

Why Eating an Apple is Like Eating the World¹

With the first bite, as you break through skin and red,
you know what it is like
to consume borders.

At the second bite, when the juice flows down your chin,
you discover how rivers
contour the fall and fall of flesh.

Third, and you know the hunger of those
whose apples are shriveled
or rotten. Vanished.

Next, you inhale the whiff of farmhands
you've never seen, as you ride
the alkaline loneliness of the seas.

(Perhaps that is why)
by the fifth bite, your mother
is not someone you're trying so hard
not to become.

The sixth bite and you're determined your children
will inherit a world with apples in it.

With the last bite, as you count the seeds
scattered in your palm, you realize
no one can count
all the apples
pulsing
in each seed.

~*~

¹ First published in *Tiferet Journal*, ed. Adele Kenny

Word Problems for Ten Marks Each

(after Bhaskara II's *'Lilavati'*²)

1. If, on a full moon night,
a boy, nineteen, climbs all forty-four steps
to flat B-205 and leaves
without getting my brother's number,
how many suns will it take
to feed courage to his feet again?

2. If Tap A can fill three buckets in a minute
and Tap B can fill half a bucket,
if Tap A is molded from ancient brass
and Tap B from mongrel alloy,
if Tap A belongs to the fourth bathroom of a bungalow
and Tap B to a cracked bus station basin,
what will the astrologer need to be paid
to see alignment in their stars?

3. If Firuza, of the straight A's
and curved waist, who has learned
to clasp her chemistry books to her chest,
is the regular source of optical data
to five pairs of unblinking, pursuant eyes,
how many weeks before her father
decides she doesn't
need college anymore?

4. If one two-armed man
can build half a wall in eight days
and one two-armed woman
can build three quarters of a wall in a dozen days,

² The Indian mathematician Bhaskara II (12th century) is known for his volume that extensively references everyday situations of his time in its word problems. Today, the text serves as an anthropological insight into a way of life and thought.

how many walls will need to fall
before they hold the same number
of two-faced coins
in their two hands?

5. (*Bonus Question*)

If Hari, who washes your car,
has to divide seven rotis and two onions
between five children,
explain why
Hari, who washes your car,
has to divide seven rotis and two onions
between five children.³

~*~

³ This poem was part of the set that was awarded the Srinivas Rayaprol Poetry Prize, and it was shortlisted for the Aesthetica Creative Writing Award.

Assorted Advice Received on the Art of Woman⁴

Sit with your knees touching. Soak peeled onions in water for at least ten minutes — why waste tears? Devi, you are like temple — how you let *anyone* touch? Have children. Have boys. When in a crowded bus, hold an open safety pin next to your chest. Laugh with your mouth covered. The unhistoried can find themselves too. Higher, lift your legs higher, you're a ballerina not a dog about to take a piss! Keep cats if you want to learn to cope with the otherness of lovers.⁵ Women who hate are far more interesting than women who love. Why you insist on jogging on the street, shaking your thisandthat for thisone and thatone — what are treadmills for? If you must meet a friend on the street, wait at a bus stop so you won't look like you are soliciting. The morning will come again. The night will come again. Your premonition is more accurate than his proof. They'll say dance like no one's watching but someone's always watching. Wear sarees. Never marry a man you wouldn't want to divorce. Wear bright lipstick. Even a flower has its roots in manure. Wear lingerie. If you hate his shirt so much, throw it in the wash with the woolens. Wear nude make up. Your voice is the sharpest blade the world has known, don't let anyone tell you it's high-pitched. Wear heels. One day you'll look at the old man in your bed and feel foolish about believing in true love, but it will pass, I promise. Walk. For which, wear sneakers. Celebrate your birthdays, especially those in your fourth decade. Have girls, *chalo*, at least one daughter for old-age sake? Give, give, give until you turn inside out. Bleed. They will say the age of woman has come but do not believe them until they stop saying it.

~*~

⁴ First published in *The Punch Magazine*, ed. Shireen Quadri

⁵ From Eunice D'souza's ever-relevant poem "Advice to Women"

The Sculptor's Guide to a Goddess⁶

She may have two arms or six, even ten
but only one pair of legs, and nothing
between them
but a gentle fold of cloth.
She may hold a lotus, a javelin,
a conch, a sword, a trishul
or an asura's severed head
but never some moisturizer,
a cupcake, a screwdriver,
a microphone.

The wrists should bend
delicately, frozen
in ethereal dance
but if that seems too pointless
for her rooted, ceramic limbs
choose one of the four mudras
for a tenure track to moksha.

Let her smile or seem vacantly
benign or, to work in the dead demon
she may glare through eternity;
but never must she appear
to celebrate with a pint
or ponder the stock market
or send out a tweet about
bunions on her feet
(she has been rooted to this spot
for three hundred years).

Her hair may be worn tight

⁶ First published in *The Punch Magazine*, ed. Shireen Quadri

or cascade over her shoulders
like an additional built-in shawl. Take some
liberties; yes she was raised
in these rain-blessed lands,
but the hair can have no signs
of frizz. Or grey.

The breasts must be tasteful C-cups
okay, D-cups — live vicariously
through your art — but never lactating
or weighed down by gravity.
Sculpt her in nine yards of silk
sufficiently cinched at the navel
and though she is mata
to us all, remember, no stretchmarks.

Blood, if you must
is permissible on her face and hands,
the respectable red of battle, valor, men
some may even dribble down
her asura-eating mouth
but she has no use for sanitary pads
or hot water bags. And even if
she did bleed,
she would have to walk out
of the temple
that week.

~*~

Self-portrait: Neti, Neti⁷

My skin is transparent
 as the wind. Come,
 look closer,
 look better.

And chant, as you approach –

One: not another woman

Two: not another other woman

Three: not woman, not man, not anything third

Four: not flower, not goddess, not homemaker,
 not home-breaker, not reformer,
 not cheerleader, not temptress,
 not sorceress, not bud, not thorn,
 not the name for breath or death,
 not sister, not bhabhi, not word-slinger,
 not middle-finger, not girl-next-door,
 not woman-on-top, not womb,
 not barren.

Five: not roots, not country, not language

Six: not metaphor

Seven: not, not, not.

And if you wade past
 the cacophony of labels
 pinned to my skin,
 watch yourself in my eyes.
 Reborn.

~*~

⁷ Not this, not that. A Sanskrit phrase that is a method of spiritual understanding through negation. A way to recognize God by recognizing everything that is not God.

Janus

My fingers grasp at an empty sky.
I do not believe
when the face speaks
the binds will free my wrists
a day when the sun will melt these chains
and
a night when darkness can be peace.
I know I can hope for
words, spoken and written.
But in this world of binaries
I am the other, the lesser, the left.
I cannot even imagine that
the scales shall be evenly balanced.
Torn, tired, tested,
our children will emerge from wombs and
naïvely
weave dreams of a day when
the world will embrace its daughters.

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~*~

Why the Elephant Isn't Big

After my own Wordsworthian walk
I will leave the flowers unplucked
by syntax. So much

of so much is prised by language,
refracting into seven shades of something
half-endearing, half-flawed that

it must be human. After all, the daffodils
aren't golden to the kitten
who can only see blue and green,

the clouds aren't lonely to the birds
who know to make friends midsky.
And I'm convinced when cats

consent to create a grammar
it will be full of possessives, these creatures
who graciously adopt the world.

So as I throw the ball to my niece
I tell her why the elephant isn't big
– it's the normal size of an elephant –

just as the ant isn't small and the giraffe
isn't tall. She looks at the wilting world
around us, first at the patchy grass

and the forgotten ball, then leaning back
to take in a spindly tree, she exclaims
breathless, like she has found last-week's

tooth, *I know! Everything is its own normal?*

I smile, my heart aching. Quickly
I remember to shrug, so she may

know to question the certainties
of adults. *Your turn!*

~*~

What Is Your Good Name?⁸

I must start with the story of how
Ma wanted to name
her children after gods,
so with her last breath
when she'd call out
to her faraway brood
– and she was certain she would –
the gods would think
she's reaching for them
and grant her passage to heaven.

Instead, the astrologer charted
the paths of the stars
at my first breath,
and extracted from the thick
of those constellations
the syllables that would fall
on my ears
all my years
like a whirling mantra.

But my true name
is neither sound nor subterfuge.
To know it, you will need
to learn a dialect of silence.
Not muffled withdrawal
or bubbling secrecy,
but the vernacular
of the grass noiselessly
opening yet another blade,
the idiom of the wind

⁸ Finalist for the Tiferet Poetry Prize, first published in *Tiferet Journal*

when it meets
neither tree nor bird,
just expanses of inhale
exhale.

In this tongue of self
knowing self
my true name will
form its sound.
And you will be able
to spell it
using the letters
of your name.

~*~

We are Born with the Dead

See, they return, and bring us with them.

- *T. S. Eliot "Four Quartets"*

And the seed stands in promise
of the tree within it,
the egg stands in promise
of feathers, flight and skies,
the mud, of clay and cup.
We exist not only as manifest
but as maybe.

Refrigerators borrow their hum
from waterfalls, deafening
chutes of molten current.
And in the sand bordering
the oceans, we draw
blueprints of silicon chips.

My skin, hair and sweat
bear the DNA that make their way
into water and weed, returning
as takeaway meals that sculpt
my skin, hair and sweat.

Sometimes when the world is ablu
and nothing knows
its place anymore, I like to imagine
I'm weaving my way
in and out of every pulse
on this blue button,
searching under rocks
for the last place
I left myself.

~*~

Too Much Faith⁹

Suppose you decide to write

a poem about the coming of spring.

You consider little things like the lilies

near the creek you pretend is a river,

but you're done with garnish and gimmick.

You need a verse with such truth

it can reverse melting glaciers

resurrect forests back into surprised green

So you begin to write about the promise

of a new age, but the slogans of the young

suggest they've been the old of another time.

The page smells of soot and metal and 1938.

You decide to work your way towards

the quiet treasures of soil and dirt,

but you need to escape

unchecked mining, at least in this poem.

You return to images of children

passing pamphlets on the streets

and women greeting riot police

with roses, but you wish the world

no longer needed that kind

of strength. You once declared

that art can heal, but your fingers

are now calloused. Your lines are desolate,

your pauses, nettles. So you declare

⁹ First published in *Open Your Eyes: An Anthology of Poetry on Climate Change* ed. by Vinita Agrawal.

that your ink is running out
of breath, that there are others, please.

And yet, when again the summer is

too late, too long, too much

and the world is drooping on its own axis
you find yourself reaching for this *prana*
of twenty-six letters, choosing vowels

and seeds, hoping you haven't placed
too much faith
in words.

~*~