

Funeral Verses

Corpse adrift, body all ablaze
that day we rescued Ma from the river
of fire, Sister, do you remember
the questions in our neighbor's eyes?

The experts marched in, snouts outstretched
hairs bristling on the back of their necks
the headman said: "Listen, here's the verdict—
they don't have any right to cremate"

We ran away from the village that night
Ma's body on our shoulders, moon shining above
pestilent swamps along the way
salt and lime pits along the way

Your breasts desiccated, my fingers
corroded from the caustic lime
nothing to eat, no way to bathe
our task overwhelmed us

We reached a realm with dead trees everywhere
dead animals' skins dangling from the branches
when we came to the riverbank at the end
of the earth we put Ma's skeleton down

Sister, I swear, we won't burn these bones
though it's not our custom we'll hide them
in the hollow of a tree. Won't those who
follow us know how to honor them?

Our bodies have grown moldy, we have
no eyes now, only sockets smarting with tears
I've forgotten whether I was ever a man
you don't remember your last show of blood

The light in the east is skull-white
behind it is dark as coming night
sitting in the last burning ground on earth
we're just a pair of body snatchers.

The Tale of Man and Wife: A Song
(*Paagli Tomar Shangey*)

Baby, with you I'll live life dreadful and severe
Baby, with you I'll live life in the dust and the sand
This one, we'll dazzle, and as for that, his waters stirred to slime
baby, with you we'll check out the waves while we can

We'll raise hell everyday, the birds will avoid this house
You'll hurl the plates and I'll shatter the precious glassware
Baby, with you I'll break up this land as a rule
Baby, with you I'll live life in nineteen forty-two

Then at high noon, we'll lose it, our money and the sons
You'll make it up by cooking an imaginary brew
Baby, with you, I'll perform the rites, as set down
Baby, with you I'll sleep over it in afternoons

Baby, with you I'll have the rice and the broth
Baby, with you I'll have my broth dipped in meat
Baby, with you I'll live life, unlettered, to the core
Baby, with you I'll live life with the letters four

We'll go to the movies, cheap thrillers for us, to entertain
And sometimes, for a change, we'll try out the artier stuff
Baby, with you I'll live life in theatre workshops
Baby, with you, we'll turn the high-priests of art

Baby, with you I'll live life in sleazy ferry-ghats
Baby, with you I'll live life at the busy cross-roads
Baby, with you, it's nothing but the truth, -- as always
'Such a liar' -- it'll be -- in my life, here, with you

My lone hand to bring home the buck, with both hands you'll blow
it away
We'll bet, we'll gamble and go borrowing in a thousand and one
ways
Lottery, with you, I'll live life with blessings from above
Lottery, with you, I'll live life with a little bit of luck

At festival time, 'here's a sale' they'll scream -- everywhere
We'll go from shop to shop, looking for the jewel in the crown
Baby, with you I'll pore over the festival lit
Baby, with you I'll live life at an annual discount
Baby, with you I'll go through the proofs -- wet and raw
Baby, with you, I'll live life in the broadsheet

Baby, with you I'll do the layouts for sure
Baby, with you I'll live life,
`goodness, gracious me!

My poetry will fly away and I'm not going to pursue
I'll make up a story, a novelette, or something on those lines
Baby, with you I'll churn out the words, arranged in art
Baby, with you I'll live life, cackling, as pigeons do

I'll get a new girlfriend and go see her sometimes, on the sly
Till you catch me one day and give me a sound dressing down
Baby, with you I'll live life, blinded -- in a maze
Baby, with you I'll live life, settling the scores

Baby, with you I'll live life -- afflicted with sin
Baby, with you I'll live life as the scriptures suggest
Baby, with you I'll perform the Pooja Bedi rites
Baby, with you I'll have the heroines of yesteryears

We'll watch TV together, and go to the palmists as a rule
With twenty-one fasts and twenty-six pledges to fulfil
Baby, with you I'll live life in a rented room
Baby, with you I'll live life -- `own your own flat'.

Baby, with you I'll live life in the district towns
Baby, with you I'll live life near the railway station
The trains stop midway with people squatting on the tracks
And the late-slips slapped on me, regularly, at my place of work

Baby, with you I'll live life in wish fulfilment
I'll buy flowers and you'll do the rooms all your life
Baby, with you -- hail our labourers and farm-hands at work
Baby, with you, we'll bring joy to this world

We'll quarrel in the evening -- our two beds moved well apart
No talking to each other till a sudden intercourse ends it all
Baby, with you I'll live life in pious abstinence
Baby, with you I'll live life as the first couple did

Baby, we'll be ruled by the monarch, as in myths
Baby, we'll live life the Republic way
Baby, with you I'll live life even as I'm fleeced
Baby, with you I'll live life by the skin of my teeth

We'll nudge this one here and push another to make way
We'll break this and make that and play with the waves for a while
Baby, with you I'll live life in the raging desert storm

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Baby, with you I'll live life to the tune of morning strains ...

Translated by Chitrlekha Basu

Scientist
(*Bijnani*)

Five pages I wrote on death
Before the end
Then I moved far away
My earnings spent

But just how far was it
I knew, from the ocean
And the same law will tell you
The sun, is, after all, the sun

Three pages I wrote, on the sun
And everything under it
Of which a line shall I bestow
On his children - those vile spirits

Made more vile, and viler still, with each death
And so the earning and spending proceeds
I'm yet to include a section on
The faraway seas

Translated by Chitrlekha Basu

Scientist

*- If I knew that they (the Germans) would fail to build
the bomb, then I would not have done anything which
would go toward building the bomb.*

I've written five pages
of the antedeath chapter,
then I went far away
to loss from profit.

The conception was born
Of distance from seawater,
By that token we knew
that light does mean light.

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I've written three pages
On the other side of light,
I'll give just one time to
Its cruel lineage.

From each death comes cruel
Profit to loss profit,
Keep writing secretly
The ocean chapter.

Translated by Ananda Lal [in MODERN POEMS FROM BENGAL]

Essay concerning Light

1. Today again after many years, to invent
 'a technique to revive the dead'
Today again after many years, to plug one's ears
 and sleep
Again after many years to sit at home memorising
 Bande Ali Mian's rhymes
Today again after many years, inspiration on
 seeing a green bathroom
And being commissioned to write the biography
 of a cloud
Today again to shoulder the shiuli* tree cut down
 long ago and
Bring it home and grow treefuls of flowers
And lying under the tree at dead of dawn
To try to spell 'flowerbed' again, today after
 many years
To end all quarrels with the songbird,
To cut off illicit relations with the fragrant
 flower, and
Today again, though colourful rousers from field
 and rallyground still
Call to arms, simply to walk away and not give a
 hoot
And to let them know that,
Every Monday a fortress opens up in front of me
And inspiration walks about inside it lamp in hand

Inspiration's shadow falls to the ground,
 the long robe trails
The old cannon come rolling down, and in rasping
 voice,
After cautioning the colourful about this,
 turning
This scene around backwards with a push again
Again to print pictures of autumn on all the skies
To let loose springtime on plant and leaf
To fill Bengal after Bengal to the brim with
 rainy season
Standing in paper boats one after another
 waving hands
Going to Gangasagar* again after many years
Because it's just today that the lid having
 come off
Smoke and fire start to come out of my head
You save yourselves

2. Just now I was writing about the shiuli tree and
 That instant the one who came into the room
 Her name is
 “A branch to keep waves on”
 Oh but it’s neither wave nor branch
 Her name is
 “I’ve applied colour”

Just now I was writing about applying colours
 This instant the one who came out of my room
 Her name is
 “Please take a bath, sir”

Oh it’s not bath nor room at all
 Her name is
 “In the quiet of the waterfall”

Just now I was writing about waterfalls and
 That instant the one who covered my page with her
 hand
 Her name is
 “Caress me”

Ah who says it’s either caress or hand
 Her name is
 “Red flare blue flare”

Just now I was writing about two kinds of flare
 And the cloud came darkening my page and said
 Everyone wants to hear something from you on the
 subject of sunlight
 Today’s Monday, you can start right away...

3. Today when I’m having to write for lay audiences
 an essay concerning sunlight
 The essay concerning shadow is lying behind all
 those tall buildings and below tall trees
 When the essay concerning motion has started
 running even before dawn
 On the heads of porters and backs of rickshaw-vans
 And when the essay concerning vapour is puffing
 intermittently in rage
 Under the lid of the pot cooking rice
 And the essay concerning sound is roaring through
 affluent motorhorns, middleclass cookers
 The Shiva-temple bells and government siren-cars

And when evening falls
And one by one the lights go on
 In the houses
I get up, I stand up like a live body
In front of the windows one by one—see the
 children at study
I ask, will Teacher come today?

6. Then one day light advances
Through windows one by one
Through the upstairs gallery through the rooftop
 garret
Through the streetpost also through the lamp
 above the vendor's snacks light advances
Checks to see if my muscles have withered to the
 right twist
Whether or not the spine has smelted to the right
 strength
And at once transmutes me to fuel
And I start a prayer:
Break me, stick me into the bottom of a
 brick-piled stove
May the pavement household be happy
Chop me up, mix and burn with all the dry
Leaves, on winter nights let my backwoods brethren
 warm
Their hands and feet
Then pull me out, pull me out from the firepit and
 toss the long embers
Shack by shack may your neighbours' households
Burn to ashes. Great.

7. Great, how dandy your run over the fire now
 To escape the fire
Running, running, hands and back warding off
 arrows, catching arrows on the fly,
Inaugural songs for each new mayhem and the blood-
 chilling
Substance of painful shrieks
Getting to understand them how dandy your getaway
 artist shedding blood along the way, all kinds of
Hullabaloo baloohulla muted cursing
 Sounds of weeping, the last breath exhaled
 Trampling trampling on, your run
Leaping up underfoot, entrapping the feet, the

bite of all these fluid flames
Who says, who says so, from under the running
The ghost of the mudswamp says so,
They've buried me, ripped open my gullet, the
knife is in the pond
It says, Here's my navel opened up and my entrails
In pieces, spreading as fertiliser from plot to
plot
The crop
Sways, Can you recognize me I'm the sharecropper's
ghost there's no need to redeem me
The daily murder over shares, trouble over wives,
men cut up over cutting crops
Blood
Bloodshed
All blood, all innards, all heads, all bones, all
calcium, all phosphate
Under the paddy, under the jute, pressing and
pushing up the paddy crop
The seedling stirs and roars, the fire burning
The soles of your feet makes them new again and
mixing freely
With this earth-substance I enjoy possession
of my land
So who said
Under the soil it's only darkness?

8. Today it's a darkness, tomorrow it's a fire, the day after a
Hair-tossing
Wave
Inside the wave a something or other
Possibly a peak, which has begun to form last
night
And the sea is sloping away on both sides
On a rock am I, a plant just awake from sleep

A gust of wind
A cyclone
A cloud, clouds jostling
A black
A column
Sounds inside the column, landslides inside the
column
And right up to the horizon a collapse
A spill reaching up to the sky
After that all things sink away

By the shoreline I, a life, have just opened my
eyes

A distance, after that
Water, after that water, after that distance,
after that distance, after that
Water
A flicker, a colour, a circle, a
Day, a wave

I leap on to the head of the wave
A tiny fish

Tiny fish, tiny fish, one fish, two fishes,
Three fishes, shoal after shoal leaping,
Dropping to the water, one day not dropping
One flew on, flew on, with wing and
Feather, flew on out there where there's sight of
The shore

9. Where does this shore stay?
In the middle of water.
Who sleeps beneath the water?
I.

Many miles from this shore
In the night from the water rises
My reptile face.
My neck is like a column. From my
Eyes' empty sockets sandy water
Many kinds of fish and slime
Roll out and drop below. Like an eyeless camel's
The face, neck twisting around for a look back,
Many miles back, towards its back, the vegetation
That has taken life on its back, the birds asleep
And all living things

Looks, then the gigantic face set on its column
Drops once more into the sea

10. —Hey wait, you can't have the right
To say just anything.
Or licence to to see just anything
Or passport to write just anything.
There's a science to everything. This time
You're really, really going beyond the limit

—Okay, but the room I come to work in
 It's a ghouls' workshop. Set on a raft, this room
 Has come swaying swaying to shore one day, now
 Its stone walls are pocked with all kinds of
 Holes. From one of them appears
 An artist's brush come alive and towards it
 Colours rush of their own.
 And of its own a mural stands up and stands
 Against the wall. In some holes are
 Big fat books. The stories of their own
 Come out of the books walking,
 And even after the book is finished walk on
 Wherever they wish. From some holes
 Roll down great rocks and the roof cracking
 Lightning strikes it again and again.
 Splinters flying, of its own it turns now
 into a face,
 Now into the branch of a tree and now into female
 sculpture,
 Then it flies out through the hole in the roof.
 And

Instantly before me
 Someone takes the great ocean lying supine
 And stands it up vertical reaching out to sky,
 The ocean is then all fire instead of water,
 The sky can't be seen at all, only on all sides
 Thousands, thousands of small and large lumps are
 Shooting out, the fire-ocean at one point
 Pulls me in too, and spills me out and up
 Beyond the fountain above its head
 That very instant once again I violate
 The limits of day and night...'

Aa aa aa aa aa...you are who, you are who, you are
 what,
 You are which, you are colour, lava colour, comet
 colour, scorched red
 Diamond colour, heat is white, heat is all, I am
 where, what world
 How many suns am I passing, arms made of
 particles, legs made
 Of particles, all a whirlpool, all spiralling,
 floating colours, blind colours,
 I don't know their names, heat is pure, heat is
 all, in it an egg
 Transparent egg, floating, running, egg, ovum, egg

of creation*

Inside, that eyes-shut-fingers-clenched, I am I,
Inside the egg opening the eyes, opened the eyes,
just this instant

My my
Foetal state...

On the other side, left behind under the volcano
My brain is humming in joy,
And in the earth's cavernous centre my hot heart
is throbbing
And my smoking autobiography, up from the desert
Roams the habitations, takes part in
Coining axioms, makes musical instruments out of
wood
Aims weapons, raises the mouthful
To the mouth, snaps fingers, whistles a tune,
With both hands conquers lack and want, builds
Love anew, finds union, and coming home
Late at night drenched by rain, sees as she
Opens the door,
In his mate's eyes, a light...

And my essay concerning light is then
Rushing on shooting past star after star after
nebula into a dark open mouth...