

Manju KANCHULI
Selection from poems

The Hunger For Justice And The Water Of Desperation

After preparing a feast
 satisfying the entire family
 like a highly skilled housewife
 satisfying herself
 she licks the empty cauldron and pan
 or swallows the slightly burnt leavings
 And then hungry and weepy-eyed this rainy night
 falls asleep. Not without fulfilling you in your bed room
 She's been spending her days licking the salty grit
 on the empty pan provided by legislation
 No justice has come to ask—"Have you eaten?"
 It's not just this century-long night
 she has slept without food
 There were many nights like that
 Today too there's a feast at her house
 Tell them: In her name
 don't put out the rice the meal requires
 She doesn't need feasts like these
 For amid great feasts, she already has
 the habit of fasting herself to sleep
 Fire rages on the riverbank. With a flood of water
 she has blanketed that terrible inferno of hunger
 She has doused the blaze sufficiently
 with the unfathomable depths
 of a single desperation

A Strange Temple

The idol behind the shut door of god must be
 arrayed with vermilion and rice
 That I don't know
 Before meeting the deity I've seen
 nothing but naked figures on the struts above
 I've read so many times
 "Behind the locked temple door there's no god at all"
 A long time has passed...these days
 I haven't opened that temple door with flowers of hope
 Its inner wall might have transformed into a mirror,
 blossoming in the mirror the priest's aroused mind
 might have bulged forth with a flood,

the mirror on the torso turned towards his mind
 might have melted with immense shame
 That I don't know
 Out of shame I haven't till now
 parted that mirror's curtain
 Encountering yellow sunlight everywhere
 the priest's robe of black clouds might tremble
 Tangled in the loincloth of a hurricane
 it might be hovering above some gorge somewhere
 That I don't know
 I haven't forced that cloud to land
 in the theater of the earth
 I haven't harassed it with bright sunlight
 History, upon a wall of mud, has been written with lines
 in the vacuum of space, with voices
 over the forehead of earth, with blood
 in the ink of the heart, with red
 into the pen of the human, with a cry;
 beneath the layered soil of earth, with bones
 into layers of sedimentary rock, with coral
 inside black coal, with illuminating diamond
 But I've never understood
 the meaning of the blank paper smeared with spider shit
 in the piled garbage bin near the temple
 An old wall might have been changed into a new mirror
 that new mirror crawled upon by a snail
 into parchment of fresh slime
 That I don't know
 I've taken those walls, mirrors, and blank sheets
 to be your undergarments
 and have never in front of anyone else
 parted them till today
 I haven't opened the temple door
 I haven't disrobed the priest The image inside the closed door of god
 must still be arrayed with vermilion and rice
 That I don't know
 Before meeting the deity
 I've seen nothing but naked figures on the struts above

Days In The Life

Either, from stained clothes
 I would scrub the dirt of superstition
 as I stayed home, or
 I'd put to be pitched into the drain
 full on the plate

the discardings of pro and con
In that way scrubbing my own environs clean

Either, I'd play with saffron yellow
salt & sugar white, and vegetable green in the kitchen,
dipping my fingers to the art of that experiment
or with sweat—sharp needle
stitch fraying divides
so as just to..
strengthen the relationship

To make our house beautiful,
with my hands my rhododendron palms
I'd scrub it clean every evening
There, with a rainbow bearing brush
I'd paint the limited sky of Mt Everest
above my own

Everyday, I would be
busy somewhere — in the library,
somewhere — in the laboratory,
somewhere — with only unlined paper and pen,
somewhere — in the educational institution,
there, with the mission of adding bricks
layer by layer to that basic foundation

In our room every evening I'd switch on a light
drawn from the clear Himalayan streams
electric light of unplanted crops
in the plains and terraces On such an evening,
like a swallow, though flying everywhere,
to my own small nest I would return
drawn by thoughts of my fledglings

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I Am Always With You

A flower conceals itself in the bud
And yet to enter a world where many and various
are thieving hands

Maria, I am always with you

As warily or in packs
phantoms flit over the lips of school kids
for the shapes they seek, Maria, with innocent face

in a hammock slung cross your room
I'll be soundly sleeping

Maria, I am always with you

When and where for your sake and mine
liberty's orations ring out in chorus,
in brothel bed, lips —by lips smothered,
before ours part to speak, lips
close tight. By those very hands raised for you and me
I'm extracted like honeycomb
By the very hands which beckon
I'm barred from the path
By their feet dancing beside me
I'm repeatedly tripped
By the hand that shakes mine I'm struck

When in far-flung defiles morals are preached,
dark night standing as the house of religion,
by their priestly hands in nightmare
unbearably we're slowly drawn and clutched
When these lascivious dons
send underlings to recruit us as call girls,
wide-eyed in the classroom chair
I read their morals spelled out on the blackboard

Maria I am always with you
For you, with words I thunder,
with action I growl, and with tears I rush
because for your sake words
are for bullets; plans are for action,
the rest, only speechless overflowing voice

Maria, this time for you, instead of flowers,
I offer a gift of stone. Please, secure it in your heart
Whenever gunned down
by relationships, fortune, values, and the law,
to produce valence,
channel the current through stone!

Whenever with one finger, man strokes
and with another finger, scratches
the minds of other men, or sitting alone in an office
licks blood with another of his fingers,
Maria, with you in blood throes

With the force of an 80 kilo paperweight
in their offices I'm pressed down,

oppressed in body and heart
 Within their house and walls by their restricting
 fingers like barbed wire fences
 I'm surrounded. Wrenched by iron-pronged hands

You know this well —
 After they've had their fill with breasts and thighs,
 they pick their teeth with a toothpick
 Butter irritates the cactus;
 fearfully they flee
 But chancing it one day parting their caterpillar lips,
 they gulp lumps of butter
 When it doesn't digest,
 Maria, flushed inside their stomachs
 I ache churning inside them

Maria I am always with you
 There are buds yet to sprout within me, Maria!
 But the more I
 want with you to open in the garden,
 the more I'm nipped
 Maria, inside camps of molestation,
 stretched out on tyranny's cutting board,
 pieces of torn flesh tremble
 With the eyes of a fish slapped onto the riverbank,
 weighed-out and bargained for on the scale,
 in the marketplace of village and town
 I'm watching...

Maria, I am always with you
 in the prison cell gasping for breath I flounder
 Maria, I am always with you
 Always with you

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If

Had I not stumbled,
 I would have fallen
 If that small mistake
 had not been made,
 how mistaken
 my life would have been
 To fathom my heart's depths,
 how often
 I would have been misled

by the heartbeat of faraway
 Had I not been
 swept aside by a rivulet,
 the rising tide
 would have drawn me under

If I hadn't been
 grazed by the paws of a cat,
 I would have fallen
 into the mouth of a tiger
 If I hadn't stumbled
 in the base camp itself,
 I would have plummeted
 from 29,000 feet
 If I hadn't stumbled,
 a mishap would have marked me
 forever

If a small mistake
 had not been made,
 how wrong
 my life would have been

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The Way of A River, The Forest, Night

I did not forge that river
 whose current drags the living down
 and tosses a carcass to its banks
 I only wet my feet—that for a few days
 became lifeless. The river was not the stable still
 continuous flow I thought it to be
 I could not cross that river

I never tread that path
 where my tiny range-bound hands
 were fated to be brushed by the beast;
 its solitude devoured
 by the leopard's clawing paws
 I cleared that forest with my gaze
 Thinking it useless to render it so,
 my eyes turned back immediately
 The forest was not blessed
 with the security, solitude and pleasure
 I thought there to be

I could not pass through that forest
 Not again did I step through to brigand night
 whose tusk now gnaws the moon
 having devoured the sun. Only a morning,
 naively, reached day and it
 blached with night—its whole body so soon
 took on the darkest hues
 Night was not the cove—warm, impregnated
 with mild dream—I thought it to be
 I could not immerse myself in the black liquids of that night

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The Picture Of A Lost Man

You were growing quickly and continuously
 spreading green hands and feet over the walnut tree
 but with scent above your bloom has been lost
 Climbing you were onto the high terraces,
 into water rippling, over the vines of the wall
 The pinnacle, the terraces lead to, the bank
 the ripple leads to, and the hilltop the wall leads to
 Suddenly how they have disappeared!
 Flowing you were the speed of the Yangtze and Volga
 Your own roaring voice blanketing stone and sand

Concealed by a hill
 I asked you so many times from afar,
 then setting foot on the path — “Where are you going?”
 Branded by the fear of delay,
 not with words, but with momentum
 you responded, forcefully
 without speech without action
 hurrying. Your river waters ran with hurricane velocity
 With patience I saw your goal
 Under the branches the wind went on blowing
 the long hair of the leaves

Like a bubble of water in its midst
 the river evaporated. How your sea was lost!
 While meeting, with only a hermit's dim eyes
 did you respond. Eyes spoke, you didn't
 “The river could not reach the sea, the sea was lost in the river”

In your oxygen-less trajectory a rocket reached the heights

Resting my chin with logic on my finger,
 looking upwards to your reinvention,
 I was too frightened to ask you
 Your velocity ascended with smoke,
 you halted in space. How your ether was lost in its midst
 When we met, your statue-body responded,
 your whole body spoke, you didn't —
 “The rocket couldn't reach space, space was lost in the rocket.”

The hand and the knife that you raised;
 how they were lost in emotion
 In restlessness, flowing river flowing, tinfoil mind
 itself lost in another reality in a tiny ladle brimming with water
 Neither was concern made clear as by an intimate friend
 nor revealed in the beloved's utterance
 I put forth the bar of restriction with my forefinger
 Above sea and earth your thinking was lost
 in calculating the effects of chemical weapons
 How many times I prayed —
 “Step sure with feelings and sympathy,
 climb to wisdom and tolerance,
 attain logic and reality”
 and all those weapons you created were after all
 lost in destruction
 As we met, your broken wall-like features responded
 the features of a man spoke, you didn't —
 “The plan couldn't come to fruition, the plan was lost in the planning”
 The hunger of the ruthless tiger whose teeth have fallen out
 lost behind the zoo's iron bars in hide-bound skin

I have become distraught
 Over the breast of my dim evening
 as if claiming property I collected your features
 An entire sketch enriched in oil color by color
 Searching the picture for your lost self
 in city, family, and gatherings
 you panicked like a hungry ghost

The Wall collapsed. The Statue fell down
 Chemical factories were destroyed
 Bridges were made. It was then I met you again
 On that day my morning collided with your evening
 Facing the light you had to drape yourself
 with a blanket of shadow. I couldn't,
 ask to the numbed evening “Where are you going?”
 Steps withdrew, mind didn't; the heart with its lips spoke,
 I didn't. Within a packet of silver paper
 I kept concealed the oil sketch of your compulsions

Though I met you several times
I couldn't reveal it to you

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I Have Nothing To Do With You Now

I superficially feel happiness and sorrow
Bare feet tread on grassy soil —not rock nor sand
steadily... Worldly affairs have no sting,
and the sea is peaceful
There is no desire, no determination; no vacillation
By singing the song of life throughout life
I am free of song
Above all there is no lyrical passion
and as the years pass
intense passion, greed, and infatuation lose hold
Nowhere is vision blurred
Conduct, analysis, and decision are distilled
as with a sweet coolness in still water
No grit kicked up anywhere
my mind floats like a kite in the sky,
like petals on water

I emancipate myself from you
There's no detestation no attraction
That's why I'm cool and calm
Within this flow there is no yearning
no determination. That's why I'm free from bondage
I am finally free from the cage of your scheming
Ever satisfied. I have no desire for the succor
that needs the shelter of your heart
No obsessive feeling; infatuation traceless
No thirst for life nor determination to end it
I am content. Without constraint.
Nothing takes hold. There is no coming or going
Nor concern for achievement
I've experienced much in little, and in its brevity
that's sufficient. No desire for worldly pleasure
Nor anxiety envy joy. I am achieving and abandoning you
By my gaze I reach you from afar
I am distancing myself. Not lust but liberation
No happiness, nor sorrow in not being near
In these present circumstances
I am not unawake. Dream has no attraction
I experience a strange respite.
No catastrophe or qualms or anything to detest
There's nothing I can say "mine" to

Purified I yearn not for distraction
 No festivity. No ebb and flow — no tide
 no mud no dust. No anxiety of non-fulfillment
 No initiative to achieve nor discard
 Nothing compels. Melancholy and serene,
 within all situations, I am far from these feelings
 There might be somewhere some intent
 in speaking of “the salve of words”
 or for uttering “wounded by gunshot”.
 But not here in renunciation
 No one need wish me joy and peace
 Simply...now...
 I have nothing more to say

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Waiting For the Next Century

My universe lacks this century
 This century is yours

For those who have hands,
 those who don't...
 for the four-footed,
 those who don't have feet...
 for the higher animals,
 the lower creatures...
 have become food
 One life for the sake of
 another's survival
 Everyone for all
 in a death obsessed land
 For the consumer
 has become a commodity

It's your century lying in a serpent's mouth
 Who will save it?

Ocean and sky unassailably free
 lie empty and vacant within river banks
 What form of emancipation
 will descend to earth?

From the hand of pollution,
 from lust — the humus of anger
 When will we be done with these skirmishes!
 Till then
 your century is tottering

It's a momentary stability without support
 Who will hold and sustain it?
 Who with serene intentions
 will join your land to the all encompassing sky?

Small cottages destroyed by fire
 Here and there encampments meditating
 Memorable heaps of ash!

Into the carcasses of youth
 felled like posts
 who will commence sowing life-force
 Who will conceive today's Buddha
 from the child of a fabricated father,
 and from another envisioning,
 today's Gandhi!

With the left hand raised for construction,
 how the other is demolished
 Civilization's debris spread over the earth's surface

Oh! though they have Gandhi's fingers and Buddha's palms,
 the tiny arteries within and splinters of bone
 destroyed
 with the acrimonies of civilization

Time is made of events
 Who'll lay foundation bricks for reconstruction
 of this your age?

In silence
 hands in splinters
 in creation
 destroyed
 covered with soil
 like skulls
 chance unearthed
 in Mohanjodaro and Harappa

Their antecedence, not easily erased,
 engraved by your chemistry's evidence

How once orchards
 flourished within the capitals of those lands
 How once battle raised itself
 upon the sovereignty of those lands!
 To uncover this,

your century cries out for the excavation of another UN

Thus the world turns towards reconciliation
 Gunfire's killing and revenge
 realized as worthless and useless

Upon the waters, separate and apart,
 how the hard land,
 almost real,
 begins to float like boats

In human relationships, at last, your century

Again,
 midst of overwhelming reconciliation,
 minor skirmishes commence
 Wherever my broken hands lie,
 there as well
 your broken legs lie
 Minor acrimonies like bursts of firecrackers
 Again the ravaged air asks for liberty
 Now man wants to live together, and not by ideology,
 It's the same day of the same century
 Oh, how could it be long!
 It's the same time
 Oh, how could it be far away!
 It's the same injured aspiration
 Oh how could it be different!
 There is only one life to live
 Oh how could it be more!

I heard the sound of a coming
 —somewhere—
 rainbows, in sight; seedpod fur,
 to the touch; shower of roses, in fragrance;
 the chorus of three timbres overflowed,
 the soft fur of a seed pod
 reverberated in a stubble of stone,
 your own Paleolithic nail
 scratched the butter of its fur
 A shower of roses
 heaped a mile high pile of stench
 The confluence of the centuries diverged
 How can this century die so easily
 always waiting for the next
 Lightning startles, thunderbolts frightens
 Under subjugation of terror, nowhere does anyone speak
 The leaves of orange tree tremble

As do chandeliers in visitors rooms,
 antennae on roofs, bricks of walls,
 cloud clusters above houses
 wondering on which side the tremor shook!

Though the wick withers under its own shadow,
 how can a moment of immense light
 die so readily?
 As if it were so easy to extinguish
 As if were an accident
 — a death
 that was contracted for

Wick, light of peace, unabated wick, light of a river overflowing
 light of the solar world over the pillow at the head of the bed
 light of immense dedication, light of struggle, protected from time immemorial
 undivided wick — light of the time that will come!

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Fire

I do so love warmth. My body, tempted by companionship with heat coming forth from the fire, contracts recollecting the cold. Drawn by the intensity of the flames, my flesh first feels heat from afar. A species of warmth ripples along a tangle of nerves tingling the skin of the brain, registering this state throughout my body and its organs. How happy I am then, smiling within. The tincture of my smile (that spoken of by the lips of the heart) is reflected in the lips that you see. Enlivened and young again with the water of deep happiness. Such expressiveness cannot be concealed. A friend walking at my side notices this change — “Why are you so happy?” Despite this expression of my own presence, my feelings cannot find the words to give voice to themselves. Whatever I say would be meager and incomplete, or so I think. I hasten past him in the clutch of that warmth. At first I saw only the light of the fire. The black of charcoal, its remains, or the darkness of the smoke, its consequence, were hidden from me. For they are not the fire's essence, its warmth, and are only related to it. Though my inquiry would soon turn towards the smoke and blackening of the burning log (the charcoal), I pay them no heed. The center that draws me is the fire's warmth. I don't make much of ash because it is the remains, and the maturity and adulthood that foresees the remains, that foretells it, is not developed in me. A man sits before the fire tending it. From a distance with deep affection and cordiality he welcomes me, he calls me, gesturing with his fingers. Between the place where I walk and that of the fire's heat a long distance remains. My feet spring forward. They hasten. Walking like this they soon reach the fire's enclave, allowing me to confront the fire precisely where I happen to stand at the culmination of that procession, without embarrassment, explicitly. How vehemently it burns. For some time I find myself haloed before the blaze. I persistently try to observe myself in that light. For some time I find myself pleased, relaxed, enlivened, and warm. The man tending the fire, who knows me well, says: “Please, come closer, sit. Beside me.” With these words I move without hesitation or thought. The feeling of warmth intensifies; my mind

takes pleasure in it. For warmth has its own music with a melody sufficient to itself, expressive of the intensity of heat. My aim to realize such warmth moves me towards him—to be at his feet where his physicality, his human form configures. Otherwise how could I have taken in the fire's warmth at that time. I would have only been touched from afar by the heat. I happen to remember the saying: “A dog struck by an ember fears the light from a bulb.” Within that remembering, that foretelling, there comes a time when a child crawls directly and unwittingly towards the fire. With his hand he tries to grasp the light he sees with his eyes. He doesn't draw the line that demarcates danger — of fire burning — in his brain. A distant voice reacts for him: “Oh, no, it will burn you. No!” With the sudden intervention of that voice his hand stops in mid-air. He saw only the fire's light; not the element that burns. Thus the underlying force of his interest draws him on. A few rapid steps and he reaches it after all. With sudden pain and agony there are tears, and in the midst of that fear and ignorance in a loud voice he screams. In that incident I see embodied that which I had already experienced. Detached, within my own mind, within the abstraction of thought, I tell myself: it is only through experience that a child learns of the pain of fire. Taking this in, I am a child again. I feel the burn, I feel myself burning, and in that memory I crawl forth reaching out for some object of warmth. In my mind, then, and now, in its youthfulness, moving towards the fire, I hear that familial and societal voice - “Oh No! No! It will burn you. Don't go.” The child's screams resounds with the voice of my former self. I remember—that as I moved towards the fire, there was no one to save me from the burning flames. No one to catch hold of me and pull me aside. I look into the burnt hands and feet of that child and I find my disfigured self in it. As if suffering from hysteria, I cry out. Perhaps, and yet, since I am now grown, it was but my first whimper in which such woeful sounds were heard. That burning fire burns me from afar, burns without my being touched by flames. In what way could a torrent of uncontrolled tears extinguish the burning embers of that log? It was more like adding ghee to the fire — the flames flare more fiercely. He stands beside me, he stares. I whimper. I cannot hold it back. As I run home it spills forth like a volcano. I tell my parents who were out walking in the garden what happened. In this way my hands were burned in childhood. I extend my helpless, innocent, fingerless hands before them and ask through my tears “How were my hands burned? Why do you never tell me what happened?” My mother says, in the voice of anger and depression “Fire burns, don't you realize that?” My father, with the same voice, but in a serious tone. “Dearest child, one should know how to use the heat of fire! The fire will warm you. But fire burns, it can burn anyone. You were a small child when you were burned by fire.” Nowadays I often place those fire-burned disfigured hands before me and heat them only with the warmth emanating from the heater in the room. How often I measure with my eyes the current and the heat of the heater's subdued flames.

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Translated from the Nepalese by Wayne Amtzis and Manju Kanchuli

Some of these poems previously were published:
 “The Hunger For Justice And The Water Of Desperation” and “A Strange Temple” in *Manoa*, “Days In The Life” in *Spoon River Poetry Review*, “Maria, I Am Always With You” in *Collages & Bricollages*, “IF” in *The Minnesota Review*;
 all the other poems in *TWO SISTERS: the poems of Benju Sharma and Manju Kanchuli*.