

MADHU RAGHAVENDRA
Writing Sample- Poems

Artist

I don't mind
being the non-essential.

Even a child takes
its mother for granted.
It does not run back
to its mother until it's hurt.

Nobody first thinks of water
when they arrive
at an exquisite dinner party,
until they are choking.

I don't mind
being the non-essential knowing
you will come looking when
things are broken
and nothing else works.

Art is non-essential
Until it is not.

Holding You
for Yuvaan

I wear you
like rivers wear thirst
skies wear blue
cats wear silk
poems wear time.

You shine like a rain-drenched
synthetic street on a broken summer night
reflecting on rusted rear-view mirrors
brand new taillights, kissing of stars
a streetlight that germinates from a Dante couplet.

Your dreams are balm for my tired eyes
I keep all noises from breaking
your measured sleep
I hide the slightest sounds
that the night may bring —

the passing footsteps of the moon
the whisper of rustling pages
the rotation of the fan blades
the coarseness of sand on seashores
the clashing of cymbals at dawn.

I hold you in the cradle of my arms
comfort you with freedom songs, your ears
where beats my heart, your tiny hands spread
your tender spine rests
on your mother's *dupatta* knotted on my back.

Spring

My memory of our pregnancy
is all kinds of red—
peeling beetroots, chopping carrots,
de-seeding pomegranates
rinsing tender *desi* chicken,
removing the gills from the fish
Standing by the three-burner gas stove
the flames are a handful of *semal*
The sound of red glass bangles
every time you change sides in sleep;
Eyes shut in broad daylight
red from the aorta of the night
The linea nigra is a brownish horizon
that bears the crimson dawn
The placenta brings a lifetime of spring — the
heart of a mother, the hands of a father
You lie under a flowering hibiscus tree; the
rust-red iron sucrose
flows through a timeless drip-set,
the ever-fluctuating hemoglobin
the ultrasound images of the baby
somersaulting in the womb
like a bird that cannot wait to find the sky
through a bougainvillea doorway
The body is a scrambling summer vine
that bears sweet, juicy, red watermelon flesh
The courtyard, the heart, everything overgrows
Gently, red palms rub the bump, calm the baby
A beloved promise pollinates from love
The pink lilies open their buds, birth.

Gālè

— for Poge Karso

The wrap and weft of stories
knit life and lore tightly.
Automated looms loom,
the dust on our hands draws debt
and dullness takes over.
The assembly lines kill culture, societies
now come in the same clothes.

She meditates like a mountain.
One end of the loom tied to the window,
an antelope of light leaps looking for a companion;
the other end to her spine.
Her nerves run through the universe.
There are no permanent fixtures,
the voice of her fabric is untamed.

Her dyes don't bleed; she bleeds love
for daughters, brocades of rain,
fashion, decorative dashes, peacock plumes and
lakes of lilacs that drown man and his machines.
Her colours are infinite, her needles converse
in codes, migrate centuries
before she brings them home.

Her motifs are faceless revolutions.
No pamphlets are served, no slogans raised
yet her women blossom
at the dance of her tribe like wild orchids.
She owns no war, stitches boundaries and
harvests the sun on her loom,
yet none of her children weave a gālè.

(Note: The gālè is the colourful wrap that is worn around the waist by the Galo women. The Galo are a central Eastern Himalayan tribe which primarily inhabit the West Siang, Lepa Rada, Lower Siang, East Siang, and Upper Subansiri districts of Arunachal Pradesh, in North East India.)

Salt

She comes from Harvard or Emory
Takes a Toyota Innova to Tezpur
To do research on women
Enslaved in tea gardens
Drowned in *nimokh saah*.

She devices an intervention
Divides the women
In experiment and control groups
Uses hand sanitiser as she explains
They get half the salt in their tea.

She takes a picture of the valley
A selfie with those women for memory
And returns to her hotel to finish her paper
Excessive salt causes anemia, hypertension
And maternal mortality, she writes.

The tea drum boils, the tea woman is tired of trials
Her back is poisoned with iron and arsenic;
She wraps salt in torn paper, ties it to the end
Of her sari, and secretly slips it into the tea.
All she has is salt.

(Note: nimokh saah- salt tea, usually consumed by the tea garden workers of Assam)

Sunday

There is no Sunday
for the farmer's fallen back
for the paddy field bearing gold
for the fermenting rice wine.

There is no Sunday
for the Birsa fighting for his land
for the Government conspiring to claim us
and everything under our feet.

There is no Sunday
for contamination of justice
for poems to be born
for blood to be poured into revolutions.

There is no Sunday
for neonates dying from extreme hunger for
stealing from coal mines and river beds
for the uncertain rotis in migrant labour bazaars.

There is no Sunday
for the clouds to bathe in quiet lakes
for the return of long-lost love
for the clock that has no hands.

Sundays are for those who obey.

Daydreaming

The beginning of the month,
salary has been credited.

What's budgeted is budgeted —
the groceries, school fees, rents,
electricity, house help, Netflix and cosmetics.

Governments are phlebotomists
who gently puncture veins, draw taxes,
give us a barbed wire country, roads and rigs,
talk a little about nuclear war and army,
tell us it's for our own safety.

Save some contingency for postcards and poets;
write to a stranger, stick a love stamp, and post it.
Poets have no country, veins, or salaries, they wait
for your postcards in their daydreams as you
buy their books and read their poems, in barter.

Losing a Tongue

— for GN Devy & Lisa Lomdak

A mother never dies, so does a language.
Words turn to birds, rest in herds of clouds,
come down on forests, stay like a leaf that holds the last drop of rain.

Tani will survive, grow like wild ferns
in the crevice of barren walls, between the loss of words.
The trains that leave Naharlagun will come back to these hills that are hospices.

The Arunachali Hindi will help trade
Tired tongues will look for words of love
like the *mithun* looks for salt.

Brothers will then come together to teach their children Tani
Look for lost lullabies, search for stolen sagas in cast away caskets
Create art from old and new words, embrace common sounds.

The skies, hills, forests and rivers will hold a *Keba*
The free skies will shine, the free hills will speak
The free rivers will sing, the free forests will write in Tani.

(Note: Tani is a language spoken mostly among the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, India and neighboring regions. Till recently, the language had no written text, and was passed on through oral traditions. Mithun- Indian bison; Keba- village council.)

Bastariya Beer

I go to villages to record hope and love
and anthropometry of children
suffering from centuries of inaccurate averages.

In Bastar, the Gonds live
in villages without roads
their independence yet to be taken.

It's morning; the rains have nowhere to go,
no men, no women —
no brokers, none broken.

We sit around in a thatch hut
smeared with cow dung
and drink *salfi*—Bastariya beer.

Milk is for calves, meat for people —
minced, hung above smoke and fire,
cured to taste.

The dance of vegetarianism is across the river,
where men did not learn to hunt wild rabbits
or enjoy the pleasures of cock fights.

We pick children playing with piglets —
you frolic with the ones you love
and eat them when you are hungry.

We time travel to the BC era
to tell them they are undernourished
according to some org in Geneva.

There's no 'free the nipples' campaign, they're free.
Their eyes, hollow from the sounds of the rounds

of gun-fires in neighboring villages

tell us more than their mid-upper arm circumference.
The measuring tapes go green, go yellow,
the red ones look better than urban anorexic models.

We invade homes with stadiometers.
A woman tells me she can make these
height measuring machines herself.

We are on either side of the widening river. I
cannot translate stadiometer in Gondi nor
tell her it's Conformité Européenne certified.

I tell her, 'You don't know, they are global standards.'
She tells me, 'You don't know our village wood,
only I may not get that, that unnatural shine.'

The infinities, right and wrong,
who can tell the potency of their
stale rice porridge, *page?*

(Page: watery rice porridge consumed in Bastar, a predominantly tribal region in India)

Bio-Data

A Thanjavur Maharashtrian
Born on the Hooghly
Calmed to my Avva's Kannadiga lullaby
Soaked in sambar and rasam
Served day after day with *begun* or *aalu bhaja*

I speak nomadic of my ancestors
Marathi from where they migrated
Tamil from where they then settled
Kannada from porous borders
Bengali from the softness of the Ganga clay
English from the convent where I schooled
Reciting *Hanuman Chalisa* at the school's chapel
Waking up to M S Subhalakshmi's *Suprabhatam*
Finding peace in the wealth of Mahboob-e-Illahi
In love with a Galo girl from Arunachal
(Where the shadows of the clouds rest on mountains
And the Yomgo and Siang fall in love)
Who speaks better Telugu than my mother
Sings Ghazals like Penaz Masani
And loves Ghalib like Purani Dilli ever did

I have no belongings —
Poetry is all I'll ever need.

A Desert Song

When Bhavari Devi sings *Tan Kattey*
To the world, the world loses its way.

A song of songs, women are war cries,
Songs struck in their throats sewn fast.

The song scorches the earth, breeding cacti;
Thorns are termites, flowers are a lie.

The *ghoonghat* is a shroud of conformity,
The cost of staying alive where art is cruelty.

Patriarchy is a fist of iron; it builds to destroy,
Turns songbirds to delicious feast, voices to alloy.

And when music springs forth from the courtyard
Skies go deaf and men drench history with tears.

For a Bhopi's song rises above flesh and bone,
Beyond tears of shrouds and palaces of stone.

And in a long melancholy note, all barriers are erased,
To usher in a time when conformity will be razed.

(The Bhopas are the community of folk singers of the local deities in Rajasthan; Bhopi being the female counterpart.)

Fluidity

Once you start breathing
the sex organs come first
then the name to float beyond the named.

Names change into (other) names
In every story, in every defiance
list of fictional names post-incendiaries.

The sides of triangles have names,
the vanished or the vanquished have names,
the puppets of ventriloquists have a name.

Names can be like Sisyphus's—meaninglessness
which leads to despair
and somehow despair feels home.

Raghavendra is a chauvinistic name for
a Hindu child with male sex organ;
it's another name for Maryada Purushottama Ram.

Raghavendra, Raghu, Raghav all sound nice,
but they are sound of
inconsistent masculinity or utopian perfection.

Utopia should be left to fiction,
appropriated texts and state-owned museums.
Madhu is a girl's name,

I have been told over and over again
but honey, Madhu is honey
gender is as free flowing as cerebrospinal fluid.

A Song for the Farmers

*-for the Tamil farmers who protested for 41 days at
JantarMantar in the scorching summer of 2017*

Dried fields are inflammable.
On the charred road asphalt and tar
behind the barricades at Jantar Mantar;
the farmers wither like crops in drought.

People come, take pictures with them and leave.
'Know Hindi?' 'No Indi only Tamil.'
People come to take pictures of them and leave.
'Know English?' 'Little English.'

People pretend; autos, buses, vehicles pass by.
Baba, politicians, activists, poets, come and go.
Government, corporate, road tars have no moral.
Although, I've seen tar melt in Delhi's April heat.

Sixty-year-old Nacchamma, half-naked,
half-dead cries. There are no tears.
'If death is what lies ahead, then I
would rather die protesting.'

The black breasts of clouds have dried up.
The monsoon-fed mother Kaveri,
who for centuries has nurtured the sky,
raised pearls, tiger stripes, blood, and city of men
like all mothers and daughters in history, is dying.

When the sky is barren, they borrow borewells
to pierce into the hard heart of their earth
find pain, dead dryness, starved cattle, sore skin
parched pulse, songs of sorrow without water.

The land now is infested with predatory
Loan sharks: *Sudugadu teriyame allaiyara sothuku.*
'Why do you have clothes on you still? Why
does your wife have a mangalsutra?'

A dirty bottle of river,
polythene of cloud,
a dead rainbow hanging from a rope,
are we dreaming of a rain that we have killed?

Swarm of Locusts

Someday I want you to wake up as me;
Want you to know how it feels
To be unloved
In a necrotic world
Where Petrarch is killed
Before the sonnet is tuned.
Poetry limps through a mob
Torqued against religion;
Tilling through graves,
Tired voice messages
Poured like taleless toluene —
Same old, same old,
Sucking on sameness
Shameless surviving Selling
shanties as shelters
Cities put together by sewers
To wriggle in pain,
Skinless, crawling on gasoline
Hollow systems
Causing incurable gangrenes
With no revolutions
Gag with fear, ill with illusion
Turn rodents
Of punitive peasantry.

Nest

The rain has gone mad.
It pours. More pours. Pours more.
The drains drown, skies flow
Like cascades of silence into abyss.
Once, I could leave homessilently,
Change cities like clouds that leave without rain —
Now, I dress up, but go nowhere;
Or maybe dress to stand by the window.
I spy on *koels* nesting on a *supari* tree,
Or the dense bamboo groove;
Watch squirrels run on pointed railings
Before taking a leap onto to an Agar tree.
I write poems in my head, and lose them
In the grass while singing Kabir to the rain,
Watch prayer flags fade, and answers flutter
Questionably between escape and love.
Am I a *koel* trying to make nest,
Who has found a home in Liyi?
