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.

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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 khao inlayed 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.
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.

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**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 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.

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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.

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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.”

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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.

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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.

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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 corraling 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.

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