

## Sridala SWAMI

Poems and a short story

### **Surviving The Fall Meant Using You For Handholds**

—Title of a painting by Eric Fischl, Bedroom Scene #6, oil on linen, 2004.

Back striped black, suit striped white  
the wall – just striped; the net – just curved.  
Crouched where the light comes from  
you see that there is no protection in  
the downward curves of the net;  
it is only a shroud over one half of the frame. No  
comfort in the dark lines on her back  
that could be wings; though they dip at the spine  
like children's drawings of crows  
in a deep blue sky, the lines will not lend her  
wings.

He stands at the precise point where wall  
meets wall, at the intersection of another  
'V' that's going nowhere. Caught between  
net and woman, objects weighing down the frame,  
it appears that freedom would lie behind him,  
in the empty spaces at his back. But look again –  
the stripes on the wall spear him in place;  
like X-rays, they pierce his insides. Those  
might even be his bones showing through,  
those white lines on his suit.

His hands are clenched and white. He is looking this  
way. Caught, unable to look away,  
you slide like light off the window ledge  
from where you were peeping. As you fall you  
recall her hands bent at the elbows, convenient  
handholds you did not take.  
As the air rushes past, all is blue, white, blur. A  
cocoon of sound. You remember  
on the net in the room, caught, a little orange and yellow that  
could have been flowers  
or butterflies.

## Post Mortem

The brain in its jar floats and dreams:  
streams of memory, consciousness, preserved. The  
two halves, like breasts, grieve  
for the softness of skin for the reserved whisper of  
touch. All this has already happened

and will never happen again. The brain curls itself up,  
hits glass, ricochets and remembers: foetal, an echo  
of shape, a pearl  
of desire – his body holding the other one that  
burnt away and became ember.

There should be a question here. A ‘how’ or a ‘why’—  
a way to understand linearities. Instead, there are ridges  
and convolutions, the repetition of blood beating,  
the raising of hair along an arm when a finger follows  
vertebrae down the spine.

Brain body umbilicus. Our bodies stretch within  
and without to accommodate life. But without you  
without you without you  
I am only a dissonance, an object adrift, a wretched  
longing for the pain of being alive.

### **Cryogenic**

After *The Cry Of Winnie Mandela* by Njabulo S. Ndebele

Let's suppose it is the man who waits  
for the woman to return.

Let's assume it's been twenty years,  
or thirty.

In all that time, through all upheavals  
and sorrows, and who knows, perhaps a few joys,

he holds himself ready for the moment when  
she will return.

While she goes on adventures and  
becomes lined with life,

or perhaps takes on large burdens on  
behalf of many people,

he is perfect and cold. He  
is waiting for her.

One day, triumphant, she returns expecting  
to find many things changed

but some things, at least,  
just as they were.

As with Odysseus, she thinks she will know him by his  
old scars

and learn about him by  
his new ones.

But in the twenty or thirty years she has been away the  
world has left no mark on him;

nothing acquired, nothing changed. He is  
just as she had left him.

Perfectly preserved, he  
knows nothing.

What can he tell her about truth or  
reconciliation?

### **Performing Patience**

*In Japanese, the word gaman means, “enduring the seemingly unbearable with patience and dignity.”*

*For China Miéville*

Out of wood, shellac, paint  
in Minidoka, Matsumoto makes a  
daughter in the box:

faces and two empty squares an  
escape clause his children study  
their backs toward

the no-fly zone window  
hung around  
the immutable Idaho sky

arrange evasions sliding  
blue in four minds  
people meeting people they knew.

## **Chromatography**

### *Solvent*

Give sleep a chance and know while you do that  
very little separates it from death. Rent your  
language by the night. Pay your dues:

### *Filter*

plant your dreams and watch them grow. Consent to  
their eventual departure and separate view  
of you from where they stand. Discard resentment:

### *Diffusions*

wear your vocabulary like a badge. Few dreams can  
survive their naming. Fragments of your days  
dissolve and separate into

### *Separations*

impossibilities. Try not to prevent whatever  
happens. What happens is, you  
will find, your days and nights are never congruent.



## Performance is all

On reading days

the poet navigates her work without memory  
or – more accurately – a memory with no true North or  
as a hiker without a map and a big thirst.

On days when the phone is dead

the poet declaims to the blind screen as if  
by an act of will she can coax a flicker  
of *certainly* from it.

On weekends

it is time for remembrances:  
of the first time of another first time every new time  
the printed paper is a tuning fork  
the faces telling her which way the wind will blow.

On every other day

she hates her voice when she listens to it

her poems end too soon

she remembers words from earlier drafts

some words contain at their tips [that thing in matches]

the dictionary under her pillow gives her dreamboats

this is not what she means when she says *tongue-tied*.



### **Redacted poetry is a message in a bottle**

You have one book with you. It is your lifeline, because you are now in a place with no means of communication. There is only this book, and your one chance of speaking to the world is through the words in it.

So you compose your message in your head, you mark words in the book, and you carefully cut them out one by one, knowing all the while that for every word you use up, others will be lost on the reverse. This is the opportunity cost of making your message.

But you do it anyway, because you must. At first your dispatches are voluble and profligate. Soon, you ration your words. As the pages become cut-outs the book speaks to you differently. It must now be a classic because every time you read it, it shows you something new.

The end of the book does not come, as it usually does, when the last page is turned. It comes when what remains are the unusable words. Everyone has a different list of these, but because this is the book you have and this is your list, the words that remain include 'anneal' and 'recombinant' and 'brise'. This is not to say that you do not love these words, or that you are not happy that somebody - the author of the book, for instance - found a use for them; just that you can't imagine what you could have to say that would include these and other such words.

But you learn these words because - after you have said all you have to say, after you have used up all the other words - these are all that are left you. Until other words come from the outside, until they can be recycled, the words you don't want or need are your companions through what you hope is only a temporary silence.

## Ten Eleven

*"There was a huge explosion. I looked out my window, and saw what appeared to be pieces of wings, on fire, falling from the sky."*

*Richard Drutman, photographer, on 11 October 2006.*

Icarus flying, Icarus falling landing  
our imagination wings feathers  
aflake.

In another age, poets meditated  
on Brueghel's canvas, marvelled at the ship  
and took the falling boy for granted.

They knew what he represented, that overreaching  
ambitious son of the more timid Daedalus.

It is the ship that drew their eyes in its wake –  
such indifference seemed fitting. After all, what could be colder than a  
world that will not even acknowledge your presence?

A world that holds the water, flat as a mirror, up to you as you  
rush towards it in a final fall. Only you shatter  
and are destroyed, Icarus. Not even your image.

Once you are under, who can tell broken feather from foam? This other boy  
is not like you. His wings are already burdened with the fears of all these  
years. No wonder he lost height rapidly.

What would he have needed to discard, to climb beyond fifty floors to where  
the wind can be clearly heard?

This boy is not like you. When he went up in flames, helicopters hovered  
and the streets were choked with people. They had their fists at their mouths stopping  
whatever threatened to fly out. Everyone took wing.

The air thrummed until you no longer knew  
who was rising and who falling. Gravity deserted us  
but our hearts were heavy. At last, when he fell – this other boy –  
we all came down to earth. We landed softly, like ash, not disturbing the earth  
with our presence. We became invisible.

In that moment, all places were home to us – skyscrapers, statues, walls, streets, bunkers,  
steps. Even the past, out of which we could have plucked you  
Icarus, as you fell past our window.

## Moth

In the days after my father's death, we kept a light on in the bedroom downstairs. It was a zero watt bulb we had originally put in for my grandfather when he used to visit because he needed it to see by when he went to the toilet. We never took it out, though we never used it again until after my father died.

I have been the first to wake up in the morning for some time now, to make

coffee and pack a school lunch. I'd come downstairs and my eyes would be drawn to that zero watt light. That was when I would really wake up: with the shock of knowing that the light signified an absence the room didn't yet feel.

On one of those mornings I noticed a moth on the wall just below the light. It

was a huge moth, with a large wingspan and touches of purple in the grey-brown. I

went to get a broom in which to catch it and let it out.

The broom was a new one, soft and sizeable. I parted it in the middle and reached for the moth. Holding it close, I thought, 'That was easy!' Near the door, I turned to check that I had indeed caught the moth. I hadn't; it was on another wall, half-hidden by the still-drawn curtains. I shook the broom loose or I don't know what and went back. I drew back all the curtains.

If I gave the moth a light whack, it would fall down stunned and I could pick it

up gently, I thought. I swiped; the moth fluttered away. I whacked at it; it flew higher. I climbed up on the empty bed and hit the wall where the moth was...had been. Its flight grew more frantic and irregular: it smashed itself against the light, the window; it came at me, swerved away. It looked like a small bat in that half-light.

While it was somewhere in the air, I hit at it repeatedly, blindly, hitting myself

in the forearm from time to time with the broom's handle. The moth disintegrated. Moth dust flew in the air and I breathed it in because I was breathing hard now and almost sobbing. I no longer wanted only to gather the moth and deliver it to the morning air. I wanted to destroy it.

The moth was nowhere. For something that large, that dark, that visible against the white walls, it had completely disappeared. I turned all the lights on in the bedroom, the dining room and the kitchen. Even in the bathroom. I looked behind every curtain, shook each one. I checked each wall carefully, section by section, as I would look for a pen in the clutter on my desk, certain it was there but I was just not seeing it. Finally, I started to pull furniture away from the wall to check behind them. I knelt to check under the bed.

There it was.

At the very centre under the double bed the moth lay, smaller than it had been. I lay on the cool floor, warm with exertion and watched it as it made a half-circle and lay still. Then I heard it.

I never knew until that moment that moths make sounds. It was a high

squeak, but not like that of bandicoots heard in the dark; not like other night sounds. But it was a sound all the same and it came from under that bed.

I swiped under with the broom but it was just out of reach. I shifted the broom so I was holding only the very edge of it and tried again but only managed to push the moth further away from me. I got up and went to the other side. This time I swept it out. It lay on the floor, tattered but still recognisably a moth. Like the very first time, I parted the broom to scoop it up. The moth

heaved itself off the floor and flew with heavy wings - isn't that strange? It had lost so much of its wing, but the flapping was slow and weary, as if the weight of wings was too much for it to bear.

It flew past. I was slow also, and I watched it go. I was ready to just let it be,

just die in peace in some corner of the room. It wasn't going to chew the curtains through in its current state. What did I want to kill it for, anyway? Against the growing light outside the window, the room became a little smaller, the lights a little more unnecessary. I turned them off. Room by room, I turned off every light and came back to lie down on the bed. Standing at the foot of the bed, though, I saw, backlit by the window, small bits of moth-wing, still drifting down. Though I couldn't see it, I was sure the bed must already be layered with flakes that were no longer brown or purple or any colour at all. I felt the breath rattle in my throat. There were other things to do.

Later, we found the moth under the fridge, still alive. We took it out and left it

on the steps. It still made half-hearted half-circles. I could not watch it any more. Still later, in my room, I took out Primo Levi's *Other People's Trades* to read his essay on the butterfly and I thought about that 'damned soul "which brings sorrow"' and that damned zero watt bulb which I had to change as soon as possible.

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