish in eggplant,  
please, for vegans. No, meat's worse!”  
Meals get a fresh slant.

**XXI.**

Yes, I doused this one.  
Three years on, the day your words  
scorched my world, homespun.

**XXII.**

Time takes off his shoes  
outside the Hall of Abbots –  
*Sutra* does mean ruse.

**XXIII.**

I smelt myths, moonbeams,  
mist for ink; write on oak leaves.  
Poems float upstream.

**XXIV.**

The stone lions of Qing,  
warrior monks, your dancers:  
March, with Spring's blessing.

**XXV.**

Invite from Zhengzhou  
to judge Thai Kickboxing Crowns.  
The Buddha laughs now.

**XXVI.**

His left arm Huike  
slashed for Damo. Blood won't help –  
here, drink my today.

**XXVII.**

Dragon and phoenix,

dancing beasts, boxing Buddha....  
the Divine frolics.

**XXVIII.**

Midnight, scale model  
of sets; three a.m., light design.  
Prayers at dawn? *Swell*.

**XXIX.**

Devaraja Hall,  
built, burnt, restored: Heavenly  
Kings, Four, never fall.

**XXX.**

Generals Hum-Haw –  
brick, blue – guard the Truth and you.  
I detour to bow.

**XXXI.**

Pain pervades as mist,  
evening dew I strive to hide:  
you snag a choked fist.

**XXXII.**

Chicken claws, pigs' balls?  
(packaged, coloured) preen on shelves.  
By night, they may *crawl*.

**XXXIII.**

Noon at Pagoda  
Forest hums – sleep-filled relics  
greet the young stupa.

**XXXIV.**

Sixteen monks and you  
scythe the air, stoke stars with spines;  
Earth's heart beats anew.

**XXXV.**

Dark mares run riot  
beneath eyes: will they unseat  
this reign of Quiet?

**XXXVI.**

The end of *Sutra*,  
“nothing's lost, things just change form,”  
becomes my mantra.

# KAVITA JINDAL

KAVITA JINDAL was born in Delhi in 1964 and grew up in three cities by the sea. She now lives by the river in London, following a nomadic life lived between Hong Kong, England and India. Her work is inspired by her observations of different cultures, landscapes and people. Apart from performing regularly in London, she has been invited to read at universities and literary festivals in Asia and Europe. Her poetry collection, *Raincheck Renewed*, was published by Chameleon Press in 2004. Since then her poems, short stories, reviews and essays on the Arts have been published in literary journals, anthologies and newspapers including *The Independent*, *The South China Morning Post*, *The Mechanics' Institute Review*, *Cha*, *In Our Own Words*, *Asia Literary Review* and *Not A Muse*.  
[www.kavitajindal.com](http://www.kavitajindal.com)

## KAVITA JINDAL

### It was in May. The sky poured.

The day the gutters overflowed  
I left Kotapuram Port.

Abandoned on the platform were black trunks and tan suitcases  
forsaken to their drenching while the porters huddled  
under the whipped red awning.  
The long brown train awaited the flutter of the guard's green flag  
as with slick-wet hair, from the window I stared  
at a shadow I thought was there.

Friends wrote after long silences to say they'd told you  
I'd shed tears on a platform awash with water  
Scraped on to the train and cried again.  
It was too good not to repeat.  
You were puzzled when you heard this  
or that's the version I received.

It wouldn't have changed anything, you said  
if you'd been there, if you'd spoken  
It wouldn't have erased the train timetable  
or the date of leaving Kotapuram  
If you'd said 'best of luck in life, my friend'  
or another farewell equally inane  
I'd have lived exactly the life I have  
it would all have panned out the same.  
I would've left on the day the sky poured  
the day the gutters overflowed  
Even if you'd stood there  
to say 'Hello. Goodbye. I care.'

'Tears?' you'd asked, with perplexed brow when the story was repeated  
of rampant lightning and umbrellas twisted by the storm.  
Of the face squelched to the streaky window.  
'Tears, for what purpose?'

There were pillars on the platform  
Posters on the pillars, imploring us to  
*Stick No Bills*

The yellow of the posters was shiny-succulent, water-lashed.  
The pillars were white and round, the sodden green flag was down,  
the train slipped out, pulled away my stare,  
away from the shadow I thought was there.

It was in May. The sky poured. The gutters overflowed.  
I left Kotapuram behind. The trains ran on time.



## A Bonsai for Princess Masako

In the imperial garden  
Chrysanthemums grow  
Take their places  
Know their roles

Gardeners' gloves  
Watering cans  
Fertilizers

Got her down

Alive in Spring?  
As far as we know  
Bright, blossoming?  
Not as before

Precious teasing  
Pruning clippers  
Weed killers

Got her down.

## Matter Grows Thin

leaves are stuck blue  
incredulous on tiles  
false are tears that come  
oh, because the sun  
put a speck in my eye

backstroke tans  
my face and hands  
front crawl hides  
the heart that divides  
on hearing a plane overhead

water gets strewn  
fragments are sewn  
the mind doesn't rip  
no, it tightens its grip  
sharpening to a point

the whiff of chlorine  
works as dopamine  
limbs flip and fin  
matter grows thin  
swimming in the pool of your absence.

# KAZIM ALI

KAZIM ALI has worked as a political organizer, lobbyist, and yoga instructor. His books include two volumes of poetry, *The Far Mosque* and *The Fortieth Day*; the novels *Quinn's Passage* and *The Disappearance of Seth*; and a book of lyric prose *Bright Felon: Autobiography and Cities*. He has taught writing and literature at various colleges including The Culinary Institute of America, Monroe Community College, Shippensburg University, and New York University; and currently teaches at Oberlin College and in the University of Southern Maine's Stonecoast MFA Program. Co-founder of the small press Nightboat Books, his poetry and essays appear widely in such journals as *American Poetry Review*, *Boston Review*, *jubilat* and in *Best American Poetry 2007*.

# **KAZIM ALI**

## **Morning News**

I left myself  
dizzy in the sky

flint-thinking a foray  
kith and kiln

humans are silent now  
rude and unshaped

do you really have to sin  
to be saved

what I was sick for  
a glass we are filling

tool that binds me  
between zenith and obscene

another season cut to pieces  
soiled and squandered

what everyone knows  
no one will say

## Prayer Request Cards

I would like the church to pray for

a clear reckoning  
the core unearthed  
what's best born skyward  
searched

who's most easily followed  
seared

who's most faithful  
beckoned to  
queer

I would like the church to pray

my psalm to unsettle the case  
my askance umbilical lust to review  
and refute the evidence

to enter my guilt-edged tongue  
as final proof  
of innocence

I would like the church

on the inside of my sin  
to spell out my breath  
to draw a wing

## Road at Ache

I was whispered along the road at Ache  
toward the sun-puddled gate

I might be the sum of yearning for  
whatever makes you emptier

better weather, the absence of bees  
but the year tells it better, all the hives

unraveling into summer, little mouths  
flooding the May air to stillness.

My telling tints the blue air  
whiter, storm-white open ear

listening to what will unspool next,  
clover, apple-trees, and to what

I owe the mysterious reciter arriving  
driving out dry the flood month

spelling me in every direction, unclear but  
swarming, given this my year to hear

## Ghost Anchor

across the street which was once a river  
Marco recovers and Jonji hovers  
at the edge of this life

I am a leaf reaching for them  
lightly reading  
the rain's clear letters

The bridge across the river  
has never been raised  
Tender bodies evaporate and condense

An echo wells up-river to sound  
Rain themselves down  
sinking into the water table

Dear Jonji in silence

What did I at all learn  
from my lost book  
Nothing drowns

## Sinking

you became real to me father  
when I saw you fly over me from beneath the waves

a bone-white door against the cloud-white ceiling  
looking for me, flapping and furious

I watched you in the dark as you slept  
knowing the edge of you only by the deeper darkness

below you now in the blue-black, a star  
winking out, I am thinking I may wake up in the labyrinth

and not ever do this  
not seek for the sun

oh father my storm-dark coast  
nothing fills



## Labyrinth

Unmake yourself            year by year  
your urge

surges in your ear            but dispersal  
no purpose at all

lost in the labyrinth  
desperate            to wring yourself

dry of lust  
wanting exhalation

to mean            disappearance  
in the space between    lightning and

thunder  
fling yourself skyward, son-storm

a hagiography            of feathers  
glued to your            sin-singed skin

arrowing            sunward  
singing the whole way

*I'm leaving you behind        ghosts of a prayer  
leaving you behind shining thread—*

# LEELA GANDHI

LEELA GANDHI was born in Mumbai in 1966. She received her BA in English from Hindu College, University of Delhi; and as an Inlaks Scholar, went to do her post-graduate work at Oxford University. Her poems have appeared in *Creations*, *Indraprastha*, *Wasafiri*, and other magazines. Her debut collection of poems, *Measures from Home*, appeared in 2000. She is also the author of a book of literary criticism, *Postcolonial Theory*, and the joint editor of the journal *Postcolonial Studies*. Gandhi has taught in the School of English at La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia; before moving to Chicago where she now teaches.

## LEELA GANDHI

### Sheila Chawla

Now you've gone too my little comma on the lean settee  
unused TV-turned-table between you and him.  
'Funky furniture', I'd say. You'd chortle to the brim,  
taking all allegations of impropriety on the chin. Some habit of concluded time  
made you release the present to others as their confine  
*too* readily; the constant drama of our youth in your eyes, before they went  
with all the rest: muscle, fibre, tissue, all spent.  
In those last blind years, haunted by children,  
you struck at them along the edges of your bed:  
an unruly crowd, demanding, jealous, ill-bred.  
Was it us, stripped of your courteous vision,  
or shadows from some former brutal playground in Lyallpur,  
the day you first stepped out of line?

## Seasonal / Anti-Pastoral

My keeper scatters even as she binds.  
Every leaf knows this figment of design  
as the grammar of seasonal iteration,  
making light its tenuous habitation  
in the abstract sequence of leaf-events.  
Most generalities are given for the order of most things:  
for each leaf, on every tree, in some continents,  
there'll be green, copper, russet, sere, passing;  
occurrence, transience, recurrence,  
on off, hot, cold, birth, death, the shifting tense  
locutions of it all. Were this were all.  
No errata in nature's covenant,  
no random perpetuity in wet cement,  
no broken bird's adamant fall.

## On Reproduction, after Darwin

In the theology of descent a catechism  
of improvement consumes most little things.  
The listless pigeon, distracted barnacle, poet-mammal,  
each pausing in uncooperative contemplation  
of inessentials, miss the amendment  
of tooth and claw, beak and tail.  
Neither rising, nor falling, they gather,  
ephemerally, against other contingencies:  
the storm in winter, the PhD colloquium,  
the end of man.

## **Swayamvar: Sita**

The way you bent that bow  
made me love the place  
your spine begins its declensions  
(base/apex, high/low),  
yet dread the symmetry  
of man and weapon;  
the deadly circle  
of your combined inversions:  
you rigid  
with complex curvature of bone,  
the other turning all that is liquid  
into stone.

## Nocturnal (I)

This time the move is egregious,  
the dreams juridical.

I must leave for a foreign place  
before dawn intercepts my deportation  
to a small, featureless town.

My preparations are immaculate,  
even banal. All belonging has been shorn  
of possession. Yet my effects refuse annulment  
of their own compact with the world:

a fridge, chaotic with animal remains  
and soy proteins will sustain guests  
to come once I have gone away.

And so on, and on, perennially,  
more ends for more beginnings.

## Nocturnal (II)

1.

In a psychic turn toward the popular,  
my most mundane anxieties  
now feature assassins and a car chase,  
or two, most nights.

Bad news if you can't drive  
and are comatose in pajamas:  
floral, frayed, beyond repute.

2.

Sleep, my father said, is the courage  
of fidelity to a benign universe,  
faith in the absence of *constitutively* hostile others;  
so we subside in war zones, traffic, terminus, intersection,  
punctuating the vigil of wakeful reason with bravado:  
'I'm alright, you can go now'.

3.

Alone in this sensorium, who watches as we sleep  
our nervous rest exact a toll for credulity?  
We recompose matter, we become the hostile world.



# MAHENDRA SOLANKI

MAHENDRA SOLANKI born in 1956 in Nairobi of Indian parents. He has lived in England since 1965 and after graduating in English and philosophy worked in publishing, bookselling, adult and community education and the theatre. He now teaches at Nottingham Trent University, having previously directed the MA in Writing. He has worked as a writer in schools, colleges, libraries, universities and a year long residency at the East Midlands Forensic Mental Health Centre, a secure unit for prisoners with mental health issues as well as taking up residencies for the Arts Council, The Poetry Society, and the Arvon Foundation, amongst others. He has been a Visiting Writing Fellow at the University of Massachusetts. He co-edited *Other Poetry* (with Anne Stevenson et al) as well as editing individual poetry collections for Blackwater Press. His collections include *Shadows of My Making*, *Exercises in Trust* (Aark Arts), and *What You Leave Behind*. Solanki's poetry has appeared in magazines and anthologies in Britain and abroad, including *The Observer* and *Poetry Review* and been broadcast on BBC Radio 3 & 4. He has also undertaken public commissions, collaborating with artists such as Kay van Bellen (for the Riverside Commission) and film-maker, Jaharlal Sen (for the Royal Festival Hall).

## **MAHENDRA SOLANKI**

### **Days**

Your days are laid out  
in a row for me  
a pull of dates  
torn from a calendar:  
an abacus of hope

### **Eggs**

I make it the way you did:  
cracked eggs spiced with  
nuggets of red chilli,  
catching my breath.

Each plate, stained  
like my fingers with  
turmeric, forever marked.

## Thirst

And what good will come  
to tell now, of how for years  
your mother took you to see  
the priest, who once alone  
with you, talked you out of  
your shorts, and with you emptied,  
would plead for you to piss into  
his mouth; his thirst not quenched?

## Wishes

What do you think about  
When you think about me?

I think about your wishes

About my tongue inside you  
About the wind outside  
About your scent around me

About the give of figs just opened  
About the feel of warm asparagus  
About your mouth as my container

About how wishes come in threes

## **from The Riverside Commission**

i

the A frame stretched tight  
against a familiar sky

take a step, a start

ii

a canal, a river  
through a lost green corridor  
a well-kept secret

iii

a man runs on this path  
between grass and water  
like a feverish race horse  
blinkerer against distractions

iv

a to and fro

a giant see-saw rocking

a give and take:  
the hiss and spill of the past

v

we who left behind our lands  
we who crossed the black ocean  
we who miss open fields and running water

we seek comfort in this pull of green  
we seek rest in this flowing bed

# MANI RAO

MANI RAO is author of seven books of poetry, has published essays and poems in journals including *Atlas*, *Indian Literature*, *Kavya Bharati*, *Chandrabbaga*, *Wasafiri*, *Meanjin*, *Washington Square*, and *West Coast Line* and in anthologies by Zoland Poetry, W W Norton, among others. She has performed at literary festivals in Las Vegas, Melbourne, Vancouver, Hong Kong, Singapore, Chicago and New York PEN World Voices. Translations of her poems have been published in Latin, Italian, Korean, Chinese, Arabic, French and German. She was Visiting Fellow at the 2005 Iowa International Writing Program, and won the 2006 University of Iowa International Programs writer-in-residence fellowship.

## **MANI RAO**

### **Brahma's Moment**

Brahma unfolded  
Four petals on a shoulder

TimeSpace emanated  
Twinned at the hip

Quarreling who's older

## **For Pootana's Sake**

The beast  
now in the guise  
of a babe

Exuding  
Sweetness

Draining the  
Poisonous wetnurses

## Shiva's Digs

Fragrant floured  
Nude blue bloat  
Last seen by the boy who  
Wanted to be a ghost

The scavenger hooks fingers  
In the rim  
Bone pots conk  
Dangling swing

Finger a ring ran away with  
Knobs and bits  
Found in ash spills

It's his job but gravely notes  
Soil bored with air  
Fluids laying cesspits



## **Panchali**

Five limp fingers  
A useless hand

Who draped Draupadi

Yudhistira sorry  
For himself

So sure he was  
The eldest son

## **Iliad Blues**

I like battles out at sea  
Hot spur  
Cold water  
Blood swimming both ways  
Salty meetings  
Sharks due  
At the end  
Level blue

## Looking for Lethe

Lingering waters Mnemosyne

Slave to recognition the sommelier sips

History's arias – mountain under ocean – crystal chambers – singing salt

Sudden body – undercurrent – slow release – cleansing nourishing bitter

Sharp – teeth – opening – vanishing citrus

Something buried – buried hint

Along her shores infinite coves

Amuse the helpless odysseys

At the end of each day

Livedness by people

# MEENA ALEXANDER

MEENA ALEXANDER's work includes six books of poetry *Illiterate Heart* (The PEN Open Book Award winner), *Raw Silk*, and *Quickly Changing River*; the memoir, *Fault Lines*; the book of essays and poems, *Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience*; two novels and two academic studies one of which is *Women in Romanticism: Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Shelley*. Anthology appearances include: *Midnight's Grandchildren: Post Independence Poetry from India* ed. Sudeep Sen (Struga Poetry Evenings, Macedonia), among many others. She is editor of *Indian Love Poems* (Everyman's Library). *Poetics of Dislocation* is forthcoming from the Poets on Poetry Series, University of Michigan Press. She has received awards from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, Fulbright Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, and the Arts Council of England. She is Distinguished Professor of English at the Graduate Center and Hunter College at the City University of New York; and currently serves as an Elector, American Poets Corner, Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

## **MEENA ALEXANDER**

### **Birthplace (with Buried Stones)**

#### **I.**

In the absence of reliable ghosts I made aria,  
Coughing into emptiness, and it came

A west wind from the plains with its arbitrary arsenal:  
Torn sails from the Ganga river,

Bits of spurned silk,  
Strips of jute to be fashioned into lines,

What words stake – sentence and make believe,  
A lyric summoning.

#### **II.**

I came into this world in an Allahabad hospital  
Close to a smelly cow pasture.

I was brought to a barracks with white walls  
And corrugated tin roof

Beside a Civil Aviation Training Center  
— In World War II officers were docketed there —

I heard the twang of propellers,  
Jets pumping hot whorls of air,

Heaven bent,  
Blessing my first home.

#### **III.**

In an open doorway, in half darkness  
I see a young woman standing.

Her breasts are swollen with milk.  
She is transfixed, staring at a man,

His hair gleaming with sweat,  
Trousers rolled up,

Stepping off his bicycle,  
Mustard bloom catches in his shirt.

I do not know what she says to him,  
Or he to her, all that is utterly beyond me.

Their infant once a clot of blood  
Is spectral still.

Behind this family are vessels of brass  
Dotted with saffron,

The trunk of a mango tree chopped into bits,  
Ready to be burnt at the household fire.

#### **IV.**

Through the portals of that larger chaos,  
What we can scarcely conceive of in our minds —

We'd rather think of starry nights with biting flames  
Trapped inside tree trunks, a wellspring of desire

Igniting men and gods,  
A lava storm where butterflies dance —

Comes bloodletting at the borders,  
Severed tongues, riots in the capital,  
The unspeakable hurt of history:  
So the river Ganga pours into the sea.

#### **V.**

In aftermath — the elements of vocal awakening:  
Crud, spittle, snot, menstrual blistering,

Also infant steps, a child's hunger, a woman's rage  
At the entrance to a kitchen,

Her hands picking up vegetable shavings, chicken bones,  
Gold tossed from an ancestral keep.

All this flows into me as mottled memory,  
Mixed with syllables of sweat, gashed syntax,

Strands of burst bone in river sand,  
Beside the buried stones of Sarasvati Koop,

Well of mystic sky-water where swans  
Dip their throats and come out dreaming.

## Afterwards, Your Loneliness

*in memory of Mirza Ghalib 1796- 1869*

### 1. Indigo Interior (Delhi 1857)

You were holed up in the cold  
No oil to light the lamps, even mice started shivering.  
You had to sell your clothes, the camel hair robe,

Woolen kurta knit with finest lambswool,  
Turkish cap, all of it,  
Down to the cotton coverings she stitched

For your bed, all this to get a few morsels of food,  
For yourself and that mad brother  
Who tore cotton, silk, off his own flesh

And started scratching —  
Unbearable itch, he had,  
Poor Yusuf.

At night you waited for a lightning flash  
So you could put out your hands,  
Touch paper, ink.

The lane where you lived  
Was shut with stones,  
Huge stones to keep out the Brits, shoved

Against the mouth of the gully.  
Roses shriveled ,  
All their color sucked

Into crevices of rock.  
Keekar trees high on the Ridge  
Held out crowns of thorn,

They were calling, calling out to you —  
Half dressed , you tried to set out, stick in hand,  
All the way from Kashmiri Gate.



## 2. Scarlet Exterior (Bombay, 2008)

In Bombay where you've never been  
People clamor by India Gate.  
So many in starlight and smoke

In the blood spotted alley way,  
On the causeway  
At dawn, clouds cling to a spittoon of fire

Dragon flies shimmer on burnt metal,  
Raving threads of light  
Pierce us into other selves we long to be

Ruinous shimmering metamorphosis.  
Who are we? Where are we?  
Stuck in the mess of Delhi, what can you tell me?

## 3. Scratched Silver

You pretend to be hard of hearing.  
You say – Why is no one coming to see me?  
My mirror flickers.

Can no one come?  
The postal system is in utter chaos.  
The letter I wrote to the British Queen

Victoria — Diamond of the Sky , Maker of Kings —  
Concerning my pension,  
Who knows if it was even delivered to her?

## 4. Gashed Gold

Be near me, you cry, as dung spills  
Down your lane and you try to stumble out.  
Were you speaking to the ghosts who live in your head?

'There is one world of mud' you wrote 'another of spirit'.

What did you mean?  
Mirza Ghalib show us where the horizon goes,

Where sight must cease.  
Your loneliness makes fiery footprints in the sand.  
At night, stars throw down their spears.

They beckon ,  
Making spirit signs  
Coming closer and closer.

## Grandmother's Garden

I.

A space without history —  
At the rim of the pond

Grandmother loosens her sari  
Steps into water

Her skin glistens, utterly naked.  
No one remembers this.

Lotus petals flicker  
Float to the axle-tree

Tree of Heaven  
They call it in the family.

By its roots  
Grandfather made a fire

Tossed in her poems  
Poor things, penned in black ink

She had folded them  
Into finicky squares

Buried them  
In her jewel case

With molten rubies  
Slow sift of sapphire

Poems of no climate  
Words halting, quick with longing

For a man whose name no one knew.  
She dreamt him up?

Who can tell?  
Two whole months she took to her bed

Her hands bent under her  
Broken winged

Refusing what food she could.  
One night

Half mad, she stumbled out  
Ran her fingers

Over scorched bark  
— *Altona Scholaris* — what was left of his body

Imagined reliquary  
Blushing like koi fed from her own hand.

II.

Syntax surrenders  
To an axe biting into wood

And hearing small shocks from my past  
I know it's all over — the years of childhood

The Innocence of Before and After  
Seasons of rain, fragrance of burnt blossoms

And under the axle tree  
Stars musk scented, acutely unreal.

In the shadow of that tree  
Mirza Ghalib comes to me

Lambs wool cap askew,  
Flecked with blood —

I tried to wash it  
In your grandmother's pond.

He took off his cap  
I saw it was crowned

With pale freckled eggs  
He knelt beside a hole

Where the tree once stood.  
I can see through this pit

To the island city  
Where you've gone to live, he said.

In the glory of the Beloved  
All borders vanish.

I saw her then in moonlight,  
A girl, my close familiar

Her wrists were stumps  
Her black hair

Blew into resurrection waves,  
She could not comb it back

She was grandmother  
And she was me.

She strode up the invisible  
Stairs into the sky.

III.

In glowing heat  
In blessed synchrony

I saw what Ghalib saw —  
Houses with their eyes torn out

Books knifed, goblets shattered

Townspeople, some in soiled dhotis

Twirling from the lampposts.  
O lilies he wrote on his sleeve

Your mouths  
Are filled with syllables —

Love draws us down into history.  
Men on horseback bearing myrrh and fine paper

All the way from Mecca to Manhattan  
Dream of a garden where

A poet sips wine  
From the crook of your elbow —

O girl with moonlit hair  
Whose wrists are stumps!

Then whispering  
So I had to stoop to hear:

Beloved my body is scarred with age  
Fit for burial

While yours gleams,  
Rainbow colored.

In the rain washed trees  
There is nothing to see but nakedness.

# MICHELLE CAHILL

MICHELLE CAHILL is Goan-Anglo-Indian. She wrote *The Accidental Cage*, short-listed in the 2007 Judith Wright Poetry Prize. She was highly commended in the 2009 Blake Poetry Prize, the Alec Bolton Prize and the Inverawe Poetry Prize. Her second book of poems, *Vishvarupa*, a collection themed around Hindu gods appeared recently. She writes fiction and essays and has been awarded grants from the Australia Council, the Copyright Agency Limited and the Australian Society of Authors.

## MICHELLE CAHILL

### Parvati in Darlington

So I lay on the body of a pale Shiva. He spoke not a word, bothered perhaps by my nut-brown skin; my slow dance calmed his electro shuffle. A slap of limbs pinned him down to my earth. I hadn't bathed in sandalwood, flouting legend with a preference for Estee Lauder. The moon's crescent tangled my hair, my breasts were bare, our timing synchronised. Night fizzed, vanishing into day, the club's hypnotic rhythms subdued. We scorned the Puranas, our tryst no Himalayan cave, but a hotel bed I had draped with stockings, lingerie, and the crystal ice of a Third Eye. I admit that's why I spoke with the speed of an antelope. It seems the acharyas were mistaken: I hadn't dated for marriage or adultery; nor with a wish to deck his house with flowers or sweep his floors. I am too busy, I declared, for dalliance or abstract gossip. I have no interest in honeybees and birds. All I wanted was a good time. I swore as the river is my sister, that this guy was not my sun or my sky. No way did it even enter my mind to have his kids. His first wife's ashes are scattered all over the city. Goddamn it, Shiva is a walking disaster; whatever he touches burns. Restraining him with handcuffs I said, forget it babe, your lingam and my yoni are made for one thing only, improper and unchaste. It's little more than conjecture to think our sweaty helix could ever be whole. Then I offered to grind and gyrate him silly, suspend our want indefinitely, and he fell utterly silent with this new meaning.



## Kali from Abroad

Kali, you are the poster-goddess, sticking out your black tongue, like Gene Simmons from Kiss, a kick in the teeth, with your punk-blue leggings, your skull and scissor charms.

You swing a trident, a demon's head and dance on the bones of a pale Shiva. I recall the convincing eyes of a girl cripple carrying your bottled effigy, as our bus careened to a dusty halt.

Some say you morphed from Parvati, drunk on blood, others cite your superhero leap from Durga's brow to slay the self-cloning serpent before a Haka dance on mythic soil.

By a hundred Sanskrit names, India claims you in a single text, while in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, you are 'the grass and the dew', on screen, our contemporary Judge Judy

having a bad hair day. I'd argue for your cosmopolitanism, a global denizen, you're adroit in drugs and aphrodisiacs, a nude Dominatrix, a feminist expert with a sadomasochistic bent.

A figure of partition you were cover girl for *Time* magazine. A Neo-pagan diva, your wholeness is darkness fashioned from light, moon-breasted, with eyes of fire, with Brahma's feet,

Varuna's watery thighs. You rise from the grave, step over carnage, feeding the world and your severed self with blood. Stripped bare as Duchamp's Bride, you set Bachelors in motion.

## The Piano Lesson

My hands are stricken. Do they not brush your sleeve?  
Are they not stripped by this embrace? Such brevity:  
light aslant on the maple, flooding us with its promise,  
as if there were things outside our selves, or our words.

There are cities whose landscapes we chart. How dry  
the river seems as dusk blanches. I twist in your arms,  
where my aches and stings are electric. Your hammers  
strike my strings, then rest, until the sound uncouples.

You have spent epistolary days, rehearsing a solitary  
composition; variations on the same étude, to balance  
what you have abandoned for loveliness. No exception  
to this, I fasten my bra, as you rest, perfectly naked.

There's no indignity. I think we're saved by the purple  
darkness. I return to the street, unable to disguise a flush  
in my cheeks. Absorbed by stilettos, subways, the slow  
traffic, for a few hours, I feel immortal, as any fugitive.

What bitter chords should I wait for? I forget to ask.  
You have tried to get behind all the music this world  
makes. My hands are stricken by the lustre of ebony  
at my keyboard. Now I work. Play the silent harmonics.

## Childhood

The afternoon cruises,  
after badminton, lemonade,  
and chutney sandwiches.  
Voices are like ribbon made  
for unwrapping the past.  
Syllables of imaginary laughter  
blend with the real, as I recall  
the warmth of uncles, aunts, cousins  
left behind in foreign cities,  
Mumbai, London, Goa.  
I think of the bright day when dad  
flew our kite on Primrose Hill.  
It's hard to say what matters.  
Everything fragments,  
defers to time's calibrations,  
the long shadows are deceptive.

I piggy-back my daughter  
in summer's leaf-light.  
We swim laps in tandem  
riding a pink foam noodle, sinking fast,  
her tiny arms a choker for my neck.  
I'm weak to her commands, her tears.  
In any competition, I must lose.  
The dragonfly's flight is a tease  
never kissing its reflection,  
a cross stitch lacing the pool.  
The distant hum of the freeway  
sounds like a hole in the heart,  
the softest turbulence.  
The garden is a green humidicrib.

## Dying to Meet You

*for Aravind Adiga*

Maybe it wasn't deferred by the hardness of rain,  
my lack of sincerity, your lover, an unfinished book,  
a hangover; the cigarettes I didn't smoke to save  
my lungs. I wasn't breathless last night. I dreamt  
an email I opened from a publisher wishing me well  
was an awful sign. You didn't even enter my dream,  
though it would make poetic sense to mention loss  
in imagined fragments: how I left my bangles by your  
bedside table; how you asked me to slide them off  
so they wouldn't chafe or ring the way memory does;  
how you covered my pillowed face under a cold sheet.  
I woke with a slight headache to morning's amnesia  
— some days I know not who I am, or how to begin.  
Yet, you're right. No one *is* dying to meet someone  
like you. The poor are buried alive in seismic rubble,  
their children swallowed by tsunamis are casualties  
of global warming, over-population, urban planning.  
How then to measure a grief which I sometimes desire  
to share? How not to read your remarks as if you came  
like an electronic prayer into my head? Is it worth you  
knowing I trembled this morning at the very thought  
of our real bodies meeting? Would I be grave? I am  
so brittle lately, imperfectly divided. I am untouched.  
In my yoga, you're not the Bhraman from whom I draw  
breath. Perhaps, by now, I might know the epic nature  
of suffering; the way we can be prisoners and still free,  
not by purchase or design. By readiness for what this  
day brings do we exist, in the spaces between words.

# MINAL HAJRATWALA

MINAL HAJRATWALA is the author of the award-winning non-fiction book, *Leaving India: My Family's Journey From Five Villages to Five Continents* (2009). She is also the editor of *The Queer Ink Anthology: Contemporary LGBT Stories of India* (2012), the first collection of contemporary queer Indian stories since the decriminalization of homosexuality in India. In 2010-11 she was a Fulbright Senior Research Scholar, researching a novel based partly on the life of the North Indian poet-saint Mirabai, as well as writing a series of poems about the unicorns of the ancient Indus Valley. Her theatrical poetry show, 'Avatars: Gods for a New Millennium', was commissioned by the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco for World AIDS Day 1999. She was a fellow at Columbia University in 2000-01, and is a graduate of Stanford University. [[www.minalhajratwala.com](http://www.minalhajratwala.com)]

## **MINAL HAJRATWALA**

### **Eden / Aparanta**

Your life was a tawdry leopard coat, a rayon dress, a false skin.  
One day you put it on inside out  
and went to the mall appearing alternate  
like those eerie stacked clouds which become, in daylight, trees.

Here in paradise it has become impossible  
to pretend the night is not lonely  
while the iron mines kill inmates at intervals & the sea  
caresses itself endlessly, roaring

of our crimes, its emptiness, all there is  
to condemn. After what we proclaimed about freedom,  
it still seems impossible to love, and even just  
to rut is not easy, nor to rest without craving

that pomegranate God stole from between our legs.  
I admit I am nearly desperate now  
slipping sadly between orange sheets in the house  
of my most shameful fantasy where

you are not, you are not, you refuse to be.

## Love in a Time of Chimaera

Glitter is the new black. Muslim is the new Black. Hate is—no, wait, that's old. What has always tried to impersonate orgasm? Money

is the new Nature. Cloned salmon are the new grapes. Eat them by the dozens,

bleed them into wine. We breed them boneless so you can just swallow.

Just swallow

the lump in your throat, the hike in your price, the hitch in her voice when she says Maybe

when she means No. When she means Yes it's a different Maybe. We are only allowed

to express half-passions, the full range of motion of Maybe. She says I have an artist's handwriting

so I flush with pride. I can't not think of you when I masturbate, how I'd make you feel

just like a girl *again*, as if you'd been born true. I've got the gift

of seeing need—an emptiness I dive into too easily, losing my sweet greed

to float free in yours. For a while (hours, years) that ecstatic merge is worth

burning every bit of my own hair. Then the stink, acrid blue,

gets to me or terrifies you

& I'm wrenched back to this undone ego re-stitching sinews to my melted spine.

## Reservoir, Dholavira

To be a guardian of the water  
tend the levels  
& the clouds,

tongue the air  
to taste its wet  
promise.

Study

the loyalties of water, how it longs  
to quench the fire at the center  
of the earth, & how to coax

—with prayer & attention, with the full focus  
of every science of your time, & with  
the earnest arc of your desire—

each dewdrop molecule to wait  
on the skin of the planet  
long enough to join

the sacred tributaries, watersheds  
& blue salt bogs  
of the bodies of your people

who have named you to this task,  
who entrust to you  
their awful daily thirst.

And if you learn  
that at the end of your underground tunnels,  
tiered pools & long

sweet

wet

drains

lies a drought that will end the world,  
you must not say. Keep the secret  
vows of water:



to disappear,  
to change,  
to flow again

when the city is ready  
to know the deluge  
of its mistakes.

All life fails. Contemplate  
what traces you will leave,  
the meanings

of love. Freedom  
is the surface tension  
& the turgid deep,

what you give yourself  
when you answer to  
your name.                    Listen,

learn the shivering melody  
of mouths, wings, legs  
rubbing together

all night  
in praise  
of the gift.

# NABINA DAS

NABINA DAS was born and brought up in Guwahati, Assam. Her first novel, *Footprints in the Bajra* (Cedar Books India), was long-listed for the Vodafone Crossword Book Award in 2011. Her poetry collection, *Into the Migrant City*, a result of a fellowship/residency with Sarai-CSDS (New Delhi, 2010), is forthcoming from Kilmog Press (NZ/Australia). Her poetry and prose have been published in several international journals and anthologies. She has a MFA Poetry from Rutgers University, a MA Linguistics from Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University, and is a fiction editor of the Rutgers University journal, *StoryQuarterly*. She has also worked in journalism and media for ten years; and is trained in Hindustani classical music having performed on radio, television, and street theatre. Nabina Das blogs at <http://nabinadas13.wordpress.com/>

## **NABINA DAS**

### **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 who tongued them tried new names.

## 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 12<sup>th</sup> 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.

# NEELANJANA BANERJEE

NEELANJANA BANERJEE is a writer and editor whose poetry and fiction have appeared in the *The Literary Review*, *Asian Pacific American Journal*, *Nimrod*, *A Room of One's Own*, *Desilit*, and the anthology *Desilicious*. She received an MFA in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University in 2007, and was a Hedgebrook Fellow in 2008. She has worked in mainstream, ethnic and independent media for the past ten years. Since 2003, she has helped young people tell their own stories at *YO! Youth Outlook Multimedia*. She is also an editor and blogger with the Asian American magazine *Hypben*. She is a co-editor of *Indivisible* (University of Arkansas Press, 2010), the first anthology of South Asian American poetry. She lives in San Francisco.



## NEELANJANA BANERJEE

### Progeny

we envision the color  
posterity will assume.  
you are sad  
because blue is de-  
feated, darkened by the weight  
of my subaltern

eyes. understand this:  
our child will shimmer, the sun  
drowning among gold

petals, hyacinths  
in a village pond. her cheeks glowing,  
the orchard blossoms

of your grandfather's  
unmapped land. wrists, veins frail as  
these loose visions but

knobs of spine sturdy,  
rugged as the snarl of my  
mouth against your lips.

## First Melt

*How sweet the past is, no matter how wrong, or how sad.*

— CHARLES WRIGHT

I watch the icicles  
                  unravel from the rooftops of this winter town,  
everything          everyone          turned lazy toward the sun's  
yellow-gold tease.

Clutch of mud at my feet and I'm reduced.

-----

Once on that field near the flat blue horizon, we sat  
on raincoats, poured gin into cans of orange juice –  
our mouths metallic, surrendered.

I remember the wide canopy of sky,  
that incessant suck of mud, the tender shoot  
of my heart.

-----

On days like this, everyone fades transparent.

Even that boy  
sitting on the steps, flesh and stone and cloth,  
just a smear of mud against the collar bone.

I walk past green courtyards of trespass,  
filled with the smell of musk and breath,  
the planetary motion  
                                  of rolling under and under.  
                                  The bodies left  
buried in the soft earth, imprint of elbows and shins.

It's the words that have dissolved, a slow-molasses disappearance  
of everything I thought was finite.

At dusk, a red wash against the buildings, nothing but  
the shape of a bone in my mind.

## Transfigure

A legend: in one tangle  
of forest, there was a woman  
raised by men. Taught to bind  
away each new curve; thicken  
the narrowness of her ankles.  
She strung her bow with locked  
arms, whistled crude melodies,  
bathed alone.

Once though, she tripped  
over the patterned feet of a warrior  
and felt the immigrant warmth  
of blush. A tingle that pulled  
loose the seams of her tight-  
cloth; uncoiled the sheen of hair.  
In prayer, she asked for  
transformation – and returned  
heavy-lidded, tip-toeing. Even  
her laugh; now a breeze over  
glass, something haunting.

I question this sacrifice. Would  
gladly turn the pulse-  
hollow of my neck, the practiced  
arc of my eyebrow for the tendons  
of an archer. Surrender  
these coy curves, swell of lip,  
grace of knee, for the rough  
abandon of man.

## Drought

We search for water all summer,  
this place as dry as the tight canyon of my throat  
when nervous. Following whispered leads  
we drive down dusty trails with the windows open.  
My cigarette wavering between fingers, your frown  
swaying like bait on a line held too long.

Nights are parched. We sit on the cracked steps  
of this rented room watching brown-skinned children  
duck their heads through the trickle of a sprinkler.  
Too shy to look at us, their eyes flit to your hand  
pressed into the thirsty skin of my thigh.

I wake up early for work, my eyes reflected  
rough in the cracks of the bathroom mirror. Tiptoeing,  
I touch my lips to your open palm but you  
stir anyway. *Dreamt about the ocean,*  
you say. At the bus stop I touch the grass  
but the dew has already evaporated.

Mid-August when you lead me down the crumble  
of an old ravine. Our footprints crack into puzzles  
at the edge of the water. You kneel and the stream swirls  
only to the waist of your shorts. My feet glide along  
the mossy slant of rock. Then: hands, shining silver fish  
dripping along the angle of my arms. The watermark  
rising on us slow, like fever.

# PRISCILA UPPAL

PRISCILA UPPAL is a Toronto poet, fiction and non-fiction writer, and academic born in Ottawa in 1974. Among her publications are seven collections of poetry: *How to Draw Blood From a Stone* (1998), *Confessions of a Fertility Expert* (1999) *Pretending to Die* (2001) *Live Coverage* (2003) *Ontological Necessities* (2006), *Traumatology* (2010), and *Successful Tragedies: Selected Poems 1998-2010* (Bloodaxe Books, U.K.); the critically-acclaimed novels *The Divine Economy of Salvation* (2002) and *To Whom It May Concern* (2009); both with Doubleday Canada; and the academic study, *We Are What We Mourn: The Contemporary English-Canadian Elegy* (2009) with McGill-Queen's University Press. Her work has been published internationally and has been translated into Croatian, Dutch, Greek, Korean, Latvian, and Italian. *Ontological Necessities* was short-listed for the prestigious \$50,000 Griffin Prize for Excellence in Poetry. She is a professor of English at York University in Toronto. As editor, she has also published several books, most recently *The Exile Book of Poetry in Translation: Twenty Canadian Poets Take On the World*, and *The Exile Book of Sports Stories*. She is an active participant in several arts committees and organizations, and is on the Board of Directors at the Toronto Arts Council. [[www.priscilauppal.ca](http://www.priscilauppal.ca)]

## PRISCILA UPPAL

### Books Do Hold Me at Night

As I open my eyes in the morning, so do books.  
Eat breakfast, lunch, dinner and dessert at my side.  
Amuse on subways, trains, and planes.  
Hold my tongue in meetings and during the news.  
Take my temperature when I'm feverish.  
Mourn when I'm sad.

I've had orgasms with books, alone and in unison.  
Travelled to the ends of the earth.  
Teetered on the edge of pools and baths.  
Waited patiently in cafés for my safe return.  
Stayed tight to the chest in the dark.

Books dressed me during puberty.  
Held their own at university.  
Knew before I did that *he* and *be* and *she* were not the one.  
Stood quietly aside while my babies were born.  
Sometimes beat me senseless.

Books sweat with me on the elliptical.  
Idle on summer porches.  
Recognize my neighbours, and crawl  
into my children's hands.  
Sing on birthdays, and treasure old memories more  
fondly than I do.

Change hats: father to uncle, daughter to professor.  
Books are survivors.  
Harness the crowd. Rewire the individual.  
Know when to hit the brakes, when to risk it off the cliff.  
I even believe, though you insist otherwise, that you know  
how to die.

And now that we're on the subject.  
My most loyal companions, I leave you

all my worldly and unworldly possessions.  
Don't let me down. Beware of fire.  
Please, do something grand.



## **A Diorama of your Anger Drifts Downstream**

It's not in a rush; heavy, plump,  
enjoys the splash of water on skin, mud  
on frame; speed builds  
in time.

Your anger has built a raft, a life jacket,  
even scuba diving equipment. This anger  
goes deep & turns exotic colours. Parts  
of its species are yet to be  
named.

To onlookers: the ordinary calculated  
occurrence of aberration, deviation  
from an outside temperature gauge. A coke  
can or an olive branch, a tear off a teenager's  
sweater, a plastic lunch bag.

Sometimes fishermen bait you,  
then throw you back.

Not famous enough. Can't compete  
with no feet for the mob to kiss,  
then trample.

Patience. Rumours study  
maps of the falls.

Ancient men sing songs of grief.  
You drag their notes along.

## Identity Crisis

My cat thinks it's a dog.  
My dog thinks it's a horse.  
My horse thinks it's a car.  
My car thinks it's a train.  
My train thinks it's a submarine.  
My submarine thinks it's a skyscraper.  
My skyscraper thinks it's a museum.  
My museum thinks it's a carnival.  
My carnival thinks it's a funeral.  
My funeral thinks it's a birth.  
My birth thinks it's an episode.  
My episode thinks it's eternal.  
My eternal thinks it's hope.  
My hope thinks it's cynicism.  
My cynicism thinks it's time.  
My time thinks it's anachronism.  
My anachronism thinks it's pride.  
My pride thinks it's a cat.

## **The Women in My Family are Boxers**

Hard quads & black eyes  
to prove it. Father gave us

each a belt on our twelfth birthdays.  
And a gold ring.  
We toughed it out.  
Then ate our cake.

Did I mention the women in my family  
are all boxers?

And the years punch back.  
While we search for a title  
worth defending.

## **There Are No Time-Outs in History**

At best there are pauses between rounds  
to stitch skin, wipe blood, spit into the bin,  
& except for a few predictable platitudes,  
wave to what's left of the crowd.

# PRIYA SARUKKAI CHABRIA

PRIYA SARUKKAI CHABRIA is a poet and novelist. Her publications include *Not Springtime Yet*, *Generation 14*, *Dialogues and Other Poems*, and *The Other Garden*. She edits the website *Talking Poetry*, and has edited three chapbook anthologies: *50 Poets 50 Poems*, *All Poetry is Protest*, and *Borders*. She is writing 'Love: Stories', and, translating from Old Tamil the saint-poet Aandal's hymns, *The Autobiography of a Goddess*. Recipient of a Senior Fellowship for Outstanding Artists from the Indian government, she has experimented with the Rasa theory of aesthetics in her writing; learnt Pali to read the Buddhist Jataka Tales; co-founded a film society 'Friends of the Archive' that screens silent films; and co-scripted the Oberhausan Critic's Choice film, *Daara*. She has also collaborated with the classical dancer, Malavika Sarukkai, on several productions including *Fireflies*, *Vipinam*, *The Grove*, and *Shrinkala*. She lives in Pune. [[www.priyawriting.com](http://www.priyawriting.com)]

# PRIYA SARUKKAI CHABRIA

## Everyday Things in my Life

1.

I'll meet you here.<sup>1</sup> In the meantime I check the mail, call the booksellers, iron clothes dowsed in yesterday's breeze and consume cups of jasmine tea. Sunlight slides down the far wall and eddies across the floor to lap around the ancient walnut wood desk near the windows; the wine red Persian carpet with its central shamsa sunburst medallion and borders of neat diamonds grows dimmer underfoot. I will await you; I will wait long past the rush hour, even though the sun has crossed over to the other side of the house and readies to slide into tomorrow between a tangle of trees and far buildings and then curve beneath them.<sup>2</sup> I shall wait till lights come on in the buildings, and until they are turned off. If you do not come, I shall say it does not matter. You could believe this.<sup>3</sup>

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1. field at the edge of the Milky Way: brilliance behind, black vastness ahead, at the rim, wheeling galaxies

2. "*What if I say I am you?*" ibid pg.154

3. ... though the adult heart is usually about five inches in length, three and a half inches in breath at its broadest and two and a half inches in thickness. However, the organ is extremely sturdy, beating without a break from its formation in the womb until death. The glistening appearance of its inner surface is due to the transparent endocardium membrane. Wounds of the heart are often immediately fatal, but not necessarily so. They may be non-penetrating, when death may occur from hemorrhage, or subsequently from pericarditis, or on the other hand, the patient may recover.

## 2.

Sometimes light wants to clutch whatever it can:<sup>4</sup>  
space, as it falls through, igniting it like a cloud from within  
as if in an act of visual echolalia while in  
the softening dusk that grows from earth upwards  
beyond trees-buildings-clouds-sky  
something, not a leaf, falls like a leaf.<sup>5</sup>  
and something unheard gargles like an inky fountain<sup>6</sup>  
and someone living prays to give up the dead<sup>7</sup>  
and fails.

-----

4. George Szirtes

5. Derek Walcott

6. Bao Jing

7. “... veils of such transparency blew across her face that she no longer knew what she was seeing...” *ibid*, pg. 260

3.

Ap	ple,	pear,	man	go:
He	cuts	fruits	for	me.
I	make	him	daal	rice.
To	get	her,	read	books.
How	man	y	more	days
Are	we	thus	gift	ed?



#### 4.

A vase of flowers squats in sunlight.<sup>8</sup> On the sideboard, a bowl of fruit. Above it, branches reflect in the mirror's bright rectangle. On the polished wood<sup>9</sup> of the dining table I lay mats, plates, cutlery, napkins. Pour a thick stream of water into a crystal decanter cut with diamond designs; it is an object of great beauty that cannot be replaced. Each time I touch it, my heart beats a little faster. Curiously, the water looks heavier with sunlight streaming through.

-----

8. whales beached on the white continent as far as the eye can see: stormclouds swept up from the ocean, lumpy, dark, lying on their sides, not gasping. Like elephants that seek out secret cavernous graveyards to die in, their ivory yellowing like dusty tallow, ribcages like broken teeth, the whales swim here, on to this melting shore of ice led by their song; they beguile themselves, become their own sirens, become liquefying moonstone

9. Voyager has proved beyond doubt that storms the size of Earth rage on the surface of Jupiter. Winds reach speeds of 15,000 miles per hour. The sun is too far away to cause these effects; therefore Jupiter's storms are caused by something else.

## 5.

As I wait, I scan a questionnaire sent by a literary journal. Their last issue was a special on terror to which I contributed; now this. Does terror affect my daily life? What do I deem as terror? Did... I close the page and browse. The bell rings. A couriered package smudged with a scrawl and foreign stamps.<sup>10</sup> Inside, a book of poems of the rarest elegance, rigour and luminosity.<sup>11</sup> D has kept his word.

I return to the room. A pair of pigeons, startled, flies towards the window, their smooth shapes becoming oval flurries as they thrash wings, pppada-ppaada-ddaadaaa against partially closed panes before escaping. On the slim marble of the windowsill, curls of down, grey on veined white, which I blow out. Should I leave the room, the pair will return to roost amid bookshelves. They never learn.

-----

10. ... under skies of cracked crystal, plum wine trapped in its veins, darkening the fractured dome, spins a mirror that captures those who look into it and reflects to each an identity they at yet do know, but which exists in their future or their past; what is more, this is an identity they will meet. [LR]

11. for it is well know that people can transform from hatred to forgiveness for no apparent reason as is frequently witnessed in survivors from war zones: having lost everyone and everything such people become apostles of peace and love. Ref: Amazon, Gaza, Kashmir, etc.

*"... the sparkle in a drop of dew is sieved through dawn so all that remains is sparkle"*

## 6.

*Salammbô* leans at an angle on the topmost shelf, a 1908 edition. Repeatedly read and passed over, today, in the space of waiting, I reach for its musty red hardcover.<sup>12</sup> Blow on it. Open it with the care brought on by neglect and its tainted delicateness. Page corners crumple on touch.<sup>13</sup> Dark moons, wormdrawn, burrow through, chapter after chapter. I pluck fresh neem<sup>14</sup> leaves and place their acrid scent between pages to drive away silverfish.

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12. However, certain possessions refuse to be tattooed into a particular time, or a specific space, such things do not abide by the rules. Rapture is foremost amongst these: it rises unbidden at all times. Moreover, it continues to rise.

13. Drenched rapture, as in lotuses filled with rain, swollen pollen and drowned bees.

14. ... especially the skid of moonlight underfoot as it rolls on dew

7.

Pastry flakes on white plates. Forks gleam, sun –warmed. The wine bottle’s lengthening shadow pauses<sup>15</sup> as I drowsily blink. Distant laughter opens its eyes, then snoozes.<sup>16</sup> I reach for your hand and place it against my face; it fits exactly, curving like mango flesh around its seed. Knowing you are nearby, I drift into sleep. I return to the dream that I constantly dream these days, that dream whose meaning I know but cannot share because my words are also only of this world<sup>17</sup>

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15. ... for, between the dissolution (pralaya) of the universe and the beginning (sargam) of the next one is a pause of complete equipoise, one of “pure duration” as time has not yet come into existence.

16.

17. The translation and significance of this stanza does not seem certain to me but is possibly worth investigating

# RAVI SHANKAR

RAVI SHANKAR is Associate Professor and Poet-in-Residence at Central Connecticut State University and the founding editor of the international online journal of the arts, *Drunken Boat* [<http://www.drunkenboat.com>]. He has published a book of poems, *Instrumentality* (Cherry Grove), named a finalist for the 2005 Connecticut Book Awards; with Reb Livingston, a collaborative chapbook, *Wanton Textiles* (No Tell Books); and two poetry chapbooks are due out next year. His creative and critical work has appeared in publications such as *Atlas*, *The Literary Review*, Scribner's *The Best American Erotic Poems: From 1800 to the Present*, *The Paris Review*, *Poets & Writers*, *Time Out New York*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *McSweeney's*, and AWP's *The Writer's Chronicle*. He has taught at Queens College, University of New Haven, and Columbia University, where he received his MFA in Poetry. He has appeared on BBC and NPR; and along with Tina Chang and Nathalie Handal, he co-edited *Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from Asia, the Middle East & Beyond* (W W Norton).

## **RAVI SHANKAR**

### **An Unverifiable Theorem**

The gun once introduced must be forgotten  
because its snub-nose gives a pocket the weight  
of syllogism: no posthumous event can affect us.

Or, say, after it occurs, death cannot affect us:  
it's impossible to imagine what we have forgotten  
when who we were no longer has any real weight.

Stripped of consciousness a body has the weight  
of water evaporating from a lake: breath leaving us.  
Once introduced the gun cannot be forgotten.

The weight of the forgotten: not what leaves us.

## Holiday

On airwaves, feigned faces sell  
dental floss, stimulants in capsules,  
geriatric aides, disposable blades,

an opprobrium of leather and lather.  
Execs on a boardroom broadloom  
stitch the sounds of glossolalia:

threads of jingle hemmed in scheme  
to brand the comet, market fizz,  
deprive the noon of pimply faces.

Diapasons spun on monitors outfit  
the eye in polymerized angoras—  
implants, enamels and radial belts—

while seamlessly the acquisitive eye  
tailors its tailor's worldview  
to be worn everywhere like a veil.

Leaden attention to razzmatazz.  
pack the rental, head for live hills,  
disembogue a stream of elan vital.

## Untitled, Oil Paint on Canvas, 1958

*"Shapes have no direct association with any particular visible experience, but in them one recognizes the principle and passion of organisms."*

-Mark Rothko

The proposal: luminous drama.  
Ensnared pallor meets an edge  
of burnished orange for a shotgun  
romance. Share a moment  
of horizontal bliss. Then watch  
as doubts arise. Ardor turns nasty  
Recriminations grow ever nastier,  
spiraling into black, burning coals  
of depression, continually brooding

on death. Timelessness passes.  
The whole spectrum gets absorbed.  
Somehow the couple emerges aglow,  
slightly altered, happily lanced  
in yellow, each a part of the other  
expecting, miraculously to give birth  
When harangued by hue and cry,  
they admit to eloping. Step away  
from domestic light's embrace

to tally the gradations that hint  
at perspective abstracted:  
romance, pain, renewal, failure,  
the ecstasy of later years, happening  
all at once. Step to the surface.  
Look there, dead center: the secret  
wedding. An exchange of vows  
in an effulgent chapel where color  
gathers to praise us in our plight.



## The Sweet Science

Appalled and thrilled is what I wrote for its alliteration but that was pure showmanship, shimmy shuffle and shoulder roll, not true to the rapt attention I had trying to pin the technical terms - jab and cross, hook and uppercut - onto the bodies of two men who glided across the roped off ring trying to land blows. Watching the fight, I watched myself watch the fight, noticing how in spite of myself raw sounds gurgled up from my throat. Was it to help exhort Bad Chad Dawson, New Haven's finest, rip into his older opponent? Or in appreciation of the way he would slip punches like a speedboat navigating a cove? Perhaps it was a muscle memory of the only time I stepped into the ring, with a buddy, to playfully grapple, until I got hit with a roundhouse in the ear, which clicked some primal button I could not unblink, and charged with animal aggression I never suspected I possessed, I dropped my good friend to his knees? Or maybe finally it was being colonized by the crowd, in synchronicity with the growls and curses that made me yell out in spite of myself. I could have been in Baghdad 7,000 years ago, where an archaeologist discovered a Mesopotamian stone tablet engraved with two boxers preparing to fight, else in 18th century London eating meat pies and drinking ales while watching a bare knuckle prize fight. Somehow each feint and parry, each exchange of fists, encapsulated an essential idea about brotherhood and brutality that I could not put into the right words. All I know is that when the final bell sounded, cauliflower ear and nerve-cell damage in the periphery, the ring overrun with promoters, corner men, men in tuxedos and blue latex gloves, cameras on cranes, the ring girl in her low-cut dress, I was fixated on the two fighters with their gloved hands raised in the air. I was galvanized yet not quite satisfied. I wanted more.

## On the Banks of the East River

Tinsel seldom dominates a domicile's décor the way lofts under the Williamsburg Bridge are strung up in silver, now that trustafarians have arrived to drive up rents, to play alt-country singer-songwriters too often too deep into the night, to bring back the mullet and Member's Only. Decades before them, a few blocks north flowed brick and strips of corrugated steel, busted up factories designated "interim multiple dwellings" to meet code, Puerto Ricans and Hasids fighting for overcrowded flats along a waterfront rife with distilleries, muggings, sugar refineries and rusted turbines that spewed silt into the East River. Now the bodega sells Brooklyn lager, stiff avocados, toupee tape, trucker hats, novelty fobs in the shapes of states, superthin lambskin condoms, Mucha Lucha Wrestling magazines, loose batteries and prepackaged kielbasas that a bearded man hunched in a subway hub furtively devours, poring over pages of Rabbinic Law. He's a Mohel who later tonight while performing a bris will taste blood from a child's penis. Three steps: cut the foreskin with a knife, rip the membrane open with a fingernail and stopper the blood flow with pursed lips. Then it's wine and matzah for everyone! Imagine. Not rubber or *Chinoiserie* or even leopard print. Tinsel.

## The Hindu Gets Baptized

Esteemed and always appreciated,  
if all too often maligned colleagues,  
please understand it was not as has been  
suggested, a recreational immersion  
or religious role-playing

(though either  
alternative would have better suited  
my father who went completely dead  
on the line for thirty full seconds before  
responding icily, “they will never ever  
let you go” meaning the Church,  
with their pleas for tithes and duty  
to attend, plus tacit and overt entreaties  
to drop Ganesha off at the Salvation  
Army as mere “idolatry”)

but rather due  
to the intervention of our next-door  
neighbor who felt we should all be  
dipped in purifying water, not from  
zeal for our souls, but in Unitarian  
good faith, a kind of benign advocacy  
on behalf of our daughter who could not  
choose for herself and because my wife  
may have already been secretly baptized  
by her grandmother, an early memory  
of which she might or might not possess  
in a whispery outline given form  
by her own mother’s suspicion

(one of a number  
of genealogical intrigues surrounding  
the Cranes, one side of the family  
unearthed near-obsessively by my mother-  
in-law after trips in a R/V with an Iowan  
and a Nova Scotian to rural libraries  
and county archives to catalogue property

and marriage, motivated less by a fervor  
for taxonomy than an abiding paranoia  
about a missing inheritance)

and most decidedly  
because I shared meditation group  
with my neighbor, where we tried to rejoice  
in our own good fortunes which in a certain  
light might make the symbolic sacrament  
of washing away one's sins not *so* very different  
from intoning "May I and others never be  
separated from the great happiness devoid  
of suffering" before sitting in *tonglen*—  
the Tibetan word for "sending and taking"—  
or reading Meiser Eckhart and eating  
scones one summer morning,

not unlike the bright  
hour in which I waded with my family  
into Cedar Lake while a small congregation  
sat in lawn chairs and the pastor with yellow  
waders, a weighted robe to prevent her  
from flashing the fish, motioned me,  
having opted unlike the others for immersion,  
not affusion, to join her by stepping waist-deep  
into sparkling gray-blue water, watched  
by a group of townsfolk I had mainly never  
met before, despite having lived on Main  
Street for almost seven years,

thinking as my skin  
adjusted to the temperature of the water  
about how the Reverend had defined baptism  
to my daughter in a meeting held the week  
before in an office at the top of the church,  
full of stuffed animals, crocheted Bible verses  
and colorful trinkets like the leavings  
from a kid's birthday party, an explosion  
of detail that had stimulated my daughter  
three dimensions beyond stillness

into full interrogation—*why? why?*—  
a recursive loop that in its indefatigable  
logic might confound even Zeno,

(Zeno of Elia,  
not to be confused with Zeno of Citium,  
the Stoic, but rather the purported inventor  
of the dialectic, the *reductio ad absurdum*  
or proof by contradiction, who according  
to Simplicius in *Aristotle's Physics* argued,  
“If there are many, they must be as many  
as they are and neither more nor less  
than that. But if they are as many as they are,  
they would be limited. If there are many,  
things that are are unlimited. For there are  
always others between the things that are,  
and again others between those,  
so the things that are are unlimited.”)

and how her queries  
stopped only when the Reverend held up  
a lollipop, then defined the act as pronouncing  
to the gathered simply that she was a loved  
child of God, a definition that made just enough  
non-denominational good sense in my mind  
to lead us to decide we might consent  
to our neighbor's aspiration, a calling after  
all to mere meaningfulness and blessing,

and how then  
in the water, the thought of bare feet  
on the stone floor of the temple permeated  
with incense, oil, lotus garlands draped  
on the depthless black carved face  
of Shiva faced by Nandi, his bull,  
Sanskrit *bhajans* lifting toward the dome,  
my mother joining in while I concentrated  
very hard on prayer, too hard probably  
to let even a moment of silence speak back  
to me, fully earnest and skeptical at once,

and how I sat alone in the cafeteria in fifth  
grade, the only vegetarian in the class,  
how those memories glinted as I stood  
blinking back the sun, while a call was cast  
to the congregation and then I fell backwards—  
*per aquam in verbo*, regeneration by water  
in the word—away from the bright sky  
and into the waiting pairs of arms.

# SANDEEP PARMAR

SANDEEP PARMAR received a PhD in English Literature from University College London in 2008. Her dissertation focused on the unpublished autobiographies of Mina Loy. In 2003, she was awarded an MA in Creative Writing (Poetry) from the University of East Anglia. She is currently co-editing *The Collected Poems of Hope Mirrlees* (forthcoming from Carcanet, 2011) and researching at Newnham College, Cambridge, as a Member of High Table, and where she also does some teaching. She lectures at the University of Hertfordshire, Open University and is a Reviews Editor for *The Wolf* poetry magazine. Her poetry appears in *Voice Recognition: 21 Poets for the 21st Century* (Bloodaxe, 2009), and in various UK and US magazines.

## SANDEEP PARMAR

### Counsel

*for Anna Smaill*

Looking to ward off danger, I browse the eighth floor of the New York Library  
for some composite rite,  
a wrist-length of red thread,  
éblouissements to blind intervening shadows.

\*

*It is good luck to dream of your wedding day,  
to feed a cat from an old shoe (so long as the cat does not sneeze).  
Do not marry a man born in the same month as you,  
or eat while dressing. Tear your veil (at the altar by accident).  
Wear earrings. Not pearls. Carry salt. Drink water.*

*Beware a woman carrying an empty bucket.  
Turn away from the mothers of stillborn sons, monks, pigs and lizards.  
Under no circumstances should you marry on a Tuesday. Or Thursday.  
And once you start from home, don't dare to look back.*

\*

How to coin the finest and most singular antidote—to dance against possible risk?

From PR6003.U64—the fair-weather lesbians of Dorothy Bussy's *Olivia*—

to the *Diary of Virginia Woolf: 1915-1919* [PR6045.072]

we plunge straight into Lily the 'simple-hearted' servant, her indiscretions.

A married Miss Stephen keeps schtum in her tremorous florals two sizes too big.

Zigzagging to PR4863.A33 *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*.

'Your goose found her way into our larder with infinite discretion.

Judging by her Giblets which we have sacrificed first, she is a most sensible Bird.'

[C.L. to John Rickman, 30 December 1816]



At PR4231.A43: *Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett: the courtship correspondence*—  
Nuances of love and outrage elongate a shortened life.  
I drift towards one leaning oversize *Wandering of the Soul* [PJ1551.E3];  
Egyptian Papyri transmuted into spells for safe passage in the afterlife.  
'Do not stop to play draughts with the dead lest you be trapped for eternity.'

To the Brothers Grimm [PT921.K56]—

Three women turned into identical flowers in a field.

Only one returned home every night. At dawn she said to her husband:

'If you come this morning and pick me, I shall be set free and stay with  
you forever.'

Imperative chance. He chose correctly.

\*

Dearest one, the riddle of marriage admits no luck.

What it recognises is pure—

it fires the dew from sleeping grasses.

Only know that he will not err (and nor will you) where love  
has paused in an evening's silence to light the unlit road.

## Invocation

*'A little bloodstained clockwork in a puddle of blood.'*

—Peter Redgrove and Penelope Shuttle, *The Hermaphrodite Album*

To be of use, but nothing will decant. Perilous consonant, seized as jewel, betrothed as fire is to the ordinary. A spell; a note. Combatant of will and engraver of sighs. Poultice to the hush, to the whispers of women in corded rooms and to the glows beneath doorways. Purchaser of anointments, slatherer of knives and spoons. Rind of merciless ends and clothier of borrowed aliases. Trenchant penurist, hoarder of silvered lakes. Post chaise bending on the whim of royal deliverance. Coin to whom there is no weight to match the fruit of emptied forest. Animal to cistern, face to coda, god to neither me to neither them, to she. To whom one is infinitely married, and yet cannot be affixed. Enter. All that spills over from my able palm is you.

## June 16, 1956. The Church of St. George the Martyr

It will be fifty years soon.

And yet it seems the preparations have not begun,  
for there are still thoughts of winter  
in the boughs above Queen Square.

A drake flies overhead. I think he is lost.  
His cry is like a man who is to wed.

And what a day it must have been,  
the stones of the old church have not forgotten,  
though the preparations for your wedding  
do not feel as though they have begun.

And yet too late, and so, too late,  
the couple that hurries in through the parish gate  
welcomes the spirits in empty pews that are to be  
their only guests. So, it is the same as it was then.

But it is not the same and yet it is, time will make  
much of this and much of you and yet it cannot be the same.

A man, bustles into the square in a black raincoat  
like someone in a scare, frightens the cashmere  
gentlemen that back away from him  
and his immortal packages. In each arm he carries ten  
or more Styrofoam boxes labelled 'human organ'  
and runs and runs, hoping to arrive before the knowledge  
of their death blackens the skins of his beating carriage.

The preparations have arrived and gone.  
We hustle the dead around and imagine  
somehow that they are alive, that time could still ferry you  
back and transplant you untarnished in this beginning.

The sky is late, later than it was fifty years ago that day  
when you, having married, were carried out hurriedly  
in something pink and knitted with one summer rose,  
that blossomed in your hand in Bloomsbury on Bloomsday.

## Taniwha at Whatipu

*'...I remember the bay that never was  
And stand like stone and cannot turn away.'*  
—James K Baxter, 'The Bay'

Fiesome and button-gunny                      the awed tailors  
chew their needles              to see you borne out, weathering for beauty.

This is hard-earned sibilance.  
The earthly mantle that comes with a hero's death.

The chorus mares its black singing.                      From the shore  
white-hearted celibates                      line up like tall breakers

crown for the pearls you hang in each ear.  
The moon as celebrant divides the remaining hours into loaves,  
makes oaths of stone as women do.

## Dada at the Pompidou

*Wo ist Dada? Ist da, da, da.* In Paris,  
a child's hobbyhorse spins in the air,  
lonely, amateurish,  
extending its ego in autistic egressions.

*Die Ausstellung—*  
*Le moment à venir—*

O Mother of the World,  
you sit cross-legged with your mandolin  
and a brown scarf tied about the chin.

Your noise invites coins;  
the rain flecks oracles  
into daring pronouncements.

At the entrance  
under umbrellas, we listen to your Montenegrin fingers  
bow strings as if you were grating nutmeg,

food of prophets.  
The brasseries are *Vendredi*-ing,  
our *cahiers* sigh at the sight.  
In minutes we are all as black as you.

# SIDDHARTHA BOSE

SIDDHARTHA BOSE is a poet, performer, and academic based in London. He grew up in Bombay and Calcutta, followed by a seven year stay in the USA. He trained as an actor, made short films, and is presently completing his first collection of poetry. His work has appeared in various journals and anthologies including *The Wolf*, *Tears in the Fence*, *Eclectica*, *Alhambra Literary Review*, *Litro*, *City State: The New London Poetry* (Penned in the Margins 2009), and *Voice Recognition: 21 Poets for the 21st Century* (Bloodaxe 2009). He was recently a featured reader for the City of London Festival, the Battle of Ideas Festival, and the London Word Festival. With Stephen Watts, he co-hosts 'Beeswax', a new live poetry venture in East London. He also teaches poetry and Shakespeare, while writing a PhD on the grotesque at Queen Mary College at the University of London.

## SIDDHARTHA BOSE

### Arranged Marriage

Outside—

Sexless infant,  
Hacked violin voice,  
Hands clutching  
Strawberries and Chinese bowl  
Wails for sky to crack—

Bits of cloud fall  
Light as snowflakes, which  
Glow the  
Ash of cries in  
Alley beside  
Steaming railway station  
Where labourers last night,  
With dust brick shovel spade,  
Dug out dreams of  
Married couples, and boiled them on  
Slow waspeaten fires.

Inside—  
Hideous laughter  
From television talk show—  
Thick with sweat.

My fingers bleed with dread,  
Dead with manic mosquitoes  
Chewing bone-marrow of lung,  
Divebombing.

Your hair wet with onions,  
Your chin heavy with  
Smell of burnt garlic—

The words you speak,  
As you conduct concerto in

Cauldron of  
Dead tasteless meat

Stream out your mouth  
Like ants from peeling black  
Hole in wall in  
Shabby stale Goa room  
I'd once slept in,

Dreaming of tea,  
My  
Bones  
Sharp  
As  
Knives.



## Epithalamium

*for Anurag Jain and Hannah Wilson*

I dream them in food—

Sautéed like onions in the scaped  
Rock of east London. Oysters humid, pork chops bled,  
Smell of cheese, dewy, sunburnt.

In this land of cloud, they met with  
Stems of colour in their eyes,  
Shafted in the wood of an ale house.

He drank the ribs of the sea from her  
Eye, she sank in the fog of his cheer,  
Pressed like bookpages, embered.

When they laugh as one, they  
Wheel.

The play of child's face  
Skims on the skin of their joy,  
Lit as the green lizard of a  
Match fired to sky.

What is said is bronzed—  
Eyebrows plucked in iron,  
Statues of words breathborn, stoned in  
Relief.

Memoried in mist, he recalls the  
Strength of a marble palace, etched in the  
Bank of pond, graven in an emperor's wealth.

His head plattered, his heart rubied.

These stories grew in the  
Country that swallows all others, from  
Where he comes, he grows.

She speaks in suncoins, drifts in beauty,  
Like woodsmoke, elmed.

In this opening of marriage door, they slip in  
Eel, majestic. A garden grows in their  
Palms of cup.

They circulate, spreading wonder in  
breath of rain.

May you both dream in forms.  
This world moves too fast. Take your time...

Let the corners of love  
Shade you.

## Lyrics

### I

I dream you with a stranger—

Nails sharp, shrapneled, in the  
Lamplight of a smoked, kleenexed room.

### II

When he takes you  
Forcefully, without shame—

Grasshoppers glaring  
Through your window—

Think my heart a stone,  
Skipping on your desire-pond,

Gardenweeded.

### III

In the end, what remains,  
Maims—

Incense of your eyes,  
Fume of your smile.

## Fragment

The slash of cars  
    On damp streets (outside our window, as we black  
    coffee this mechanical city) now  
Sounds like the ebb and flow  
    Of waves kissing the dirty sands  
    Of a Coromandel beach on that  
Hot humid evening in Madras—

The sea had merged the sky,  
  Blackolived,  
  complete.

From where the three of us sat  
That grayblackness of skysea  
    Together, forever seemed so calm  
    Like the wind through trees  
In a greenfield in  
    slow motion.

But if we haunt  
The immensity of that image from  
All others we had round us—

    Three of us sandsplit,  
    Knees touching jaw,  
        Dark bare feet trundling,  
            Bleached highrise apartments,  
    Dogs and babies yelling,  
        Jewels hanging like convicts from ear  
    Pinched and scratched—

Of all those images that had  
Crept inside of us like smallpox—

Then what do we have?  
Just that oliveblack expanse perhaps,  
Which even as we now think of it,

Blackholes...

## Still Life: Artichoke

Inside an art—

i—choke:

cave of mirrors,

creased petals,

vulva.

# SUDEEP SEN

SUDEEP SEN [www.sudeepsen.net] is widely recognized as a major new generation voice in world literature and one of “the finest younger English-language poets in the international literary scene. A distinct voice: carefully modulated and skilled, well measured and crafted” (*BBC Radio*). He is fascinated not just by language but the possibilities of language” (*Scotland on Sunday*). He studied at the University of Delhi & as an Inlaks Scholar received an MS from Columbia University. His many awards include: Hawthornden Fellowship (UK) and Pushcart Prize nomination (USA). He was writer-in-residence at the Scottish Poetry Library (Edinburgh) and visiting scholar at Harvard University. Sen’s books include: *The Lunar Visitations*, *New York Times*, *Dali’s Twisted Hands*, *Postmarked India: New & Selected Poems* (HarperCollins), *Distracted Geographies*, *Prayer Flag*, *Rain*, *Aria* (A K Ramanujan Translation Award), *Ladakh*, and *Blue Nude: Poems & Translations 1977-2012* (Jorge Zalamea International Poetry Prize). He has also edited several important anthologies, including: *The HarperCollins Book of Modern English Poetry by Indians*, *World Literature Today Modern Indian Writing*, *Poetry Review Portfolio of Indian Poetry*, *The Literary Review Indian Poetry*, *Midnight’s Grandchildren: Post-Independence English Poetry from India*, *Wasafiri New Writing from India*, *South Asia & the Diaspora*, and, *Lines Review Twelve Modern Young Indian Poets*. His poems, translated into 25 languages, have featured in international anthologies by Penguin, HarperCollins, Bloomsbury, Routledge, Norton, Knopf, Everyman, Macmillan, and Granta. His words have appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*, *Newsweek*, *Guardian*, *Observer*, *Independent*, *Telegraph*, *FT*, *London Magazine*, *Literary Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Hindu*, *Outlook*, *India Today*, and broadcast on BBC, CNN IBN, NDTV & AIR. Sen’s recent work appears in *New Writing 15* (Granta), *Language for a New Century* (Norton), *Confronting Love: Poems* (Penguin) & *Neela: An Erotic Play of Verse and Arts* (Collins). He is editorial director of AARK ARTS, and editor of *Atlas* [www.atlasaarkarts.net].

## SUDEEP SEN

### Winter

Couched on crimson cushions,  
pink bleeds gold

and red spills into one's heart.  
Broad leather keeps time,

calibrating different hours  
in different zones

unaware of the grammar  
that makes sense.

Only random woofs and snores  
of two distant dogs

on a very cold night  
clears fog that is unresolved.

New plants wait for new heat —  
to grow, to mature.

An old cane recliner contains  
poetry for peace — woven

text keeping comfort in place.  
But it is the impatience of want

that keeps equations unsolved.  
Heavy, translucent, vaporous,

split red by mother tongues —  
winter's breath is pink.

## Mediterranean

1

A bright red boat  
Yellow capsicums

Blue fishing nets  
Ochre fort walls

2

Sahar's silk blouse  
gold and sheer

Her dark black  
*kohl*-lined lashes

3

A street child's  
brown fists

holding the rainbow  
in his small grasp

4

My lost memory  
white and frozen

now melts colour  
ready to refract



## **Banyan**

*for Jane Draycott*

As winter secrets  
melt

with the purple  
sun,

what is revealed  
is electric —

notes tune  
unknown scales,

syntax alters  
tongues,

terracotta melts  
white,

banyan ribbons  
into armatures

as branch-roots  
twist, meeting

soil in a circle.  
Circuits

glazed  
under cloth

carry  
alphabets

for a calligrapher's  
nib

italicised

in invisible ink,  
letters never  
posted,  
cartographer's  
map, uncharted —  
as phrases fold  
so do veils.

## Stills from Sanskriti: Triptych

*(three haiku)*

### STAR GLASS

tiny-star-flecked grass —  
scattered mirrors cut-pasted  
to reflect the sky —

### LEAF ON WATER

slate-edged lotus pond —  
mosaic-leaves fanning water  
blooms, refract white light —

### ARCH

red sandstone arches —  
gateway to beyond, through which  
everything passes —



strange love, this is —

*a saving: what medics and nurses do.*

i live buddha-like, unblinking, a painted vacant smile —  
one that stores pain and painlessness —  
someone else's nirvana thrust upon me.

*some things* I once believed in

*are beyond my choosing* —

choosing is a choice unavailable to me.

## Chinese Calligraphy

*for Wang Anyi, Zhao Libong, Peihua & Su De*

Wolf and sheep hair  
gather arcs, jet-black ink

in looped characters —  
ideograms containing

a lifetime of words,  
wisdom, and history.

Elegant brush-tips,  
sharpened to a point

by water's healing touch,  
sable-hair stroked

to an elliptical gathering  
of fine-graded hair

end in a finite point,  
a pliable nib

controlling serif-strokes  
depending upon

our hand's subtle  
human-weight.

Some brushes  
have carved heads

containing the sound  
of pigeons —

ancient postmen,  
now a cosmetic

gaggle of bird-talk.

Yet others,  
mere bamboo-stalks  
sharpened, carved,  
bearing the name  
of a poet,  
or a phrase  
from a poem,  
or the place  
where it was made.  
Characters'  
incipient moon-birth,  
their lunar image  
a slow-transforming  
complex matrix,  
a grid of lines  
and strokes —  
cursive, traditional,  
clerical, modern.  
Ink's history  
from chalk and water  
to ready-made  
solution  
does not always rely  
on the round  
and oval stones —  
mixing plates —  
where

circles and crescents  
collide,

dots, streaks  
and lines meet,

appearing and  
disappearing

depending on the ink's  
fluid strength.

Root of a tree  
hold brushes at rest,

and part of the  
trunk, now carved,

flattens hand-made  
cream-yellow felt

and white rice-paper  
into translucent tablets,

perfect empty sheets —  
*tabula rasa.*

The slow glide of  
a wet brush,

delicately swathed  
in deep-black ink,

our fingers  
calibrating

the characters'  
gentle touch



tell a story  
that is both  
  
apparent and hidden  
to an everyday eye.  
  
Music of its sweep,  
length, breadth —  
  
the broadening  
and narrowing  
  
of brush-strokes  
are human emotions —  
  
mood-swings  
that make up  
  
the story as a whole.  
Lyrics, latent,  
  
embedded beautifully —  
describe a score,  
  
understated,  
yet bold  
  
in its intention.  
Brush-tips sing  
  
as moisture  
evaporates.  
  
Then they are washed  
clean, wrapped  
  
in knitted bamboo-mats,  
hung out to dry  
  
for the next inspiration

to catch flight.  
Black chalk and water  
rubbed on stone  
will now have to wait,  
until the next  
peony blossoms bloom.  
The final touch —  
an artist's signature,  
an autograph,  
a stamp  
carved on stone —  
pressed on oily-ink,  
blood-red —  
incarnadine —  
leaving secret clues  
in the corner  
of a page,  
a story that'll unravel  
and sing, next spring.

*Shanghai 2011*

# SUMANA ROY

SUMANA ROY's first novel, *Love in the Chicken's Neck*, in an early draft, was long listed for the Man Asian Literary Prize 2008. Her short fiction and essays have been published in anthologies and magazines such as: *21 Under 40* (Zubaan), *The New Anthem* (Tranquebar), *The Popcorn Essayists* (Westland), *Caravan*, *Open Magazine*, *Biblio*, *Himal Southasian*, *The Hindu*, *Tehelka*, and *Hindustan Times*. Her poetry has appeared in *Guernica*, *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*, *Biblio*, *Asia Writes*, *Ultraviolet*, *Himal Southasian*, *Muse India*, and *Pratilipi*.

## SUMANA ROY

### Marriage: Mirrors

*There is a white hole in the wall,  
a mirror. It is a trap.  
I know I am going  
to let myself be caught in it.*  
— JEAN PAUL SARTRE, *Nausea*

There is a white hole in the wall,  
a marriage. It is a trap.  
I am silly. I still look for height  
in photos, for spines  
in reflections, for valleys  
in your bathroom mirrors.

There is a white hole in the wall,  
a map. It is a trap.  
The divorce was a steak.  
It came well done.  
We broke mirrors like bread,  
paid in small change for *space*.

There is a white hole in the wall,  
a magnet. It is the sun.  
What charred attraction.  
We broke locks.  
We changed passwords.  
Part-time sage, illegal tenant.

There is a white hole in the wall,  
it is meat. It is a lie.  
Chewy without sauce.  
Barbed wire between teeth.  
Bones on china.  
Mirror is butcher's spit.

## Sadness

Sadness is a white crane on a white cow.  
Only one can bear the weight of another.

Sadness is white sand on a river bank.  
It is white even when wet.

Sadness is white hibiscus resting on a fence.  
It has a white bud and a white corpse.

Sadness is a snow-covered tree, eyelashes of white.  
Its branches droop with its own weight.

Sadness is a wild elephant's tusk, a deposition of years.  
It has beauty and grace only from a distance.

Sadness is the sclera, the screen from which hurt drips.  
It washes itself, tinges red and becomes white again.

Sadness is a museum, pictures on white walls.  
You leave it but it never leaves you.

## Lunch

Lunch is a walking stick  
that carries the broad-leaved day.  
It is superstition.  
“It’s one already!”  
Her voice’s an empty ceremony.

Lunch is school uniform  
that has lost its spiny starch.  
Every stanza’s a dull refrain.  
“It’s getting cold!”  
Her voice has grown a stubble.

Lunch is a salt painting  
that has become a fresco.  
It’s a duet about a lantern.  
“It’s too bland!”  
Her voice is a winter window.

Lunch is a firewood breath  
that they take twice.  
It’s a geography of waste.  
“It’s sour-sweet!”  
Her voice’s dew on stone.

## **It is Possible**

It is possible  
that looking for depth  
I choose to drown  
in laughter

It is possible  
that looking for height  
I choose to climb  
a chimney

It is possible  
that looking for breadth  
I choose to walk  
along ant-trails

Is it possible  
that looking for love  
I choose to forget  
your cupboard?

# SUMMI KAIPA

SUMMI KAIPA received her MFA in Poetry from the Iowa Writers' Workshop. She has authored three chapbooks: *The Epics* (Leroy Press), *I Beg You Be Still* (Belladonna), and *The Language Parable* (Corollary Press). Kaipa was the recipient of the Holmes Award from *Fourteen Hills Review* and the Potrero Nuevo Fund Prize in 2002 for her first play. *Interlope*, a magazine devoted to innovative writing by Asian Americans, was founded and edited by Kaipa from 1998 to 2003. She is a co-editor of *Indivisible*, the first anthology of South Asian American poetry (University of Arkansas Press, 2010), and is also working on her first full-length collection of poems. She lives in Berkeley, California.



## SUMMI KAIPA

### Reality Bites

the slip underneath my dress her valedictory address is showing the future for the overeducated english major is living in a flop house buying chips and beer on your father's gas card until he cuts you off folding perfect t-shirts in a go-nowhere retail job documenting the apathy and fear of your friends as they roll in and out of bed with a long list of anonymous lovers terrified they might die of aids i was going to class forgetting class watching my roommate a korean baptist who covered a hole in the wall next to her bed with a poster of jesus fall messily in love the fiddlestick of hedonism unfurled for the both of us i reeked of clove cigarettes of the transient thrill of breaking up with your first love before he beats you to it everything was excess rip it out damn it get rid of it damn it courtney love ditched her dress stripped to the underslip so the boys fueled by cisco and testosterone launched the furniture out of the seventh floor window we were one part teen spirit one part american spirits in my pocket everyone was smoking themselves silly i was getting hard i was getting soft my mouth burned like a stranger to my mother's food i grew a sailor's tongue salty and swollen a thriving and invasive new colony of individualism and irony while the language of childhood atrophied the untranslatable bits faded into a was-i-ever-there home movie could i explain this newly discovered tragi-romance walt whitman singing heartily of himself henry rollins lunging and thrusting into his robust quads body surfing the mosh pit trusting the hands that buoy you until you fall nikki giovanni talking black arts black revolution litwack quoting public enemy don't don't don't believe the hype clutching foucault to my chest deconstructing everything to smithereens the naked man in a loin cloth imagined feathers in his hair like a statue of quetzalcoatl if you look closely you'll see everything in my bloodshot eyes

## Qurbani

“Hi, Lollipop!” catcalls the horny matron. As Firoz Khan turns around to look at her, we witness his winsome profile. He’s a cross between the bumbling Mr. Bean and the unswervingly suave Pierce Brosnan. His Solid Gold girlfriend sports shimmery floor length dresses and sings lounge songs with backup girls like Abba in space-age silver go-go boots. I wished I was Zeenat Aman, the Indian Bo Derek “10,” and dreamed of her white feather boas to wrap around my shoulders while I mimicked her shaking hips. The dulcet voices of my family sadly skipped past me like a tooth fairy forgetting a kid on her rounds. A motorcycle helmet in hand, Firoz Khan embodies cool and watches on. They are in love, or they are in love without kisses, which led most of us down a path of wonder and confusion. Were passionate “French” ones, ever swapped by Indians? Or did they just dance and sing and fight, in jeans that were too snug or a sweater a decade too ripe? But the curve of Zeenat’s belly is precise, and her red sequined number all fever. Large circles of fabric missing where the hips of her dress should be. A hundred times, I pressed rewind, a carrot as my microphone, belting off-key “Aap Jaisa Koi . . . “ with the disco sound of falling stars nevertheless egging me on. “Arre, Zeenat!” My father winked at the uncles, and Firoz, listening, drunk on a cocktail of lust, knows he’s a lucky man.

## Bobby

You're always smiling like a ventriloquist's dummy. Underneath the silly impulse of love-at-first sight, I know the rubble has begun to fall. The glass curtain of your world is not illusory. You just can't see it through a cloud of love. Let me tell you, then, what I know. My father is a bumbling recent immigrant, who could never compete—the jewelry drips from your chin like an old man's jowls—but he is still my father. Before you, I loved a cab driver's son. My home in a motel along Highway 99 coursing through strip malls, farms, and desert. "We're all the same," you'll say. You'll say it for awhile until the naiveté rubs thin. The loss of your mother's hand on your cheek and your father's fail-safe business is enough to break you. You will see, then, that we don't dance alone. And I'm only a public school girl.

## Mera Naam Joker

It was that opening scene. You are the center of the circus, the sublime moving force of this farce with baggy pants, suspenders and comically large shoes. The clown face which so purposefully betrays suffering that it epitomizes it. It was that opening scene. The characters of your past blot dew from their eyes as they turn the corners of their mouth upward to meet yours. You are lying on an operation table. Even as a child, I knew the scene was staged to tap the essence of dark humor. Another clown performs surgery to remove your heart. "I no longer need it," you say, flippantly. You say it because you don't mean it. Because you have chosen solitude. Or, as you scan the audience's attentive eyes, hoping for comedy, because it has chosen you. The red glass heart, as big as a candy box, belongs to no one. It's free for all. It's the most difficult thing you have ever encountered. You toss it carelessly into the air. I watch my father watch the scene, gazing at the television with a sadness I have rarely seen. As the heart shatters to shards, I exit the room.

## Hare Rama Hare Krishna

After Jassbir, almost blind, loses her glasses, it's all downhill. Daddy's flirtations unzip the family unit. In a swift and untenable fork in the story, Mom and Prashant are gone. Dead? Something like that. Back then, the distance between continents like the suspension of disbelief in this story was insurmountable. The bold girl flips her hurt into a Kerouac karmic love and trades coke bottle glasses for glamorously large pink frames. I ditched mine, too, and got hip after slipping on the word "rhetoric" and losing the 8<sup>th</sup> grade spelling bee. A beaten up copy of *The Dharma Bums*, the one she later borrowed from me, on her bedside table next to the painkillers and poppers. "What does the world care about us?" she sings, as she puffs at a pipe and raises her arm to the sky. When I first lost my religion, I sullenly dreamt of the rooftop parties on Rose Street and wondered, punch-drunk, if The Beats might help me find it. Flubbing chemistry and fingering poetry like a new charm, I hummed "Dum Maro Dum," with the image of Zeenat's backside like an hourglass ticking at the hip. Descent into hell, we're supposed to believe, is made easier by her corrupted Canadian background. Only the West can beget such exquisite womanly decadence, and I am filled with admiration and autobiography.

# TABISH KHAIR

TABISH KHAIR was born and educated mostly in Gaya, India. He is the author of five collection of poetry: *My World*, *A Reporter's Diary*, *The Book of Heroes* (all Rupa), *Where Parallel Lines Meet* (Penguin India), and *Man of Glass* (HarperCollins India); three novels: *An Angel in Pyjamas* (HarperCollins India), *The Bus Stopped* (Picador), and *Filming: A Love Story* (Picador); and number of academic studies: *Babu Fictions: Alienation in Contemporary Indian English Novels* (OUP); *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Companion* (Permanent Black); and *Other Routes: 1500 Years of African and Asian Travel Writing* (co-editor / Signal Books & Indiana University Press). He has won the All India Poetry Prize and other awards; and his poems have appeared in many anthologies, including *Midnight's Grandchildren: Post Independence Poetry from India* ed. Sudeep Sen (Struga Poetry Evenings, Macedonia), and *Twelve Modern Young Indian Poets* ed. Sudeep Sen (Lines Review, Edinburgh). Tabish Khair currently teaches in the Department of English at Aarhus University in Denmark. [[www.tabishkhair.co.uk](http://www.tabishkhair.co.uk)]

## TABISH KHAIR

### Who in a Million Diamonds Sums Us up?

(A Prologue by Fru Andersen<sup>1</sup>)

*The man who has had the time to think enough  
The central man, the human globe, responsive  
As a mirror with a voice, the man of glass,  
Who in a million diamonds sums us up.*  
— Wallace Stevens, ‘Asides on the Oboe’

1.

The view from the bank is mostly bleak,  
Though sometimes a barge passes by, lighted and loud.

With gin for warmth I have stood here washing  
Those clothes I hoped he would get to wear.

Once when he returned with his face slapped,  
I took him out of school.  
Not you, I told the teacher, not you,  
Life has blows enough in its bloody bag for him.

He was an outsider like you, and as ugly, black man.  
Like you, he came from nowhere. Like you, he would sing.

He would do more: he would dance, float on a cloud,  
With those long limbs of his, his heavy sunken face.

2.

Is he coming now, is he coming again, in his moment of glory?  
What music is this that floats like milk on water?

I remember the first time he sailed by, in rich garments;  
Like the clothes I had washed were the clothes he wore.

I stood here, just here, with gin for company,

---

<sup>1</sup> H. C. Andersen’s strong-willed mother, whose last years were spent as an alcoholic (and washer-woman).

And watched the music drift by on that lighted barge.

I believe he raised his hands in a surreptitious moment;  
I know he called to me in the darkness of his art.

But the barge was too far away, the music too loud;  
I stood silent like you, stranger, dark writer,  
And watched him toasted on the barge of dreams.

He knew I never held it against him, the distance between us.  
I had heard him croak; I had watched him stumble.  
What did they know, those toasting him, how far away he was?

3.

At a certain time of the year, when the season grows cold,  
Hands roughened by washing, mind deadened with drink,  
I come and stand here to watch him pass in his glory.

Year after year, centuries maybe. Who knows?  
Mostly I stand lonely, as on that day; sometimes I wave.

And sometimes I find a shadow by my side; today it is you.  
Someone who watches him from a distance, silently like me.

I know the shadow every time, though it is always different.  
Distance knits those shadows to him, and to me.

Silence too, for you are those who hear him in the silence;  
He lives in you who do not toast him on the lighted barge.

4.

In some I see his stumble, in some I hear his croaking;  
My steadfast tin soldier, my ugly duckling.

5.

Child, lover, friend, stranger  
Are names for presence and absence,  
Are terms to measure distance.

They speak of love, or fame, or success,



But what do they know who sail on lighted barges?

Do they know how long it takes  
For the chilled body to get used  
To another's warmth and shape?

Three months or two years, I would say.

In any case you ease the body along  
On soft crutches to begin with, until  
You learn to walk again,

Pour coffee instead of tea,  
Talk just a bit differently,  
Slant opinions unconsciously

To fit a different shoulder  
Into your (regrown) arms,  
Consider perfectly normal  
A new curvature of spine,

To stop yourself just in time  
From leaning on ghost limbs.

It does not take long to anticipate a fall.

What do they know who sail on lighted barges?

6.  
To arrive anywhere you have to come from afar,  
As he did, as shadows like you do, you ugly black man.

In his fairy tales, they find peace,  
But I see you lay mines between his lines.

I see you step on mines he laid between his lines.  
You know where they are, the distance has taught you.

Each explosion shatters his mirror of himself  
And multiplies it into a million diamonds.

It returns him to himself, the glass man,  
The man with no reference and all.

You watch him from the bank where the view is bleak.  
He listens for your explosions and not their lighted words.

Go ahead, writer from nowhere, silent shadow:  
Blast my immortal son to bits.

## **The Soldier Home from Iraq**

*(The Tinder Box)*

What could I do being what I was:  
Saviour of old women, their killer too.  
On my chest there sat a big dog;  
Trained to get answers, move it, jump jump jump,  
I picked up my M16A2 and shot her.  
There she lay. There they lay.

Back home I was rich like anyone else,  
Princesses clutched my dog hairs  
In fantasy, in ecstasy.  
Later we slept.

I had my will  
Until

The shades of a prison-house closed upon me  
And I remembered I had forgotten  
Something.  
It eludes me still.  
Was it a candle, a wick, a tinderbox?  
Something to do with light surely.  
Something that would have set me free.

## **War Reporter**

*(Elder-Tree Mother)*

Everything he looks at turns story:  
He makes a tale of all he touches.

Embedded with the boys, he slowly pours  
Stories out of regimental teapots.

But will he tell of the girl who worried  
About the next knock on the door?

Will he tell of the boy who lay  
Drenched in a dry dry land?

Will he tell of children who fly  
Always always through the sky?

Will he tell why their parents roam  
Slowly slowly towards your home?

## **Mechanical**

*(The Nightingale)*

It does not sound like glass bells.

It sounds like guns.

What art has gone into the manufacture

Of this mighty machine!

If it had feathers, it would also fly.

If it had a tongue, it could also tell.

But it sings the same song over and over again:

Won't we ever get tired of listening to it?

## **Couplets in Ice**

*(The Snow Queen)*

1.

The walls of your palace are made of snow.  
The game of reason is cold and slow.

2.

You cannot tell your love apart:  
The Queen of Ice sits in your heart.

3.

How well we understand in tongues unknown  
The word that in English is pronounced 'alone.'

4.

Always the crow knows where your love went,  
Though he speaks harshly and with an accent.

5.

How soon it happened: just a while ago  
You held my hands and walked in sand or snow.

6.

The last story cannot be told:  
Its words were patented and sold.

## Refugee

*(The Princess on the Pea)*

Who can tell her identity?  
The gold, the silk mattress, such stuff  
Are noble and yet not enough:  
Where is the blasted pea?

*Note: Except for the first poem, all the others are based on stories by H. C. Andersen.  
The titles of the stories in italics are given in parenthesis.*

# TENZIN DICKYI

TENZIN DICKYI was born in Manali, India and raised in a Tibetan boarding school and Tibetan settlement in Himachal Pradesh. When she was in high school, her family immigrated to the United States. She studied English and American Literature at Harvard University. After college, she worked for a few years in New York as Special Assistant to the Representative of His Holiness the Dalai Lama to the Americas at the Office of Tibet. Tenzin Dickyi, an MFA candidate at New York's Columbia University, is a editor of the *Tibetan Political Review* and Columbia University's *Apogee Journal*.



## TENZIN DICKYI

### Everything is Relative

In the first year her cheeks are too vivid.  
But she denies her absence.  
She learns the sound for water — Pani,  
swirls in her mouth words unfamiliar.  
She eats rice twice a day with her fingers;  
this diminishes its festivity.  
A small boy tells her the Himalayas are rising.  
The walk back will take longer, she thinks.  
She begins to cook with unfamiliar spices —  
cloves & coriander, fennel & mustard seed,  
reluctantly acknowledges her expertise.  
She grows to interpret different touches,  
to name separate Gods.  
In the final year she accepts  
the possibility of betrayal.

## The Chorten

The *chorten* squats  
in the mystery of  
the incoming circle.

At five o'clock when  
the pigeons flock, the  
*korā* swells supremely.

A confusion of  
men and women  
asking only this:

What shall we do  
with a love of  
diminishing returns?

## The Trunk

the trunk eschews  
modesty its lids  
are flipped  
like a pair of steel  
lips clamped open  
indelicate display  
two sets of flannel pajamas  
reign over debris  
a handheld Mauser  
pistol forty-seven years  
old a streetlight orange  
torch with failed batteries  
packets of gum  
the trunk makes decisions  
weighs just as much  
empty when rain drops  
on the slate roof  
insinuates itself  
within the trunk lets it  
sticker letters decorate  
the sides and drawings  
cruel in their two  
dimensionality of  
naked women in colorful  
silk scarves the trunk  
waits for restitution

## Yuthok Lane

This is how it will be:  
we will take a walk on concrete, not blue tiles,  
and you will pretend to be disappointed.  
This will have the quality of a ritual.  
In the morning, the sun will fall from the sky;  
we will protect ourselves against its fire.  
It is not so unbearable, but we have learnt  
to be wary of arrivals from the east.  
We are unbeautiful here;  
our stay in the plains has rendered us so.  
But whispers now carry endearments,  
and we will not have it any other way.  
Outside the chapel, we will collect ourselves,  
then enter the bowels of this benign shell.  
Nothing in here threatens us.  
We will pull out our offerings, crisp and new.  
This time they will go where they are intended.  
The pilgrims are less urgent now. And slowly  
the shadow of the deity gains its substance.

# TENZIN TSUNDUE

TENZIN TSUNDUE was born to a Tibetan refugee family who laboured on India's border roads around Manali, North India, during the chaotic era of Tibetan refugee resettlement in the early seventies. He is a writer, poet, essayist, and activist who graduated from Madras, South India. His writings have appeared in *International PEN*, *The Indian PEN*, *The Indian Literary Panorama*, *The Little Magazine*, *Outlook*, *The Times of India*, *The Indian Express*, *Hindustan Times*, *Better Photography*, *The Economic Times*, *Tebelka*, *Mid-Day*, *Tibetan Review*, *Freedom First* and *Gandhi Marg*. His two books of poetry are *Crossing the Border* and *Kora*. He won the 2001 *Outlook*-Picador Award for Non-Fiction. Currently, he is completing his third book of poetry, and on a compilation of essays on the Tibetan freedom movement. Tsundue joined Friends of Tibet (India) in 1999, and since then he has been working with the organisation as its General Secretary. He lives in Dharamsala in India, where Dalai Lama's government is based in exile.

## TENZIN TSUNDUE

### I am a Terrorist

I am a terrorist.  
I like to kill.

I have horns,  
two fangs  
and a dragonfly tail.

Chased away from my home,  
hiding from fear,  
saving my life,  
doors slammed on my face,

justice constantly denied,  
patience is tested  
on television, battered  
in front of the silent majority  
pushed against the wall,  
from that dead end  
I have returned.

I am the humiliation  
you gulped down  
with flattened nose.

I am the shame  
you buried in darkness.

I am a terrorist  
shoot me down.

Cowardice and fear  
I left behind  
in the valley  
among the meowly cats  
and lapping dogs.

I am single,  
I have nothing —  
to lose.

I am a bullet  
I do not think

from the tin shell  
I leap for that thrilling  
2 - second life  
and die with the dead.

I am the life  
you left behind.

## When it Rains in Dharamsala

When it rains in Dharamsala  
raindrops wear boxing gloves,  
thousands of them  
come crashing down  
and beat my room.  
Under its tin roof  
my room cries from inside  
and wets my bed, my papers.

Sometimes the clever rain comes  
from behind my room,  
the treacherous walls lift  
their heels and allow  
a small flood into my room.

I sit on my island-nation bed  
and watch my country in flood,  
notes on freedom,  
memoirs of my prison days,  
letters from college friends,  
crumbs of bread  
and Maggi noodles  
rise sprightly to the surface  
like a sudden recovery  
of a forgotten memory.

Three months of torture,  
monsoon in the needle-leaved pines  
Himalaya rinsed clean  
glistens in the evening sun.

Until the rain calms down  
and stops beating my room  
I need to console my tin roof  
who has been on duty  
from the British Raj.  
This room has sheltered



many homeless people.

Now captured by mongooses  
and mice, lizards and spiders,  
and partly rented by me.  
A rented room for home  
is a humbling existence.

My Kashmiri landlady  
at eighty cannot return home.  
We often compete for beauty  
Kashmir or Tibet.

Every evening  
I return to my rented room.  
But I am not going to die this way.  
There has got to be  
some way out of here.  
I cannot cry like my room  
I have cried enough  
in prisons and  
in small moments of despair.

There has got to be  
some way out of here.  
I cannot cry,  
my room is wet enough.

## **Somewhere I lost my Losar\***

Somewhere along the path, I  
lost it, don't know where or when.

It wasn't a one-fine-day incident.  
As I grew up it just got left behind,  
very slowly, and I didn't go back for it.  
It was there when as a kid I used to wait  
for the annual momo dinner,  
when we lined up for gifts that came  
wrapped in newspapers in our  
refugee school, it was there when  
we all gained a year together, before  
birthdays were cakes and candles.

Somewhere along the path, I  
lost it, don't know where or when.

When new clothes started to feel  
stiff and firecrackers frightening, when  
our jailed heroes ate in pig sties there,  
or were dead, heads smashed  
against the wall as we danced  
to Bollywood numbers here,  
when the boarding school and uniforms  
took care of our daily needs, when  
family meant just good friends,  
sometime when Losar started to mean  
a new year, few sacred routines,  
somehow, I lost my Losar.

Somewhere along the path, I  
lost it, don't know where or when.

Colleged in seaside city, when it was  
still Bombay, sister's family on pilgrimage,  
uncle in Varanasi, mother grazing cows  
in South India, still need to report  
to Dharamsala police, couldn't get train tickets,

too risky to try waiting list, and it's  
three days, including return journey  
it's one week. Even if I go,  
other siblings may not find the time. Adjusting  
timings, it's been 20 years without a Losar.

Somewhere along the path, I  
lost it, don't know where or when.

Losar is when we the juveniles and bastards  
call home, across the Himalayas and cry  
into the wire. Losar is some plastic flowers  
and a momo party. And then in 2008  
when our people rode horses, shouting 'Freedom'  
against rattling machine guns, when they  
died like flies in the Olympics' spectacle,  
we shaved our heads bald and threatened  
to die by fasting, but failed.  
I couldn't die.

Somewhere along the path, I  
lost it, don't know where or when.  
Somewhere, I lost my Losar.

*[\*Losar is the Tibetan New Year festival which falls  
in the month of February or March of the Christian calendar.]*

# VIJAY SESHADRI

VIJAY SESHADRI was born in Bangalore, India in 1954, but moved to the USA at age five. He grew up in Columbus, Ohio. His work has appeared in *Threepenny Review*, *The New Yorker*, *Shenandoah*, *Antaeus*, *AGNI*, *The Paris Review* (which awarded him the 1995 Bernard F Connors Long Poem Prize for 'Lifeline'), and *The American Scholar*. His work has also appeared in the anthology, *Under 35: The New Generation of American Poets*, ed. Nicholas Christopher (Anchor Books). His three collections of poetry are *Wild Kingdom*, *The Long Meadow*, and *The Disappearances*. He teaches poetry and is the director of the graduate non-fiction writing programme at Sarah Lawrence College, and lives in Brooklyn, New York.

## **VIJAY SESHADRI**

### **Memoir**

Orwell says somewhere that no one ever writes the real story of their life.  
The real story of a life is the story of its humiliations.  
If I wrote that story now—  
radioactive to the end of time—  
people, I swear, your eyes would fall out, you couldn't peel  
the gloves fast enough  
from your hands scorched by the firestorms of that shame.  
Your poor hands. Your poor eyes  
to see me weeping in my room  
or boring the tall blonde to death.  
Once I accused the innocent.  
Once I bowed and prayed to the guilty.  
I still wince at what I once said to the devastated widow.  
And one October afternoon, under a locust tree  
whose blackened pods were falling and making  
illuminating patterns on the pathway,  
I was seized by joy,  
and someone saw me there,  
and that was the worst of all,  
lacerating and unforgettable.

## Guide for the Perplexed

The bedroom slippers' silk linings.

The dressing gown of brocade, stitched with the zodiac.

The pajamas underneath also made out of silk,  
for which how many individuals of the species *B. mori*,  
having munched the succulent, pale-green mulberry leaves  
and insinuated a sack wherein to magnify themselves,  
were steamed to death from the inside out?

The delicate fibres are intact.

He feels their ripeness on his skin.

He listens deeply into the night, which listens back.

The birch log pops in the fireplace.

The fetishes brood on the mantelpiece.

The ice melts in the gin.

And yellower and deeper than dandelion yellow,  
yellower and stronger than Moroccan yellow,  
the color, almost, of a yellow marigold, is  
the yellow silk kimono she wears to greet the floating world.

Moths on the wing clutter the starlight.

Ghosts of dead moths are on the windowpane and  
knee deep in the ballroom,  
in social clubs and places of worship.

They are proof, if anyone still needs proof, that  
awesome are the powers of humankind,  
who have taken this selfsame moth  
and endowed it with a gene from the jellyfish  
so as to produce fluorescent silk!

And all in the interests of beauty!

(I shall spare you, by the way,  
my exhaustive researches into the history  
of the Silk Road.)

## Family Happiness

On our first date, I told my wife  
I was a lesbian trapped in the body of a man.  
Everybody says that now, of course,  
on TV and radio, alternative media outlets,  
tattoos and bumper stickers, but this was long ago, when  
none but the brave (who deserve the fair)  
would come up with something like that.  
She smiled the pleased and goofy smile that flowers in her big eyes,  
and I thought I had her.  
Looking back now, though,  
I can see her appraisal of me rounding to completeness.  
I can hear her cognition firing.  
She knew it. She knew even then  
the truth it has cost me the aeons to acquire,  
climbing and climbing the broken stairs:  
I'm a man trapped in the body of a man.  
I clutch the smooth walls and see through his eyes  
the oil fires and containment units,  
the huge clawed gantries strung out on the twilit polar horizon.  
Through his alloyed ears, I hear  
the objects of his scorn, his compassion, his hatred, his love  
crying out and crying out.  
Half my arms are his arms.  
Half my face is welded to his face.  
The other half mouths his clumsy ironies.  
“Life is war,” he says.  
“Tragic,” he says. “Tragic.”  
The simulacra are marching everywhere,  
and deep in the caves the chimeras are breathing.

## Elegy

I've been asked to instruct you about the town you've gone to,  
where I've never been.

The cathedral is worth looking at,  
but the streets are narrow, uneven, and a little grim.

The river is sluggish in the summer and muddy in the spring.

The cottage industries are obsolete.

The population numbers one.

The population numbers one fugitive

who slips into the shadows and haunts the belfries.

His half-eaten meals are cold on the empty café tables.

His page of unsolved equations is blowing down the cobblestones.

His death was so unjust that he can't forgive himself.

He waits for his life to catch up to him.

He is you and you and you.

You will look to him for your expiation,

face him in the revolving door, sit with him in the plaza

and soothe his fears and sympathize with his story

and accustom him to the overwhelming sun

until his death becomes your death.

You will restore his confiscated minutes to him one by one.



## Thought Problem

How strange would it be if you met yourself on the street?  
How strange if you liked yourself,  
took yourself in your arms, married your own self,  
propagated by techniques known only to you,  
and then populated the world? Replicas of you are everywhere.  
Some are Arabs. Some are Jews. Some live in yurts. It is  
an abomination, but better that your  
sweet and scrupulously neat self  
emerges at many points on the earth to watch the horned moon rise  
than all those dolts out there,  
turning into pillars of salt wherever we look.  
If we have to have people, let them be you,  
spritzing your geraniums, driving yourself to the haberdashery,  
killing your supper with a blowgun.  
Yes, only in the forest do you feel at peace,  
up in the branches and down in the terrific gorges,  
but you've seen through everything else.  
You've fled in terror across the frozen lake,  
you've found yourself in the sand, the palace,  
the prison, the dockside stews;  
and long ago, on this same planet, you came home  
to an empty house, poured a Scotch-and-soda,  
and sat in a recliner in the unlit rumpus room,  
puzzled at what became of you.

# VIKRAM SETH

VIKRAM SETH was born in Kolkata in 1952. He studied and lived for several years each in India, England, USA, and China. Winner of innumerable national and international awards, his genre-spanning works include — [travelogue] *From Heaven Lake*, [novel-in-verse] *The Golden Gate*, [poetry] *Mappings*, *The Humble Administrator's Garden*, *All You Who Sleep Tonight*, *The Poems: 1981-1994*, *The Rivered Earth*, [children's verse] *Beastly Tales*, [poetry translation] *Three Chinese Poets*, [prose novels] *A Suitable Boy*, and *An Equal Music*, [libretto] *Arion and the Dolphin*, and [non-fiction/memoir] *Two Lives*. His work has been translated into many international languages and anthologised widely. Seth lives in New Delhi and London.

## **VIKRAM SETH**

### **Sampati**

'Why  
do  
you  
cry?'  
'I flew  
too  
high.  
Un-  
done,  
all  
see  
me  
fall.'

## The Fever Bird

The fever bird sang out last night.  
I could not sleep, try as I might.

My brain was split, my spirit raw.  
I looked into the garden, saw

The shadow of the amaltas  
Shake slightly on the moonlit grass.

Unseen, the bird cried out its grief,  
Its lunacy, without relief:

Three notes repeated closer, higher,  
Soaring, then sinking down like fire

Only to breathe the night and soar,  
As crazed, as desperate, as before.

I shivered in the midnight heat  
And smelt the sweat that soaked my sheet.

And now tonight I hear again  
The call that skewers through my brain,

The call, the brain-sick triple note —  
A bone of pain stuck in its throat.

I am so tired I could weep.  
Mad bird, for God's sake let me sleep.

Why do you cry like one possessed?  
When will you rest? When will you rest?

Why wait each night till all but I  
Lie sleeping in the house, then cry?

Why do you scream into my ear  
What no one else but I can hear?

## For Philippe Honoré

Perhaps this could have stayed unstated.  
Had our words turned to other things  
In the grey park, the rain abated,  
Life would have quickened other strings.  
I list your gifts in this creation:  
Pen, paper, ink and inspiration,  
Peace to the heart with touch or word,  
Ease to the soul with note and chord.

How did that walk, those winter hours,  
Occasion this? No lightning came;  
Nor did I sense, when touched by flame,  
Our story lit with borrowed powers —  
Rather, by what our spirits burned,  
Embered in words, to us returned.

## Giles Gordon

Gone though you have, I heard your voice today.  
I tried to make out what the words might mean,  
Like something seen half-clearly on a screen:  
Each savoured reference, each laughing bark,  
Sage comment, bad pun, indiscreet remark.

Gone since you have, grief too in time will go,  
Or share space with old joy; it must be so.  
Rest then in peace, but spare us some elation.  
Death cannot put down every conversation.  
Over and out, as you once used to say?  
Not on your life. You're on this line to stay.

## Dubious

Some men like Jack  
and some like Jill;  
I'm glad I like  
them both; but still

I wonder if  
this freewheeling  
really is an  
enlightened thing —

or is its greater  
scope a sign  
of deviance from  
some party line?

In the strict ranks  
of Gay and Straight  
what is my status?  
Stray? or Great?

## Distressful Homonyms

Since for me now you have no warmth to spare  
I sense I must adopt a sane and spare

Philosophy to ease a restless state  
Fuelled by this uncaring. It will state

A very meagre truth: love like the rest  
Of our emotions, sometimes needs a rest.

Happiness, too, no doubt; and so, why even  
Hope that 'the course of true love' could run even?



## Unclaimed

To make love with a stranger is the best.  
There is no riddle and there is no test. —

To lie and love, not aching to make sense  
Of this night in the mesh of reference.

To touch, unclaimed by fear of imminent day,  
And understand, as only strangers may.

To feel the beat of foreign heart to heart  
Preferring neither to prolong nor part.

To rest within the unknown arms and know  
That this is all there is; that this is so.