

Guru Tshering LADAKHI

Poems

A Himalayan Ballad

Across the wind-filled pass of Nathu
 In the valley of the orange country
 Lives the mother of my child-to-be.
 Do not grieve, my love.
 At Shigatse I've bought you a turquoise ring.
 In the holy temple of Lhasa
 I'll offer butter lamps and silk scarves.
 White cranes flying south to the plains of Phakpay-yul, Bear
 the tidings of this rootless trader.
 Tell her I'll come speeding on my Yarcund mare
 If at year-end business should prove fair. O
 father of my child, come soon!
 Today your son uttered your name.
 You left on the eve of the last peach blossom
 And now their fallen hues collect about our bamboo gate.
 The tinkle of caravans from the North
 Takes me running as far as the crossroads.
 How I wish it were you.
 Everybody clicks their tongue when they see me. I
 cannot think of work, I think only of you.
 By next spring your son will be walking And
 asking for you. What will I say?
 Maybe when you return you can take me along too But
 alas, I do not have warm shoes to follow you.

**_*_

Of Mothers and Heirlooms

In the right-hand corner of my mother's cupboard there is a squat steel safe. Inside you will find red corals freckled with age, one-eyed and three-eyed agates, earrings, heavy bridal *khaos* inlaid with Tibetan turquoise, pearls unraveled in a silk pouch, a bracelet- the first ever gift my father bought when her wrist was slim, some rings and some without their stones, amulet she wore as a child, trinkets, necklaces passed down generations, jewelers' receipts and some horoscope charts rolled up into a corner unmindful of all the fuss.
 I open a large red box, the way she would have on countless occasions, spreading its wares bazaar-like on her bed. She would pick them up, gaze and polish until each piece gleams into her past, years rise and wave like a hand and a quiet sun pauses briefly on her face. Then suddenly out of the blue she is struck by a mother's anguish, six grown children in the house and an heirloom to divide them.

Khao: Tibetan/Sikkimese Jewelry set worn by women.

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Ode on a Broken Cup

It first got chipped on the lip,
followed by cracks that run down spreading inverse like
translucent veins on a newborn baby.
Time has widened these hairline fractures into
deeper fault lines
on an otherwise clear bone china.

This minor forgettable accident on *mhemhe's* old bowl
nevertheless, freezes time and retrieves images and lines
that crisscrossed his wizened face.
I loved everything about that visage-
his toothless smile, hollow laughter, gnarled hands and a
drooped figure forever spinning a prayer wheel.
Without these first memories
my childhood would be empty and false.

Beyond the binary of perfection and mediocrity,
what beauty can I gather from
the broken and the condemned?
The ancient Japanese discovered a
part of themselves in "kintsugi"
but I have neither the tools nor the skill
so, I will keep this bowl high on an open shelf,
equal among unblemished cups and plates. no
longer shall I conceal or discard it
but fill it with jasmine in a bowlful of moonlight.

**mhemhe - grandfather in many Tibeto-Burman dialects.*

**_*_

'O Darjeeling!

There was a time when it was said,
"What Darjeeling thinks today, Nepal
thinks ten years later."
This old Queen among hill stations with
chipped nails and flaking make up
languishes in the diminishing realms of her former glory.
Despite her sagging breasts and dwindling retinue
she still exudes glamour and hides an occasional surprise.
In the eye of my memory
she was that shining city on the hill- stars
dripping down her blue velvet gown,
her beauty was beyond our common reach.
Amongst the custodians of her past
You will discover that her manners remain impeccable and

her traditions steeped in her colonial past.
As for etiquette she invites me for afternoon
tea and scones and I oblige with my pinkie up.

**_*_

Mayal Lyang

My country of old is like the measured breath in your meditation - calm and clear. Happy are the people of *Mayel Lyang* for we smile easily and make merry. Our shivering laughter soars high above the peaks and beyond the eagle's flight to join with our ancestors becoming a new constellation of stars.

Mayel Lyang folks do not know profit and have always given to long hands that stretched across our valleys snapping fingers and grabbing what they want, yet our hearts are not desolate. It is the memory in our veins, the seed in our blood, the promise of peace to men and gods alike which make us almost non-reactive to loud victors who arrived writing violence, shedding blood on their path only to find their arrogance washed away in our rivers, transforming them to become in time a part of this hallowed land.

So go forth and learn to talk to rocks, stroke the barks of ancient trees, race the foaming streams and behold that sacred summit to the west and keep faith. May *Kabi Lunchok* once again bear witness to this new kinship and let shamans propitiate the deities.

Water holds no form and the sky has neither center nor circumference.

“O child, do not grasp, live lightly in this world of floating mirages, remember all clinging is delusional.” These words of our seers and shamans have permeated every fabric of our being in this tiny piece of crested land; the proverbial hidden valley of rice for over a thousand years and have thus shaped our hands and hearts.

Mayel Lyang - ancient name of Sikkim in Lepcha language.

Kabi Lunchok: "Treaty of Blood Brotherhood" was signed at Kabi Lungchok in the 14th century by the Tibetan Khampa prince Khye Bumsa and Lepcha Chief and Shaman Thekong Tek on behalf of Bhutias and Lepchas.

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Lunuganga

A land in an embrace of a salt river and
a sky suspended on the low hung wires
of an afternoon.

At the entrance, a Roman head withdraws
deeper among vines as if to avert all the intrusion. I
tread in the spreading shade of tropical trees.

Beams and pillars, wood and bricks
meet formally at right angles,
Frames open into frame
as an eye of an ageing timber regards me with
desultory glances from the past
while the terracotta tiles feel cool

on the soles of my bare feet.
An ancient fan squeaks and shudders
struggling to rotate
and the day spills silently into the river.

After tea and sandwiches we get up
and head towards the car.
Marble statues on far pedestals
recede slowly from view as we descend
through a foliage covered arch.
Time is on a slow march here, it
wanders about the house
dusting bookshelves and tabletops
then reclines on a couch for a siesta.

I may have traveled far across the oceans
and beyond the blue mountains.
The road ahead is only the sound of
your own footsteps so far gone that
we are once again at the beginning
of new journeys-
all the while *Lunuganga* tugs me
at my sleeve and I don't know how to let her go.

Lunuganga Estate was the country house of the celebrated Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa who developed a new language in architecture called Tropical Modernism. The estate is now under a Trust and the buildings on the estate are now run as a boutique hotel.

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Memories of a Former Retainer of The Palace

Many were the days of merriment
and happiness was our destiny, or
so we thought.
Those days look distant,
weeds overrun the gardens of the Palace,
the famed Hall of Jewels is silent,
and the Lion Throne empty.
There are no echoes of shuffling footsteps
in busy corridors brimming with hopes of a nation.
Elegant images of court ladies recede into nostalgia
their soft whispers fade away inside folds of silk.

Our fates betray us and a king dies broken.
His former retainers and guards
scattered like leaves in autumn breeze
across distant lands and far valleys,

make ends meet in odd places.
 High beyond the city walls, under the shade of junipers his
 ashes rests in a reliquary -
 a reminder of what might have been.

Dark clouds loom over these lands,
 rains pour constantly.
 I weep for the days past and the days ahead,
 where future generations will
 scarce remember a once noble king
 but for the conspiracy of stars
 our beloved country too
 would have found her place in the sun.
 I, Wang Chen, former retainer of the royal household,
 lower my head for I'm unworthy of my king's kindness.

**_*_

Anne's Return

"I have always loved the hills," she said, then she ran down the slope, arms spread wide, the
 unbridled screams and laughter- carefree sounds echo briefly from her childhood.
 The placid waters mirror the sky, the trees, the encircling hills and a bright face luminous at the edge
 of the lake. Clouds pass by above and so do the years and we are no more free than our thoughts. The
 time when we climbed trees and rocks to our hearts' content is but a distant memory. Somewhere
 along the way, we lost our natural ability to live with spontaneous joy and cluttered our heads with
 objects of desire and conventions that really don't matter in the end.

The heat and dust of the cities in the vast tropical plains of the sub-continent where one lives to
 struggle and endure had gradually evaporated any connection to this land but she is here now in her
 grandmother's house in this season of renewals- dusting chairs, wiping picture frames, opening old
 scarred cupboards that emanate forgotten fragrances, pounding secret spices collected from
 Himalayan gardens in the kitchen of many stories remembered, told, retold with rich embellishments
 as a gallery of ghosts from her past patiently await for Anne's long overdue return.

**_*_

The Unbearable Tyranny of Not Knowing

Then one day a young man, just
 married, clean-shaven returns
 home
 built by his father's sweat and cunning
 climbs a chair,
 dismantles a fan off an iron hook on the ceiling,
 slips a rope through an old spring scale
 with the cold precise hands of a surgeon
 tugging at the nylon to measure the load tension,
 dips a handkerchief into a bottle of chloroform his

head is a cloud of sleep.

In the time of the jade green river
 when it took all his might to haul that beautiful beast-
 its gold-silver scales blinding his eyes.
 Cries of joy mingle with the sweat, sun and salt of youth a
 bronze body splaying the cool waters
 to gather in the abundance of his arms a
 thirty-pound masher.
 It's tail swinging and slapping wildly in the air,
 clinging for survival in a fleeting world
 even as life ejaculates from its enormous mouth.

A shard of light breaks through the window
 his faint blue veins pulsating under a porcelain chin above a
 round grey shirt.
 A photo frame on the mantel piece
 is turned sideways as if to avert
 the three of them freeze-framed in his bulging eyes.
 Here now with a broken smile, jammed fists a
 half-bitten tongue that mocks you
 as if to say something but won't
 because you will read him wrong again.

This long night wet with the slime of fear,
 you try to clutch onto anything
 your palms drenched from holding your face.
 The coming days will melt us all into islands.
 The unbearable tyranny of not knowing will
 crush your hands with roses.
 Nothing you hold will ever have meaning- so,
 mark your footsteps with ash
 and burn all your broken things burn
 them without a word.

**_*_

Sikkim has one of the highest rates of suicides in India. In the last statistics of 2012, it has edged out Pondicherry and is second only to Maharashtra.

Affliction

Struck by the beauty of
 the autumn moon
 Jez left home and a wife by the windowsill.
 She sat sideways with a porcelain face
 and diamonds sparkling around her long neck.
 He could not find logic nor love
 in his leaving
 just that the gulmohar was in full bloom
 and his heart could not contain the overflow

of scarlet and crimson.
 The mango pulp dripping slow from a branch
 had teased him all summer long
 with its scented skin, succulent body
 and a dimple digging deep
 beyond the smooth golden-green pasture.
 Sometimes he hears whispers that curl inside his ears,
 unraveling like silk from a writhing body,
 licking the soft belly of his tongue.
 The shape is foreign, tender, and blind with pleasure- all
 senses are perked to the full.
 Unbeknownst to him of this peculiar affliction,
 he wonders, moving in with lovers and strangers, he
 pauses briefly even as he is enclosed
 into the ample bosom of colossal nights.

**_*_

Gonpo Tashi's Sorrow

In memory of Tibetans who have died in foreign lands as refugees

They left their yaks and sheep on the high pastures, left
 their old and infirm at the village,
 left their repositories of faith and
 carried few precious relics hidden inside their *chubbas*,
 they buried the dead over frozen passes,
 cut locks of hair and kept them inside amulets,
 they slipped away under the starlight, they left without goodbyes.

Yesterday, they were ordinary people
 living ordinary lives beyond these mountain ranges,
 today they live in an alien land,
 with "refugee" written all over their faces,
 eking out a living building roads in another country,
 gods have no answers to their plight
 and he puts the children to sleep with lies.

He dreams tonight of azure skies over Lithang,
 of glacier streams running across sweeping valleys and
 his mother waving and calling him
 from across fields of barley with sunshine in her eyes.
 Decades have gone by living in refugee camps,
 hope has a charlatan's face and his memories play tricks.

His dreams have since withered away for his mother is long deceased and
 he himself is old, half blind and his bones know
 that he may never return to those high pastures-
 they lie far beyond his reach for a final embrace before he sleeps.
 In the emptiness of his room he sometimes cries an old regret like a prayer,

“Forgive me my beloved fatherland for I could not break free your shackles.”

**_*

Moonstruck

And then there you were
standing beneath the shade of a magnolia tree
with a quiet smile
building a room in my heart without
words or water.

You wore daisies in your hair when
we met under a blue ocean.
Drifting past swaying sea grass and corals you
pulled the sun into the cup of your hand.

Our thighs touched briefly in the swirls
burnishing an urgent hunger into memory.
You dropped a black pearl on my body and
laughing swam away.

On that cold December night
you did not mind the stars
which gathered overhead into a whirlpool and
poured like summer rain.

I saw a fluid figure dance in the dark
silently to the rhythm of earth and wind.
A purple alley cat leapt high over the moon
the night you bid me to stay and not leave.

**_*_

The Way of Silence

Ray listens deeply to her words
and when words become few he
listens to her silence more
and finds a pathway to a language.

The way her eyes gaze and move in
the emptiness of the room; swim
and sparkle in the sun light
sonnets tumble out of summer breeze
and when dark clouds fill them
they sink deep beneath the ocean amid the
ruins of lost worlds.

The way her hand brushes across her face
releasing blossoms in the air,
the way she ties her hair into a bun or
unties to let it flow free in the wind or
holds it with a scarf are all but phases of the moon. The
way she reclines on the bed with one arm
carrying her shoulders and the other gently clasping her
breasts.

The incandescent light spills
from the nape of her neck
running down a straight back
ending at the cleft of her buttocks.

Ray's mind traces the contours of silence,
rising and falling over its many moods until
it drowns into a pool of wordless ink.

-*_*_*-

Death of a Father (Part II)

Because your face is
inside my brain
those eyes turn slowly
the landscapes in my dreams, though
your flesh is dust now.
I recall a tough weathered face
that broke like a child's when amla's coffin arrived
seven years ago,
that night when marigolds were breaking under a bright moon your
pain breached a sea of sorrow
engulfing us all into islands of grief.
The next morning you had
no compass to wake up to,
no center to anchor on,
no north, south, east or west no
heaven or earth,
you couldn't find nothing
or
you simply didn't care anymore.
And now you too have gone, leaving
us but a coded language -
a row of white shirts and grey pants, a deck of cards, the
steaming aroma of dried fish on black lentil,
a Webley & Scott revolver I sneaked as a boy firing
each shot with fearful glee.
This montage of grainy images is
a gift, a medallion
with the dead weight of the past

even as dark shadows split into a pincer movement to ambush me another day.

**_*_

The Making of the Pure Man

There was once a man who was obsessed with the idea of purity – bleached bright and seductive like cocaine. He had pure unblemished beliefs and was of unadulterated bloodline and wanted the world to be filled with pure people like 24 carats pure.

So, with great oratory and political acumen he reached out first to the ordinary people who dug their roots to align to the new idea of purity. In this pursuit they shed all ideas and emotions that bloomed into colour, discarding rainbows as they were too multi coloured for the new monochromatic world order. As they became more insular, they discovered a revelation in the legends of their forefathers in which they had been waiting for a messiah like him for as far back as their history could recede. A heavy mix of race, faith and bloodlines blossomed like a big new shining hope and so quickly all these people rose up like a storm till it became a hurricane and lashed out hard against a placid earth uprooting polluted people clinging pathetically to their contaminated lives.

“One day this wretched place will be heaven on earth,” the pure man declared in bold unalloyed words and gazed longingly into a spotless future with his chin up and head held high. His sharp profile with an aquiline nose, firm jaw line and deep-set eyes was a Kodak moment and it framed itself into a poster of sincere exhortation.

His dream proliferated and became everyone’s dream. Accomplishing his dream was a national enterprise. All pure people worked with the highest sense of duty and purpose for a most noble cause which led to the herding and corralling of all impure people into camps arranged in neat long rows. However, there was a deadlock as they could not agree which was the best course of action to adopt to rid all these dirty lives from the face of this earth. After a long and thorough discussion that lasted till the wee hours of the morning and taking all views into consideration they came to an overwhelming consensus which was billed as Solution X. State of the art facilities propped up on computer screens detailing in sophisticated 3D models, the stages of extermination on autonomous conveyor belts that was designed to process most efficiently and cost effectively the total eradication of all designated impure people and their soiled blood, infected ideology and false faith from this land forever without a trace.

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The Quiet Rebellion of Ramiro Garcia Rodriguez

Ramario, the illegal immigrant retires for the day. He takes me to a shack and says,
"This is my home." I notice he has few possessions. On one wall are framed photographs of his family. He points out some members who are missing like fingers from his hand. When I ask how, he offers a sigh,
"Knocked down by treacherous journeys on train roofs, the killer desert, and many dark rivers along the border. Others are dead in a forgotten country drowned in the faded blue margins of a map a million years ago."

In this climate of distrust
working like a mule, used and abused.
Unintended,
they have drawn this "Hombre" from the shadows.
Collective prejudice of a nation congeals
like a cold lump of victory across this vast land.

He tastes the wind,
this survivor of many sorrows
at last stands up, arms akimbo
legs apart, sleeves rolled up.
The salt of the land is not only a memory
it is his sweat which has mingled with the mud - a
tiny wet patch moist with dreams.

On the brow of a hill this ghost of a man
finally digs his boots
and as he lifts his head heavenward he knows- this
piece of sky is not for leaving.

**_*_