

# **Touch**

**Meena Kandasamy**

Foreword by  
**Kamala Das**

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## *Foreword*

Kamala Das

Once again after long years of search I came into contact with the power of honest poetry when I was reading Meena Kandasamy's anthology of verse.

She wove a fabric rare and strange, faintly smudged with the Indianness of her thought that saw "even the monsoons come leisurely strolling like decorated temple elephants." "The unseen lover weaves his way into every poem" she cries but she "must write about him forgetting the shame and the embarrassment it would cause for somehow it seems better than not writing anything at all." "An infidel's emptiness, a void closing over voids . . ."

Dying and then resurrecting herself again and again in a country that refuses to forget the unkind myths of caste and perhaps of religion, Meena carries as her twin self, her shadow the dark cynicism of youth that must help her to survive. "Happiness is a hollow world for fools to inhabit" cries Meena at a moment of revelation. Revelations come to her frequently and prophecies linger at her lips.

Older by nearly half a century, I acknowledge the superiority of her poetic vision and wish her access to the magical brew of bliss and tears each true poet is forced to partake of, day after day, month after month, year after year . . .

  
31/1/2006

## *Acknowledgements*

Thank you to my parents, Dr W B Vasantha and Dr K Kandasamy, for all the years of bringing me up and for letting me to be the woman I want to be. Thank you for having put up so patiently with my sharp words and that trademark sudden tears. Thank you for the courage you gave me and the confidence you put into my words: it made me write my first poem and all the poems thereafter.

Thank you Appa, for your unbounded and zealous encouragement; I wish all fathers loved their daughters this way. Thank you Amma, for having accepted me the way I turned out to be: I do feel sorry that could not I live up to your great expectations even in my poetry. Thank you Amma and Appa, above all, for teaching me never to compromise myself. It is the only lesson that I seem to have learnt all these years.

Thank you, my darling sister, Ilanthenral, for all the conceivable reasons available on this crowded planet. I will not even try listing them out; without you I wouldn't have survived this life, especially some of those bleak, wrecking days that almost broke me. My most special thanks because you were the first one to whom I secretly read the barebones of my poems, before they got a life of their own and walked into the world.

Thank you to my godparents K Amal, Henry Jerome and David Selvaraj for letting me cry my heart out and for the comfort you let me have.

Thank you to Kamala Das: I worship every line of your poetry. Much more, the courage I find in your powerful verse. Not even in my wildest dreams did I imagine that I would be writing something that would be read by you. No, really. Thank you because you have given me the belief and the blessings to go ahead.

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Thank you to J Ajani, now pursuing a post-graduation in biochemistry in Cuddapah. It is three years since we met, and you remain my only best friend. And yes, I am as possessive as I used to be during the past fifteen years.

Thank you to Sunil K Poolani: you descended like a lightning when I was hunting in the dark for a publisher. Oh, and you have been as quick too.

Thank you to Surya Rao, who is managing editor of Muse India, who taught me to have a rare kind of hope.

Thank you to artist Veera Santhanam, you have helped me with all the artwork.

Can all my love and gratitude be catalogued, or laid end to end? Because you dwell in so many of my poems, should I still continue my struggle to confine you into words? The thanks I think up in my head are swallowed on the way down to my throat; and what I feel takes up the shape of hot, glass tears and a formless ache, so you shall have my silence instead. Learn to fall in love with that too. And, in the end, how shall I say it all to you, for being my past, my present and my future. Thank you because you touched me so deeply.

**Meena Kandasamy**

*15 August 2006*





*bring him up to worship you*



### Lines addressed to a warrior

come.

colonise me.

creep into the hollows  
of my landscape—my eyes click lock:  
no more the drawing of the gates.  
set up your home your office  
the writing desk and the trading post.  
ignore the sand-brown  
of my skin—a willing blind  
i'll never know black from white.  
take me and talk of your finer finish  
stunned i yield, so script your stories here.

invade.

this inner-space.

adjust the pace and pulse  
of marching armies—and house  
your machine guns, its manuals.  
populate me with anthems  
the songs of wrath and those of war.  
draft words that echo  
of gunfire, to accompany  
my lone dance of submission.  
though prose mad and power crazy, you  
conquer me, never with malice or manhood.

capture.

every territory.

fill up all my blank skin  
to resound with the strike of scimitars,  
the sadness of success.  
have all your battles lost, or won,  
chronicled across my line of down.

### Excerpts from a study guide

Teach him not to seek  
Where he has been taught to find. . .

Lead him into the land  
Of silences—Ignore his words of praise  
Where all the perfidy hides. . .

Because the climax of a dream  
Is its return to reality, let him cling  
To your laughter, to your eyes that shine of light. . .

Make him study the gilt of gold  
Against the wan brown of your skin but let him choose. . .

Exhibit your flawless arms  
Dearest child of 1984—no vaccination mark  
Nothing to remind him of his *Maari* or small pox. . .

Lead him to count the moles  
On your skin but force him to begin  
With the beauty spot above your lips. . .

Talk to him of that summer of chickenpox  
That left you almost unscathed, but show him  
The unbeautiful gash where metal seared eight-year skin. . .

Tell him the history of your *Raphunzel* hair  
That tickled your shins. And of a cruel world that sapped  
You, so your hair cannot reach down to cover your shame. . .

Press his ears against your skin  
And hear him announce—the dance  
Is in the bones, the dance is in the blood. . .

*Bring him up to worship you* 15

He shall chart and plot  
And map, but shrewd girl  
Bring him up to worship you. . .

Allow him to memorize all of you  
So that, some day, he shall ravish you  
Screaming fiery love-words in your mother-tongue. . .

He would have  
Learnt your lesson, by then. . .

### Frenzied light

When you called me  
To light up your life  
I could never refuse.  
But, there are things I ask of you.

Love, I can't be a candle  
For I know it is an ancient lie.  
The candle is for the solemn,  
And for those who yearn a slow  
And settled tenderness. Not for us.  
It is for those who can bear to leave  
A mass of their waste, the dregs of their glory.  
O, it is for the selfish who seek to burn through a medium.

Love, I will promise you a substitute.  
I could be that piece of holy camphor  
So safely locked away from prying hands.  
And dearest, when I burn for you, that single time  
Nothing shall remain of me, or of you, except that flash of  
Memory. Our blending shall be so sublime, so intense, so total.

Come, consume me,  
Devastate me love, if you ever will,  
But with a force that I will forever remember.

## Storming in tea-cups

*"a cup of tea is not a cup of tea, when you make it at twilight just for him."*

call it a love potion.  
liquid dreams.  
scented desire.  
wishes boiled to a blend.

three cinnamon pods  
the dried darjeeling leaves  
milk and pearl-white cream  
simmering to a syrup to be filtered.

as you sweat in its vapours  
and imagine how the tea tastes  
against his lips his teeth his tongue  
and the pale pink insides of his throat

as you stir in the sugar  
and test a spoonful to see  
if it stings and soothes and  
stimulates the way you intended

as you pour it into his cup  
with eyes mirroring supernovas and  
study the desirable brown of the tea

an entire shade  
that fits exactly  
between the desert sand of your skin  
and the date palm of his.

almost the color  
of your possible child.

### You don't know if you are yielding or resisting

it is the last day of the year  
and you think about writing  
a farewell poem for the year  
that was, for the year you  
began writing poetry

you think of the tragedies  
you know, you even plan  
to write about naming your only  
daughter (whenever she is born,  
anyway) after a suicide-bomber  
you try to think of fear and hate  
and some devious defence for all  
those sins you had painstakingly  
planned to do just so that your  
poetry has more life and colour  
and verve and in the end it might  
appear that you have experience

you strive like mad to avoid writing  
poems about your unseen lover,  
you concede deep within that you  
do not know his name or age or what  
he murders for a living, yet he weaves  
his way into every poem of yours

you want to write that single poem  
which is free of him, which does not  
carry the stains of his masculine scent  
and which doesn't make you think of  
his hairless chest and the deftness of his  
fingers on you and god yes god his eyes  
you want to write a poem just for yourself,

a poem where you do not cringe  
or stand shame-faced at his  
worship of himself and how  
silently and steadfastly he  
has made you worship him

you have always known that  
your knowledge of him was  
very limited—that expecting  
the stranger to caress you when  
you cry is an insane idea—  
after all when your lover comes  
he has no memory about the  
days and months and years he has  
spent inside your heart and he does  
not wish to hear for how long you  
have harboured him right between  
your breasts

you notice the clock tick away  
and again you give up writing  
that poem for it always eludes you

then,

you succumb to all your cravings  
and write all you can about him  
forgetting the shame and the  
embarrassment it would cause  
somehow it seems better than  
not writing anything at all.

### **Fuchsia shock**

My bed smells of textbooks  
and it is more than a month or so,  
since I dreamt of sunlight and the sky's  
embrace. Even a woman's lush vanities—  
scarlet silk and shining gold—have been lost  
on me. I am snared in a world of aqua, fuchsia,  
and lime set dangerously against black and white.

Words tightly wrapped,  
and imprisoned in a cluster of  
highlighter colours, share my slavery.  
Rattling loud, the colorized intrusions  
have pickled the past, leaving me to savour  
saturation. Oh hell, even my treasured dreams  
have been bleached away in shades of three, or five.

Save me, from this  
unbearable starkness  
of fluorescence; where lines  
rehash the pages brutally, moving  
with sounds of spectacled scrutiny.  
For, all that I can bear to comprehend  
is the loss of dare: my sheltered cowardice.  
And, the sole comfort I crave, through stifled  
tears is stolen love beneath stained glass windows.

Dearest, lavish your love  
in slender earthtone shades,  
in the colours of skin singing—  
to shield our renewed dreams,  
and to believe, once more, in absolutes.

## Mulligatawny dreams

*anaconda. candy. cash. catamaran.  
cheroot. coolie. corundum. curry.  
ginger. mango. mulligatawny.  
patchouli. poppadom. rice.  
tatty. teak. vetiver.*

i dream of an english  
full of the words of my language.

an english in small letters  
an english that shall tire a white man's tongue  
an english where small children practice with smooth  
    round pebbles in their mouth to the spell the right zha  
an english where a pregnant woman is a 'stomach-child-lady'  
an english where the magic of black eyes and brown bodies  
    replaces the glamour of eyes in dishwater blue shades and  
    the airbrush romance of pink white cherry blossom skins  
an english where love means only the strange frenzy between  
    a man and his beloved, not between him and his car  
an english without the privacy of its many rooms  
an english with suffixes for respect  
an english with more than thirty six words to call the sea  
an english that doesn't belittle brown or black men or women  
an english of tasting with five fingers  
an english of talking love with eyes alone

and i dream of an english

where men  
of that spiky, crunchy tongue  
buy flower-garlands of jasmine  
to take home to their coy wives  
for the silent demand of a night of wordless whispered love . . .

**And, the stars are not sufficient**

In the wild throbbing sky,  
(with its thousand metaphors)  
i m looking out for meteors—  
and, the stars, it seems,  
are no longer sufficient.

Once, i was a pampered child,  
wasting wishes, never knowing,  
what to long for. Meteors came,  
and went, twitching for the end  
of light, or glory; and waiting,  
for the whispered prayers. And,  
I stood, wishless, a tiny cynic,  
a crazed agnostic, talking of  
science and nature, of big  
bangs and broken lives against  
the fevered zeal of blind  
faith and fervid hope.

Now, I long for the absolutes,  
but, I am lost with the absent  
words, an infidel's emptiness,  
a void closing over voids.  
But for all I care, I refuse  
to confine, or enshrine  
this rising  
                  this falling,  
this state of  
suspension  
in four-letter words. I know  
of the danger that movement  
holds, of radiant Icarus dying with his  
dreams alive, and Lucifer's quick

descent, and fallen men and women  
in the purgatory, waiting and waiting—  
palpitating like widowed hearts for fates  
tossed to them. And some bit of me  
is also being tossed about but what  
sustains me, like a banshee caress,  
is the blanket of throbbing stars—  
while I look out, for meteors,  
rehearsing a little wish  
and longing to make  
a little magic  
work for us.

### Whispered intimacies

And I got your words  
Today.

I will have them painted  
Tonight.

Try to choose  
Or take them all.

Glitter on innocent  
Raspberry lips that plead  
For touch, for closer  
Communion.

Composition in coffee  
Cream blending with bitter  
Chocolate worn on business  
Days.

Ravenous red, for fiery  
Animals in us, tamed,  
By love in dying  
Languages.

Colourless words, invisible  
But everywhere—Love  
Reserved for needy  
Nights.

Love, remember the rain  
And our fading words  
On lonely nights  
Drenching—Drizzling—

*Bring him up to worship you 25*

Straying to a steady  
Chatter or studied  
Silence.

Remember our  
Whispered intimacies  
Which still linger on lips.

Remember that some words  
Which once beheld promise  
Now hold our bodies  
In motion.

**Non-conversations with a lover**

don't talk to me  
of sudden love. . .

in our land  
even the monsoons come—  
leisurely, strolling like  
decorated temple elephants  
(the pomp, the paraphernalia)—  
after months of monotonous prayer,  
preparations and palpitating waits.

my darling  
his silence  
(*those still shoulders*)  
but his eyes dance  
his eyes dance  
(*so wild, so wild*)

so i think of raging  
summer storms—  
like uncontrollable tuskers  
trampling in *mast*  
(the madness, the lust)—  
across the forests of our land. . .

## He replaces poetry

Two months into love and today I turn into a whore  
Hunting for words, tearing them out from soiled sheets  
Of mind or pinching them from the world like removing  
Jade-green flecks from tiger's eyes. . . And poetry refuses  
Entry into my mirrored life that is bequeathed to him.

I try the mad-woman's antics: I have pulled my hair and  
Bruised my thin wrists and bit the insides of my cheeks till  
They have bled a warm red sourness and I have starved  
In arrogance to call the words home to me and thrown up  
To clear me of him but he, strong dark man, refuses to budge,

Give way or take leave. My dark nights of savage tears have  
Gone in search of needy shores deserting me (with the devil  
Of a lover who sleeps half-a-dozen streams apart) and so  
Have the words that once made me the sad lone woman  
I was, and pretended to be. I am happy now he says and

I nod, like a Tanjore doll in breeze, and reply in cloying tones  
This is happiness. I know I do not indulge in lies or delusion but  
This is happiness and happiness is a hollow world for fools to  
Inhabit, where all the dreams eventually die by coming to life.  
Love has smothered me to a gay inertia and I long for a little

Hurt and pain that will let me scream and I wait for offending  
Words to row me into worlds where I shall cry wildly for whole  
Nights like the lament of lonely, old and greying seas. . . Then  
Sadness shall come back with its dancing fairy lights and nail me  
To wailing crosses. . . Poetry, in the end, shall replace all of him.

**You'll remain with me**

On the most depressed days,  
I am content  
That there could never be  
An Ideal Vacuum—  
The Perfect Emptiness.

So I know  
You'll still remain with me. . .

## Monologue

I speak alone because  
I do not know his answers.

*And yet, you want to be heard.*

I want to tell him that I have  
Closed and sealed my skin.

*Baby, I told you, love can hurt.*

I have exiled my heart.

*This is a lonely, lonely world, even with a lover.*

Since I know the difference  
Between believing and being in love

*Oh! you know nothing.*

I have stopped  
My frantic search  
For the Buddhas

*Only they came to you, in ones, twos, tens.*

When I thought of  
Yasodhara, his wife  
Left behind alone and  
Large with child . . .

*What about the good things, eh?  
Recollect them. Remember that  
Memory is a mere vending machine . . .*

### **If everything comes crashing down**

And both of us become strangers onto each other  
Do not worry about me.

We will look beyond eyes and run into each other  
As usual, for the rest of life.

I do not know what you would  
Treasure of me in your mind.

But in billboards planted  
Across my fervent heart,  
I will celebrate you as the man  
Who made me woman.

And there are the small things that I would  
always remember:  
Your affinity to catch colds; my rising fevers on seeing you  
Your headaches, your backaches; my avowed helplessness  
Your falling asleep while waiting for my reply  
Your asking me to remain with you for all of time. . .  
All your delicious lies. . .

Over the phone,  
the sound of your drinking water,  
the soundlessness of your yawn. . .  
the camouflage of who you were talking to  
the new meanings you gave to worn-out words

Yes, all of this.  
And that once,  
You called me a goddess.

## Love and war

two thousand years ago  
our word for love  
was the same.

women and men  
wrote their songs of love  
the intimacies of inside

and they spoke of how  
love was tireless  
love was a fantasy feast  
love was no disease  
love was no evil goddess  
love was a harshness, in the parting  
love was

    'the thing that made a girl's bangles  
    slip loose when her lord went away  
    grow tight when her lord returned'  
love was (they sang)  
    'bigger than the earth  
    higher than the sky  
    unfathomable than the waters.'  
love was.

no names were named.  
you did not know  
    who he was  
    or who she was  
    or when it was  
    or where it was  
only  
love was.

and there were  
the poems of war,  
the war poetry  
poems on the outside

(and perhaps  
because the bards  
wore lotuses of gold)

there are  
the poems  
where the names were named  
where the kings were praised  
where a bard addressed another  
where the guide sang to the patron  
where the poet sang to the courtesan  
where mothers spoke of tigers in their wombs  
where the kingdom was  
    'an unfailing harvest of  
    victorious wars'  
where the old women  
    'threatened to slash their breasts  
    if their sons died in battle with backs  
    turned in fright'  
where the end spoke of  
    'the blood glowing  
    in the red center of the battlefield  
    like the sky before nightfall'

and because it has an end  
war was a history.

love never has an end.  
love was. and will be.



*touch*



## Touch

Have you ever tried meditation?  
Struggling hard to concentrate,  
and keeping your mind as blank  
as a whitewashed wall by closing  
your eyes, nose, ears; and shutting out  
every possible thought. Every thing.  
And, the only failure, that ever came,  
the only gross betrayal—  
was from your own skin.

*You will have known this.*

Do you still remember,  
how, the first distractions arose?  
And you blamed skin as a sinner;  
how, when your kundalini was rising,  
shaken, you felt the cold concrete floor  
skin rubbing against skin, your saffron robes,  
how, even in a far-off different realm—  
your skin anchored you to this earth.  
Amidst all that pervading emptiness,  
touch retained its sensuality.

*You will have known this.*

Or if you thought more variedly, about  
taste, you would discount it—as the touch  
of the tongue. Or, you may recollect how  
a gentle touch, a caress changed your life  
multifold, and you were never the person  
you should have been. Feeling with your skin,  
was perhaps the first of the senses,  
its reality always remained with you—  
You never got rid of it.

*You will have known this.*

You will have known almost  
every knowledgeable thing about  
the charms and the temptations  
that touch could hold.

But, you will never have known  
that touch—the taboo  
to your transcendence,  
when crystallized in caste  
was a paraphernalia of  
undeserving hate.

### Advaita: The ultimate question

Non	Dualism
Atman	Self
Brahman	God
Are	Equal
And	Same.
So	I
Untouchable	Outcast
Am	God.
Will	You
Ever	Agree?
No	Matter
What	You
Preach,	Answer
Me.	Through
Your	Saints.
One	More
Final	Question
Can	My
Untouchable	Atman
And	Your
Brahmin	Atman
Ever	Be

One

?

## Aggression

Ours is a silence  
that waits. Endlessly waits.

And then, unable to bear it  
any further, it breaks into wails.

But not all suppressed reactions  
end in our bemoaning the tragedy.

Sometimes,  
the outward signals  
of inward struggles takes colossal forms  
And the revolution happens because our dreams explode.

Most of the time:

Aggression is the best kind of trouble-shooting.

## Another paradise lost: The Hindu way

One sleepy summer afternoon, while helping myself to a glass of chilled water, I saw a snake lying curled under the fridge. It could have been a very poisonous cobra. Very

quickly, I chose my mode of attack: Acid. Staggering, I reached for the glass bottle so that I could pour the yellow-green cheap acid on its slimy body, burning it to death.

"Stop it", the snake hissed in pure Tamil connecting with me in the language of my prayer and poetry. "I am an exile." And I configured mental images of political

refugees. It wriggled out and I saw that it was balding, almost Rushdie-like, perhaps with a death sentence too. Controversy was a crowd pulling catch-phrase, to which I dutifully

succumbed. Acid bottle in hand, I heard the snake preach to me about living in detachment. "The perfection of life is when you do not know the difference between yielding and

resisting." The scrawny being writhed further and told me of rebirth and reincarnation. Being a writer I really wanted to take notes. Instead I began arguing. "Shut up", the snake said to me,

"Karma is just bunkum. You disagree due to borrowed ideas." Sharp movements of the red tongue terrified me. Almost sensing my fear, it

said, "You could never challenge what you do not comprehend." The snake spoke in circles, in patterns that could only resemble a snake swallowing its tail. Whatever. And then it

occurred to me: Speech was the oldest trap, the charming deceiver, persuasion's weapon and Satan's first area of expertise. "Stop it", this time I said the words. "Tell me just your

story. Save the cant and rant for critical times." My acidic tone gained me a menacing status and I continued, "You are a mean serpent. Instigator. Trouble-maker. Sly liar. Undulating

temptation-provider. Unworthy reminder of the seduction of strength over matter." It protested in a booming resonant voice, "No, I am not any of this. I am just an exile, from

paradise. Because of your Catholic upbringing, you don't even know about the paradise lost in Hinduism." Who bothered for history or heritage, except shriveling snakes and failed

writers? At least, we both had something in common. "Look here comrade, my credentials are different. In heaven, I was an activist. An avid dissenter. Before the accession to heaven,

long long ago, I was a mighty monarch on earth, feared and respected. I was Nahusa the Great. My subjects were happy, the kingdom prosperous. And I ruled for twelve thousand years, until the day

when I decided that I could take leave of life. In heaven too, I was venerated. But one question had plagued me all the years of my long life, and it still tormented me in heaven. I wanted to know why

caste was there, why people suffered because of their karmas. I questioned the Gods, and the learned sages there. I asked them what would happen if an high-born did manual work just like the low-born.

I worried about the division of labor, this disparity in dreams and destinies. You could say I was a rebel pleading for liberty-equality-fraternity. I had a riotous history of revolution. The Gods plotted against me,

decided that I was trouble. I was cursed to turn into a vile snake. I was banished from paradise. For sixty million years, I shall roam the earth, and then I may return." This was a different case of the paradise lost.

In this tale, there was no forbidden fruit, no second fickle-minded woman. Tradition triumphed over reason and the good were cast away. I let the serpent go, happy that he had given my hungry mind a story, or

perhaps, a poem to be written on unfair days. I began to respect snakes—the challengers of hierarchy. While I gave him the freedom of safe passage I vowed never to kill serpents. Much later

I realized brutally that this was just another occupational hazard for choosing a life where I was to be showing solidarity with activists and dissenters.

### **Becoming a Brahmin**

Algorithm for converting a Shudra into a Brahmin

Begin.

- Step 1: Take a beautiful Shudra girl.
- Step 2: Make her marry a Brahmin.
- Step 3: Let her give birth to his female child.
- Step 4: Let this child marry a Brahmin.
- Step 5: Repeat steps 3-4 six times.
- Step 6: Display the end product. It is a Brahmin.

End.

Algorithm advocated by Father of the Nation at Tirupur.  
Documented by Periyar on 20.09.1947.

Algorithm for converting a Pariah into a Brahmin

Awaiting another Father of the Nation  
to produce this algorithm.

(Inconvenience caused due to inadvertent delay  
is sincerely regretted.)

## Dignity

Sons of the oppressor castes:

You are 'virtuous' children  
of 'virtuous' fathers  
born in an envious  
position because of  
your 'virtuous' deeds.

You stick to your faith,  
the incurable sickness  
of your minds,  
we don't stop you  
from continuing  
to tend centuries  
of cultivated superegos.  
We will even let you wallow  
in the rare happiness  
that hierarchy provides.

But, don't suppress  
our rightful share of dignity. It  
might even prove helpful  
If you ever learnt  
That virtue  
Though inherited  
Was nothing beyond  
The appearance  
Of the footprint  
Of a bird  
On water. . .

### **Ekalaivan**

This note comes as a consolation:

You can do a lot of things  
With your left hand.  
Besides, fascist Dronacharyas warrant  
Left-handed treatment.

Also,  
You don't need your right thumb,  
To pull a trigger or hurl a bomb.

## Evil spirits

You are possessed.  
Witch doctors believe in phantoms,  
that cause your illness. But, driving out devils  
can be challenging. Spirits are given away—

We are made to sit opposite you,  
Force-fed a 'meal'—bland food mixed  
with your hair, nails, spit and pus.  
Illegally (despite the government ban),  
We take your hoard of evil spirits  
Barter-system: for having ate your food.

And because ghosts and ghouls  
obey your rules, they leave you to come to us.  
Is this 'transference'? An unofficial appeasement.

We become inhabited by the dead,  
who ruins our doomed lives. Demons in our  
bodies are brutal tenants and frequently,  
They suck with their vampire tongues  
to drink our anemic blood—  
leave their puncture marks, which  
can be faintly seen on our black skins;  
skins that bear greater scars,  
reminders of larger, human cruelty. . .

Anyway, there isn't a lot of life in our bodies.  
We are souls. Wandering souls. Still, once  
Ghost-tasted, we rot away. We rot away.  
Remember, rotting is a long procedure. . .  
Day by day, we grow coffin cold and slowly  
Life creeps out, a lazy earthworm. At last, we die.  
We die.

## Fire

Black satanic fumes  
shroud the blank blue skies  
in puffing jet black soot;  
few flashy cameras record  
glimpses of destruction  
(for tomorrow's papers) . . .

Our huts are burning—  
Regular huts in proper rows.  
Dry thatches (conspirators-in-crime)  
feed the flames as we rush out  
shrieking-crying-moaning  
open mouthed hysterical curses  
and as if in an answer—  
when the blazing work is done  
Fire engines arrive . . .

Deliberately late.  
These feverish cries continue  
in the same shrilly pitch  
echo, echo, echo and  
finally reach. . .

Up there.  
Reverberate and sound as loud  
as snail shells crackling under nailed boots  
and perhaps as distinct and defenseless.  
This double catastrophe projected in sights  
and shrieks evokes. . .  
No response.

Those above are (mostly):  
indifferent bastards.

## **Fleeting**

Our history is lost,  
perhaps destroyed  
And efforts at recollection  
Entail in melancholy.

And fleeting memories are perishable—  
Imaginary showcase stuff having expiry dates.

Caste perennially remains  
a scheming bulldozer  
Crushing only the Dalits—  
And renewing, revoking our bitter past.

We move about, measuring our ages in sorrows.  
But when can we get to live our lives in retrospect?

### **For sale**

My school bud, he work hard.  
He slog. He make money.  
He grow dam rich.

He go to da temple, where  
his po' ol' folks ain't allowed.  
He buy incense for two bucks  
flowers for five, kinda shaggy  
coconut for ten bucks.  
He also buy a standing place  
at da front and da special prayer  
in his name all at twenty more.

Priest with ash and holy smoke  
come to him, give extra blesses for  
a cool crisp fifty my bud gives.

He stand there and stare,  
stare hard at the Gawd;  
his first time in temple.

Then my jus Blessed bud, he ask me:  
Say, ya, how much da "Luxmee" cost?

## Hymns of a hag

I fancy myself being a witch.  
Broomstick borne and black as pitch.

Thin, stark-naked and with fire for eyes.  
Killing men whom I despise.

Bewailing the woeful life I led.  
Casting dark spells, makin' them dead.

Thronging ghettos, to unbend bent backs.  
Handing them knives, 'least an axe.

Lot later I fly to temple streets.  
Our men firm, I show my feats.

Haunting oppressors to shave their heads.  
Cutting all their holy threads.

Experiencing joy as they bleed.  
Dance, rejoice my black black deed.

Leave one farewell note, an obscene cue:  
'Judgment day is long since due.'

Ultimately, I'll lie in the ditch—  
Ne'er give a damn, when called 'Bitch'.

### **Immanuel**

God he was, in those short living years,  
when he lifted the lowly and put down  
the mighty from their thrones.

And he became a greater God,  
with his brutal death, that incited  
many deaths and a significant liberation.

It was a warrior's passing,  
a faint resonance of an ancient prophet  
the Jewish carpenter's son.

Now, if there be any mourning  
let it be for our heroes  
yet to die, fighting. . .

### Last love letter

. . . Our passionate love,  
Once transcended caste.  
Let it now  
Transcend mortality. . .  
Fear not beloved,  
In Love—  
Life is not compulsory.

Let us leave it to cold Death,  
Cruelly, He shall  
Perfect our Love.  
Preserve it for Eternity. . .

### Liquid Tragedy: Karamchedu 1985

Buffalo Baths. Urine. Bullshit  
Drinking Water for the Dalits  
The very same Pond.  
Practice for eons.  
A bold Dalit lady  
dares to question injustice.  
Hits forth with her pot. Her indignation  
is avenged. Fury let loose. Violence. Rapes.  
Killings. Self-seeking politicians shamelessly  
consult History—"If there was a way out then,  
there shall be a way out now." Succor arrives with  
Esteemed Father of our Nation. His *Samaadhi* speaks:  
If Harijans don't get water in this village, let them  
set on a sojourn elsewhere. The rotten example  
is obeyed. Casting behind cruel memories  
Dalits exit—weary of the persecution  
And wander all over the nation.  
Again, a Dalit Exodus.  
Total Surrender.

## **Maariamamma**

We understand  
why upper caste Gods  
and their 'good-girl' much-married, father-fucked,  
virgin, vegetarian oh-so-pure Goddesses  
borne in their golden chariots  
don't come to our streets.

We know the reasons for their non-entry into slums.  
Actually, our poverty would soil their hearts  
and our labor corrupt their souls.

But Maariamamma,  
when you are still getting  
those roosters and goats,  
why have you stopped coming to our doors?

Maari, our girl,  
when did you join their gang?

## Mohandas Karamchand

(written after reading Sylvia Plath's *Daddy*)

"Generations to come will scarcely believe that such a one as this  
walked the earth in flesh and blood."

—Albert Einstein

Who? Who? Who?  
*Mahatma*. Sorry no.  
*Truth. Non-violence.*  
Stop it. Enough taboo.

That trash is long overdue.  
You need a thorough review.  
Your tax-free salt stimulated our wounds  
We gonna sue you, the Congress shoe.

Gone half-cuckoo, you called us names,  
You dubbed us pariahs—"Harijans"  
goody-goody guys of a bigot god  
Ram Ram Hey Ram—boo.

Don't ever act like a holy saint.  
we can see through you, impure you.  
Remember, how you dealt with your poor wife.  
But, they wrote your books, they made your life.

They stuffed you up, the imposter true.  
And sew you up—filled you with virtue  
and gave you all that glossy deeds  
enough reason we still lick you.

You knew, you bloody well knew,  
Caste won't go, they wouldn't let it go.

It haunts us now, the way you do  
with a spooky stick, a eerie laugh or two.

But they killed you, the naked you,  
your blood with mud was gooey goo.  
Sadist fool, you killed your body  
many times before this too.

Bapu, bapu, you big fraud, we hate you.

### Narration

I'll weep to you about  
My landlord, and with  
My mature gestures—  
You will understand:  
The torn sari, disheveled hair  
Stifled cries and meek submission.  
*I was not an untouchable then.*

I'll curse the skies,  
And shout: scream to you  
Words that incite wrath and  
You will definitely know:  
The priest, his lecherous eyes,  
Glances that disrobed, defiled.  
*I was not polluting at four feet.*

How can I say  
Anything, anything  
Against my own man?

*How?*

So I take shelter in silence  
Wear it like a mask.  
When alone, I stumble  
Into a flood of incoherencies. . .

## Prayers

In an arid land of arid human minds  
Caste, yet again authored a tragedy.  
He, disease wrecked, downtrodden,  
long-ago skinner of animals, sets out.  
Ten days of Typhoid, and a partial recovery.  
Enough reason to thank some God.

He drags himself clumsily to a nearby temple.  
Sadly, of an Upper-caste God.  
Away from the temple, he bends in supplication.  
Says his last prayer—Unwelcome Gratefulness.  
To a God who (anyway) didn't help him recover.  
Innocent Acts of Undulating Faith spurned  
Anger. Retaliation.

An irked Rajput surged forth  
and smote the untouchable with a iron rod.  
He, warrior caste lion couldn't tolerate encroachment.  
At the temple. By a Dalit. Deathly howls of a feeble-voiced  
rent the air, fervently seeking holy intervention.  
God, Lifeless as ever—watched grimly with closed eyes.  
In resigned submission, the sick man's Life was given away.  
Caste—crueler than disease, emotionless, dry, took its toll  
Confirming traditional truths: Dalits die, due to devotion.

Unanswered questions remain;  
Agony is not always a forgotten memory.

Life teaches: there are different Gods at different temples.  
One solitary thought haunts recollection day and night.  
Where did this poor man's sixty-five-year-old soul go?  
To Heaven—to join noble martyrs who died for a cause?  
Or to Hell—where the Gods reside, making Caste Laws?

## Shame

"Gang Rape."

Two severe syllables  
implied in her presence  
perpetuate the assault. . .

Public's prying eyes  
segregate her—the victim.  
But, the criminals have  
already mainstreamed—  
Their Caste is a classic shield.

"Dalit Girl Raped"  
is much too commonplace.  
Humiliation gnaws  
the sixteen year old.  
Gory scars on a wrecked body,  
serve as constant reminders  
of disgrace, helplessness.

Brutal condolences  
are declared—for the sake  
of dear old formality.  
Comfort seems remote—  
a retreating fantasy. . .

Bravely, in search of  
a definite solution,  
and an elusive purification,  
she takes the tests of fire—  
the ancient medicine for shame.  
Alas, her death  
is an irrevocable side-effect.

## **We real hot**

*(Inspired by 'We Real Cool' by Gwendolyn Brooks)*

We real hot. We  
Ne'er rot. We

Know knack. We  
Beat back. We

Shock stars. We  
Win wars. We

Ne'er late. We  
Fuck Fate.

## We will rebuild worlds

We will rebuild/ worlds from shattered glass/ and  
remnants of holocausts.

Once impaled for our faith/ and trained to speak in  
voiceless whispers/ we'll implore/ you to produce the list/  
from hallowed memories/ of our people disgraced/ as  
outcastes/ degraded/ as untouchable at / sixty-four feet/  
denied a life/ and livelihood and done to death/

in so many ways it would take/ an encyclopedia to  
describe and steven-spielberg/ or some-such-guy to  
produce the special effects for a blockbuster version/

not just the stories of how/ you charred to death forty-four  
of our men and women and children/ because they asked  
for handfuls of rice/

electrocuted children to instant death because they played  
in your well/ and other ghastly carnages

but the crimes of passion/  
our passion/ your crimes

poured poison and pesticide through the ears-nose-mouth/  
or hanged them in public/ because a man and a woman  
dared to love

and you wanted/ to teach/ other boys and other girls/ the  
lessons of/ how to/ whom to/ when to/ where to/ continue  
their caste lines

and we will refresh your mind with other histories/ of how  
you brutally murdered and massacred our peoples/ with

the smiling promise of/ heaven in the next birth/ and in  
this/ a peace that/ never belonged.

We will wipe away the/ sham of your smiles/ that appear  
and/ disappear like commercials on prime time tv/ smiles  
that flash across/ botoxed faces/ smiles that crease/  
plucked eyebrows/ smiles that are pasted and/ plastered to  
your lips/ smiles that sell yourself/ smiles that seek to/ sell  
us into soulless worlds.

We will singe the many skins you wear to the world/ the  
skins you change at work/ the skins called castes and/  
skins called race/ the skins you mend once a week/ the  
skin you bought at a sale/ the skin you thought was yours/  
the filthy rich stinking skin you thought you could retain  
at bed.

Shorn of style/ and a hypocrisy named/ sophistication/  
there would be nothing for you to do but gape at our  
combat gears.

We will learn/ how to fight/ with the substantial  
spontaneity/ with which we first learnt/ how to love.

So/ now/ upon a future time/  
there will be a revolution.

It will begin in our red-hot dreams that surge that/ scorch  
that/ scald that sizzle like lava/ but never settle down  
never/ pungently solidify.

It will begin/ when the song in the sway/ of our hips/ will  
lead us to dance and sing/ and stand up straight / put up a  
pretty fight/ redeem and reclaim/ the essence of our  
earth.

It will begin/ as our naked bodies/ held close together/ like  
hands in prayer/ against each other/ like hands in prayer/  
set to defy the dares the/ diktats the years the terms/ the  
threats/ that set us apart.

It will begin/ as we give names to our children and/ give  
names to our / inward anger and aches and/ name  
ourselves/ with words of fury/ like forest fires/ with the  
words of wrath/ like stealthy wildcat eyes/ that scare the  
cowards/ in power/ away.

It will begin/ the way thunder rises in our throats and/ we  
will brandish our slogans with a stormy stress and  
succeed/ to chronicle to/ convey the last stories/  
of our lost and scattered lives.

It will begin/ when the oppressors will wince/ every time  
they hear our voices and their sparkly/ silence  
will never be taken for a sacrament.

It will begin when never/ resting we will scream/ until/  
our uvulas tear away and our breathless words  
breathe life to the bleeding dead and in the black magic  
of our momentary silences/ you will hear two questions/  
*India, what is the caste of sperm?/ India, what is the cost of life?*  
and the rest of our words will rush/ in this silenced earth/  
like the rage of a river in first flood.

It will begin/ that day when/ we will pay/ all that  
it takes/ for the dangerous price of love.



*add some spice*



## When the God drank milk

September 21, 1995.

This was the second time  
He spanned the world  
So quickly. . . In telecast  
miracles that occurred from  
Michigan to Manila to Madras  
Whether He was in plastic, ceramic,  
Fire-burnt clay or stiff black stone  
The Elephant-Headed, the Pot-Bellied,  
The Remover of Obstacles, Ganesha,  
The God had his fill as he sucked  
The spoonfuls of creamy milk. . .

I am not willing to listen to  
Capillary Action Rationalism  
Or any scientific explorations. . .

Instead I am hunting for some  
Silly girl's bizarre secret, to know if  
The Son of Shiva had let himself  
To be breastfed, to be suckled. . .  
And if she, having tasted success  
At His having tasted her,  
Moved on to younger,  
Charming Gods,  
With their mouths  
Full of white teeth.

### Elegy to my first keyboard

You entered my life when I was twelve. I really didn't have hormones then. I was lost in a different world. Of science, of space, and the small small atoms that we were all made up of. I wanted to be a spy or a scientist. I thought you would help me become one.

You made me fall in love. With you. And unknown to my parents, with language.

I started to write. But that is another story.

I loved you too much. Loved you through all those long nights when you made me cry. When you simply wouldn't listen to me. And when I couldn't find the words to tell my love to you.

Living with you was very memorable. Too much fun. And we were getting better by the day. At least, I was. Until you decided to add some spice.

I was too weak for them.

To stay ahead of me, you would type on your own. I don't know what these slashes meant but they would come everytime I stopped to pause.

When you knew this didn't excite me, you stopped.

Much later

In your effort at unity, you started putting the op's and p's together. I never knew why.

~~And one hot summer morning the space bar konked out i had to separate every single word by the use of hyphens or dashes and i could not even run the word counts and oh it was so bad but still i put up with you. Familiarity with you never bred contempt it gave birth to love to comfort to knowing all your little quirks. Disabling that vital cord which tied you was so easy and even so legal but i resisted i always gave you chances and i thought that your teasing would be over soon soon anytime soon alas it was not to be. You had grown haughty and ill tempered and God i still loved you. Not to love a strong woman was very demeaning on me.~~

One night you repaired yourself. I never asked you how.  
Questions are prohibited in love affairs with me.  
Finally, you crashed.

You misbehaved, threw your tiny tantrums.  
You showed me your keyboard ego.  
Or was it my zeal and drive?  
Did I misuse-abuse-overuse you?  
I loved you. I still do.

You were a great mistress.  
Only, you took an early retirement.

### The whore's wedding

"The whore is to wed,"  
Those women said, and for weeks  
Treated the world to spicy food  
And rehearsed gossip.  
"We are free of further tension,"  
They said, as they looked forward  
To reformed husbands and  
Routine love.

"Ten prominent men at least count,"  
One hushed voice was heard and  
Others added up the figures, like messy  
Kitchen budgets and suddenly everything  
Uttered was in spiky whispers. . .  
"I think she will kill him."  
"I think she will cheat him too."  
"I think its her influence, this marriage."  
"I think she will have a child by another man."  
"I think she is horridly lucky to get married so late."  
"I think he will come to know of her bloody colorful past."  
"I think. . ."

I thought too.

Of the ten men in her bones  
    Under her skin, over her length,  
    How well her body remembers. . .  
Of the poor man in her bed  
    Always being measured against  
    The ten men in her head. . .  
Of the arching of her back,  
    And like sleeping on swords  
    The pain of pretending love. . .

## Zeal, misplaced

By stray reading eyes happen to glance at zealous stuff. . .  
Unbelievable words fired from patriotic pens  
Attack your nerves and heart and head  
With empty bravado promise to

- destroy poverty
- burn corruption
- give reservation

Sinister political manifestos masquerade as  
Poems-plays-short stories-novels.  
With reality resting in peace,  
The times for the sets  
Are imaginary—

- an alternate present
- a reconceived past
- or an extrapolated future

You might even know the oft-repeated characters  
Who walk with heads proudly held high  
(Like metallic purple-gray  
Aliens with antennae)—

- pulverized Dalits
- screwed up women
- skinny shrunk poor.

And it leaves you wondering. . .  
Are they writing Science fiction, Indian style?

Yeah, I mean  
Science fiction.

### Shooting away

Mrs. Visalakshi,  
killer of dreams,  
teacher of physics,  
Yama version 2002,  
made us all obsessed with sex.

I swear, yes, it was her  
'can you able to understand?' speech  
and orthodox prudery  
that made one student among us  
discover that rockets were—

Long lingams  
polished to a shine  
shooting away into darkness  
ejaculating something creamy white  
with great force, but from the wrong side.

## **Inheritance**

Helplessly, silent;  
we watched it being seized away, all our lands.  
The Government—a fulltime bewitching whore  
had promised Jobs. Industrialization. Power, Electric.  
Everything went, Nothing came.

Now, landless, uprooted,  
unsettled in a resettlement colony  
we feast our souls on lucent memories—Of an earlier life.

When memory charts  
familiar horizons  
I often recollect that  
long ago rainy Sunday  
in our crowded church,  
Fr. Jose reading crisply  
"Blessed are the meek  
for they shall inherit the earth."

### Reverence :: Nuisance

In walls of reception counters  
and staircases of offices, hospitals, firms  
and other 'secular' institutions—  
pictures of Hindu Gods are painted. . .  
so that casual people walking in (or up or down)  
fear to spit on the adorned walls.

But still looking around or climbing:  
you can always find the work done  
a irregular red border underlining the walls  
owing so much to betel juice and spit.

And on cheap roadside compound walls  
that don't bear "Stick No Bills" messages or  
cinema and political posters—the Gods once again  
are advertised. And captioned with legends that read  
"Do not Urinate". And yet, the Gods are covered with  
layers of smelly urine—they don't retaliate.

Tolerance is a very holy concept.

Or like someone said,  
the Caste Gods deserve  
the treatment they get.

## The gods wake up

Another worst things with the Gods is that  
They sleep most of the time—  
    (they don't even dream).  
If you happen to go near heaven:  
It is a very noisy boring place.  
And all that you get to hear there are—  
Thirty three million synchronized godly snores.  
    (The Goddesses snore too).

The Gods sleep right through the prayers  
Performed by the Brahmins—  
    (maybe they find it boring).  
Births, Marriages, innumerable yagnas,  
Brahmins take the center-stage, all the  
Gods skip. Also, "Om" is now obsolete—  
a kind of recurring mosquito buzz.  
    (Besides, Om is ©opyrighted).

At times, the sleeping celestials do stir.  
Gods always get excited over funerals—  
    (they are kind of necrophilic).  
The loud drums lead the dead to eternal sleep,  
Ancient noises herald the escaping life.  
This deeper music shakes the skies.  
That's when the Gods wake up.  
    (Just to receive the dead.)

### Advice to an upwardly mobile man

At a busy traffic jam,  
our car comes to a crawling stop.  
Seconds later,  
a street child comes  
in tattered clothes  
and sun-kissed matted hair,  
and, as usual, she begs.  
"Urchin, Get Away"  
my boyfriend screams  
and rolls up  
the car windows.  
We get started.  
On the way, I summon  
enchancing powers  
that a love affair gives me.  
I lean close to him  
and whisper:  
(in a traffic signal voice)  
"Darling,  
Stop.  
Look Back.  
Reach Out."

## **Deciphering a culture**

INSTRUCTION #1 NAILED TO THE WALL: SWITCH  
OFF YOUR CELLPHONES

*Keep Smiling! :-)* This is what I got to read on ink-splattered desks one lonely day in the central Winners DON'T library of the IIT Madras. I was there waiting for someone to come and join me Frustrated and all the books surrounding me were such rigorous affairs in quantum mechanics One and ocean engineering and acoustics Sided and though I had studied science at school, I had opted out of academics Lovers for (shall we say) personal reasons.

*And so there was literally nothing Association in there that I could read and understand, so I set about staring at the desks (Frustrated One Sided Lovers Association) and suddenly the graffiti made sense (Acronym FOSLA) and my reading picked up Join FOSLA da! in leaps and FOSLA: Exclusively for mother-fuckers like you bounds. Watching it was so funny I liked the picture. . . because I imagined Life begins at 40, Ice cream expires at 2 nothing in these mass of Bare! Scientific and Technical books with their !!SUPERB!! mumbo-jumbo jargons could attract me Lol! but these words I love rumour penned by different students was kind of distracting My kiss is bad and also a nice thing to My head is sad engage myself Its your love in.*

*So That's made me glad I was busy straining to Help everyone! Love everyone! And yes, HATE ALL!! make out the CAT words and some of it was boring Guru is great! and Love my ass, don't you? racy and Simran hip and Impossible breasts had self-explanatory illustrations Don't marry be happy of naked, naked women that Asha, I love you was really Come out of the web of the world disgusting and horrific and If God has given you a rock it's your choice to build a bridge or a wall I really don't know what to say I have built a wall, what you want to*

do for that????? *and* Then I will curse Him and go search for some grub (only a rock, eh!) *i looked up in exasperation.*

INSTRUCTION #2 NAILED TO THE WALL: DON'T REPLACE BOOKS TO STACK. LEAVE THEM ON THE TABLE.

*The other words* Me too *are silly* Me too da idiot *and I try my best to take* How dare you *everything* Om Namah Shivaiah *of this civilization* Morals R for Morons *by just* To suck the marrow of life! (not me fuckers, but Henry DAVID Thoreau) *deciphering* Structure of Benzynes a Boobsy culture Keep Trying *but* Illustration (India map) *its all* Point out Lovegadh? Sexpura? *in vain.* Quates Desk [www.horny-banana.com](http://www.horny-banana.com) So what I love vaginas sunflower gulmohar Oh god help me!! When I start talking to a girl, she starts loving me. Its disgraceful. Help me! Is it your bra? Nice work Illustration Can you draw the equation of the above ellipse Take your origin as Shravati and +ve axis along Sarayu ur time starts now No cunt if you take Shrav and Sarayu as lost what will be your origin Fat Fool Dribbler, read that AGAIN. Got me? Hum angrejon ke jamane ke fuckers hain Rock n Roll Stupid Once upon a time. . . there was Anushya. . . No smoking U taste good! Hippy sex? Wanna something hot?

*And I was feeling blank and looking up and repeating*  
Wanna something hot?

INSTRUCTION #3 NAILED TO THE WALL: SILENCE.

## Justice is. . .

(For Indians only. . .)

The first lesson we are taught about life  
has something to do with dharma and karma.

"*Dharma*". "*Karma*" two good appetizing and rhyming words  
they may come in handy for classic poets.

Dharma they say is indefinable,  
it is all encompassing  
and yet untranslatable.

Dharma they say means  
Justice, Integrity, Veracity,  
Righteousness and Legitimacy.  
Almost enough meaning for a word.

And you carry it on with yourself.  
Dharma makes a versatile lucky-charm.  
All your life, you blame things you don't understand  
on the word no one has ever understood.  
Sometimes highly frustrated with the cruelty  
and apathy of everything, you resort to blaming karma  
and you begin to trace past lives, ancestry  
you bother about the enormity of trivialities  
you start worrying about the petty lineage of everything  
you happen to come across.

This insanity deludes you as you fret and fume over  
descent—pedigree—wretched caste, and above all proper  
marriages and the legitimate sons  
and then it all comes to you

the truth, the truth about all this \*\*\*\*  
the truth about Dharma  
You remember the man,  
the man Dharma,  
for—the medium is the message.

You realize he is a bastard,  
an illegitimate son.  
Justice is Dharma.  
Dharma is a bastard.  
So you know Justice is. . .

Well, whatever. But still, blotted.  
Blemished. And with Scandal for a middle name.  
Perhaps all your hopes die  
and you stop all your expectations.

Or, perhaps you suddenly throw back your head  
and laugh and laugh. . .

Whatever you chose to do  
the truth hits you  
when she whispers

'Legitimacy is Illegitimate.'

## **Sun in the mouth**

And the truth scorches and singes  
the pink open flesh of your mouth  
with its pungent yellow taste, so,  
speaking the truth is not so easy  
with just one tongue, anyway.

Seeing might have been closest  
to truth and as Plotinus said  
the eye would not be able to see  
the sun if it was itself not sun  
and so seeing was understanding.

The Egyptians called the eye  
with the circle of the iris  
with the pupil in the centre  
as the sun in the mouth  
and that was their truth.

Cyclops must have had little  
to see in this vast world and  
deprived of the whole truth  
and that was his loss, his tragedy.

Even Argus with all his eyes  
couldn't escape in the end.  
How much truth, how many eyes  
of how many senses would it take  
to tell the truth to the  
lord of the third-eye?

A king of a Tamil temple city  
raged mad to know the truth  
of the scent of a woman's hair.

Since money bought truth  
he made ready, a thousand gold coins.

And a poor poet still married to faith  
prayed on to Shiva, the lord of struggling  
survivors, lord of births and lives and  
deaths, lord of poor poets who gave him  
a poem to be sung at the king's court.

A savant there picked a mistake like  
peeling the scab of a healed wound  
and said that the poem was wrong.  
He said that any woman's hair  
did not have a natural scent.

The lord of dances and grey ash  
and cremation grounds came down  
to challenge this stubborn man who  
extended his truth, even if the woman  
was the consort of the lord.

He would not budge even if the lord  
threatened to open his third eye,  
the eye in the forehead which would  
reduce him to bone-white ashes  
as light as the wispiest clouds.  
The court cowered in fright. . .

But in arrogance the savant said a mistake  
is a mistake even if it was the lord of the forehead-eye.

*O' saint-bard and master of many wily words  
What do you know of truth or love,  
or the scent of a woman's hair?  
On the nights of naked sky and*

*a fragile quarter moon, my lord,  
he of the deep blue throat,  
he of the rivers in his hair,  
he of the third-eye, comes to me.  
Before he tears the blankness  
of my womb, before he traces  
the length of my spine, the curve  
of my thighs, before he strokes  
my cheeks, he buries his head  
in the thousand and one nights  
of my long tresses and he says  
it smells like the wind-lost voices  
of his childhood summers.*

### Prayers in the bathroom, overheard

Prayer overheard in a bathroom:

*O Ganga, O Jamuna, O Godavari, O Saraswati,  
O Narmada, O Indus, O Kaveri,  
Be you present in this water.*

A God in the heaven  
Who at this particular time,  
Was busy taking care  
Of a rather monotonous task  
Of answering bath-time prayers, replies:  
"Ganga might be present, but you must be aware  
Of how pure, pure the water is.  
If half-burnt corpses is your preferred choice, so be it.  
Jamuna is dry, so I am sorry."

The learned man modifies his prayer,  
(The way men amend the Laws)  
And triumphantly recites:

*O Godavari, O Saraswati, O Narmada, O Indus, O Kaveri,  
Be you present in this water.*

This God is too logical  
(That's not advisable in Gods).

This is his first shift  
As a God of Bath-time prayers,  
He again warns the learned man:  
"Godavari and Narmada, my dear, are too busy  
With their dams. And believe me  
Saraswati will be very soon discovered  
So it is not really possible for them to cleanse you."

The learned man once again modifies his prayer,  
And since practice make perfect, he quickly recites:

*O Indus, O Kaveri, Be you present in this water.*

Mr. God-in-charge is too tired of explaining stuff  
To this fellow. He thunders in a mighty voice,  
"Indus, you nut, is in Pakistan  
And the tributaries of her in India  
Are used mainly for Irrigation, Green revolution—  
Strictly not for things as flimsy as your bath.  
Kaveri, by the way, will be available  
Once the arbitration is settled."

The learned man, readying himself to go the temple  
(not for prayer, that's his workplace)  
Says no prayer, and just grumbles— "So much  
For faith and all that I get is corporation water!"

God of Bucket baths once again  
Sincere as ever to his new job,  
In a rehearsed apologetic tone,  
Interrupts with a annoying fact—  
"My dearest child I know this last fact may hurt  
But just for your information—  
Your pump-operator is  
An untouchable."  
The learned man exits the bathroom—without  
Having a nice warm bath.

After the revelation, no one  
In his family bathes.

They have now placed  
Their faith in powerful deodorants.

### Sacred thread

"Did you eat?"  
I indifferently ask, matter of routine,  
flimsy gossip with a neighbourhood beggar.

She—a plunderer of dustbins and  
I—unemployed, a wanderer  
don't have much in common.  
"I ate enough Saab," she says.  
"Remains of a Royal Feast."

Sorrow lines carved by poverty  
on her sullen face crease further,  
shriveling 80-year-old skin.  
Painful hollow eyes stare beyond sight—  
into non-existence. And as her frail body shakes  
She begins to croon her woeful tale.

"The great temple priest  
and his family wanted a place  
in the heavens, among the Gods."  
"So", she says, "for the ticket  
reservation in the skies,  
the priest celebrated a twice-birth  
ceremony for a three year old; who  
bathed in turmeric water,  
robed in raw resplendent silk,  
crowned like a emperor,  
was adorned with the sacred thread."

With her old old metaphors,  
and skinny hands cutting sea breeze  
in wildest gesticulations, I foresee  
a never-ending long-drawn recital.

"Thousand eight invitees," she gasps  
"and they were all given the Mahaprasad. . .  
followed by a grand feast."  
She got to eat  
the waste of it.

"The drums and the conches so loud, so loud". she cries.  
With compassion she says— "It made Him, all of three  
run away, in fear. He was caught after a hot chase.  
And then, He was made to do, the parikrama,  
a sacred circulation around Sri Jagannath."

I look for the ending of the tale  
I need respite, when suddenly I realize  
her eyes mock me, satire embedded in tears,  
as stifled chuckles escape sunken toothless jaws:

"He—the three year old,  
It was only a bull.," she says.  
"The priest doesn't have male progeny".

I stand  
Dumb in a Daze.  
Her grief grows me up.  
She walks away, smiling.  
Her Hunger, absent—  
A temporary Nirvana,

May be,  
deep inside  
she pleads  
"God, let all bulls become twice-borns".

### How they prostitute a poem

It is uniquely easy for some to sell  
Ideals because business of absent  
Goods is essentially a sacrosanct  
But mostly a flimsy transaction.

Some learn, early on, to prostitute their verse.  
So, in all the waking hours they scavenge  
For a simple simile to match requirements, fulfill needs.  
They barter reality and every romance  
To a blurred triplicate carbon-copy  
World of Hard Cash and Price Tags and Brand Names.

In this brothel of stilled hope  
And stagnated stories, poems  
Are born virgin and endowed  
With voluptuous figures of firm,  
Full breasts and wide hips where men  
Prefer to plant their pastime dreams,  
Or conceive their seed,  
Or merely spite themselves,  
Or dabble at domination.

But, the poem, with this  
Bogus existence becomes  
An adept, untiring prostitute.

Taken  
On a starry night,  
The poem opens  
(dry and drab and dreary:  
lacking love and life) like  
The paid-for parting  
Of the thighs.



*to that more congenial spot*



## **Cinquains**

### **Morning Song**

Wet pink  
And dusty grey  
The sky begins to blush.  
Some sleepy careless charm welcomes  
Daybreak.

### **Even Song**

Azure  
And pink gold hues  
The smug sky at twilight  
A final flush of fulfilment  
Night falls.

### Promises

(for my sister)

Today, you promised that  
you will show me a picture postcard lake,  
Where I could hear the wind bristling against palm-fronds,  
And where I could taste the spray on my lips. . .  
And where I could smell and see and feel everything  
that I had so far, only beheld in imagination.

Stony inhibitions settled into a shoddy corner of my heart,  
And I followed you through all the forest clearings—  
And all that we could see was the shallow brackish water,  
Lazy ripples persuading leaves (even lilies were absent).  
A little faraway, out of habit, the birds fought for territory.  
O' the lake was not performing for us.  
I didn't see the promised peace.  
O' I felt so bitter and hopeless and disappointed.

You broke into those silent lies cajoling me with those  
Large eyes and deft little touches that this was winter:  
You blamed the bareness and the desolate waste.  
And how I loved your reassurances.  
The promise was remade and I had a firmer hope  
That in summer you shall lead me to the bank,  
To that more congenial spot, where I could lose myself.

What pains me is till then,  
I would have to carry  
History in my heart.  
I would have to let  
A veritable phantasmagoria—  
Of the burdened past and the oblivious future  
Colour all my waiting days.

## Returning home

And you see the two-crows-for-joy-pass that are sitting on overhead cables and the evening moon, a mere silvery slice against fluffy translucent sky.

And the remains of your school where you spent your twelve longest years and lived through everything.

And the bus-stand you had to draw for your art-class in yellow ochre or asphalt grey and the emptiness that now occupies the place where a tiny café once stood.

And the tree where they fed you lunch before you learnt to walk back home. And I thought of my parents.

*Brilliant people talking of the intricacies of their life and the corruption of morals and the bygone days and hunger in their childhood and their dead-dear-departed parents as if to teach you what to talk to your children.*

(And you are their child,  
so you speak their lines.)

Still returning home,

And there are rusty mammoth girders that outline the sky like the derelicts of lost dreams and crossed hopes.

And girls so flimsy pretty yet unsafe in the little worlds of lip gloss and love affairs that you could have smoked them into oblivion.

And the dry decaying dead leaves crushed with varying noises and carrying a spent smell that clings to your hair.

And the shy forest noises that violate your fixation over  
sight and sound and smell and touch yes touch.

And I thought of my lover.

*A primitive man who would invade  
your aloneness on insomniac nights  
and challenge your assumptions of  
love and your sophistications and fill  
your ears with the four letter words of  
his ancient language that have begun  
to sound to you like earth songs to  
which your body awakens.*

(And you are his love,  
so you listen to his lines.)

On the way home, the small  
lessons you learn of life. . .  
Love, or the promise of love,  
its lack of choice.  
This large world.  
And its littleness.



*lines of control*



## **Betrayal**

If Judas had lived longer,  
(and not simply hanged himself or  
become an forlorn exile)  
or if he had abandoned  
his conscience forever, selling it with  
those thirty shining pieces of silver—  
he would have become, in all probability  
a very successful politician.

He would have sold scores  
of saviours, grew rich and  
a millionaire. And contended, lived his life  
enslaving men, abhorring slaves—  
and Mr. Judas Iscariot, would have  
become a kind of star celebrity,  
forever remembered. A History.

And to this day,  
treachery flourishes—  
The fate of Jesus befalls  
every other messiah.  
In this world,  
there is a single critical risk:  
even the kisses betray.

## Blackboard poems

S P A C E  
is a problem unlike your never-ending  
paper or the maddening blankness of  
your word processor where you can go on  
and on in anguish or insanity or boredom  
on one-hundred-and-seven degree Fahrenheit afternoons.  
(To write the next lines you need to take  
the green&goldbrown duster to rub off these eight)

Colour is another confusion you want  
to wish away. At sixteen you wouldn't write  
OneSingleWord unless it was forty percent  
gray letters on a plum background and your  
monitor looked like a high class youknowwho.  
The font then was Footlight MT Light, 13 pt.  
Now, at twenty one, it is Verdana, eight point.  
(I have erased again)

NOTHING SEDUCES LIKE YOUR OWN HANDWRITING.  
THE WHITE CHALK DANCING ACROSS GLASS-GREEN.

Creepers on W's & R's, hats on S, hearts on I's & J's.

(I have erased again)

I don't grudge the colours too. Instead of two hundred  
and fifty six fantasies there is the catholic bridal white.  
Sometimes, there is yellow, blue, green, purple, red and  
orange and the opportunity of giving them names—

Flaky Fullmoon. Bleached & Faded Captain Haddock Suit.  
Temple-tank Algae. Crushed Lilac Under Flashlight.  
Sherbet Stain. Sawdust Chillidust Cream.

(I have erased again)

There is considerable exertion (let me hazard a guess:  
writing takes two hundred calories per hour, erasing  
with the duster five hundred, and walking across must  
be say, around eighty). Then, there is chalk-dust allergy  
that compels me to sneeze. And the chemical after-effect  
that spoils the moody brown skin of any glowing goddess.

And the unbearable sounds  
of chalk squeak. . .  
(I have erased again.  
The fifth time now.)

But, a poet loves  
writing blackboard poems.  
(So easy, to imagine, an audience)  
Yet, how much she dreads  
Impermanence. . .

## The flight of birds

*"a poem should be wordless  
as the flight of birds."*

—Archibald Macleish, *Ars Poetica*.

birds don't sing in their flight  
for them flying is a muse  
they compose mid-air  
weave agnostic verse  
sneering haughtily at our absurdity  
as they float over our meaningless mosques and churches  
and those patrolled international borders  
and other disputed sites  
where the guns go bang bang bang all the time  
they swing over there losing their birdegos  
(ego is difficult to retain in mid-flight)  
wondering about and watching men plucking out  
and quashing the lives of other men and women and  
poor helpless children and they  
shed a birdtear or two from there  
a birdtear that is lost midway in the heat of some explosion  
down below some crazy fanatical bomb detonating  
killing instantly the people and the city and the forests  
and even the pitiable babybirds who are yet to learn to fly

they contemplate of writing poems  
about a bird's egg charring  
before even being boiled and scratch their beaks  
unsure if this is a metaphor or simile or other poetic device

o the birds have lots  
and lots and lots  
to write about  
o their writings will never be banned

they borrow freedom  
to write poems in the sky  
they come back and  
pass it on to us  
we take the song only  
brutally  
but at least we take the song

to take the poem  
to unscramble the words from the song  
and to put it back again as song so spontaneously  
that it remains the poem and the song  
to remember forever this refrain whose melody haunts us  
and to hum that refrain which preserves our sanity  
perhaps we need to fly

a trifle aimlessly like birds

or because we are humans  
six-sensed creatures with massive egos  
and massive superegos and massive egos on the ego  
and because of possessing gray matter  
what doctors call medulla oblongata  
we need to feel with our red hearts  
than think with some unlocatable mind

we need to look deeper. . .  
into ourselves, into eyes  
we need to lose ourselves  
then, and only then

the poems will come  
silent  
wordless  
as the flight of birds

### Meeting the prophetess

Leave your books behind.

Since memory,  
Like knowledge, is a traitor,  
Erase every hoarding of your horrible past.

At last, when you enter her world  
Of fraying edges and falling angels  
Don't barter words where touch will do and be the truth.  
For once allow her silence to sear, strip your life-layers  
Because she who knows the truth will not know the tale.

## Model

Face-to-face, everyday  
I have grown to like her.

The small tribal girl  
In my wall calendar,  
who smiles permanently. . .

Ebony skin.  
Lightning, trapped  
In large, lovely eyes.  
A naughty nose-ring.  
Teeth, braided pearls  
Set in midnight.  
Cherished contrasts.

I, city girl, try to calculate  
Costs of innocent beauty, untouched  
And estimate rates of absent professional fees.

Unknown to herself, she inspires—  
Love. Hope. Pity. A little dedication.  
One day, grim realization knocks my brain.

I learn pseudo-gratefulness and worry about  
The dangers the rustic backdrop holds for her.  
I lament, in despair, what is she doing now? Or,  
Rather, what is being done to her?

Somewhere, my afflicted conscience screams:  
Whatever the evil do,  
Let them not mutilate the hope in her eyes.  
It will see her break the centuries of servitude.

### **This wired world**

This world never understood poems or poets.

Why, even my computer can understand  
Nike Picasso Pepsi Gucci Motorola  
But she thinks  
I am misspelling  
When I write  
Pablo Neruda.  
She suggests  
I try Nerd, Nerds or Nerdy  
Instead of Neruda.

I leave her and her choice of alternate spellings.  
I vow to discard these bizarre suggestions.

I am convinced

This world never understood poems or poets.  
I pray it remembers the greatest of them.  
Or, at least their names.

**Work is worship, or so they said. . .**

Six thirty in the a.m.  
And you still have not  
Gone to bed.

It is three days  
Since you have  
Combed your hair.

It is a week  
Since you had a bath.

And six weeks  
Since your dog had hers.

It is three months  
Since you popped  
The baby pink multi-vitamins.

It is half a year  
Since you met your only best friend.

Woe to your scraggyscornfullistless world  
Where the moonlit sky exists only in the grand  
Lullabies that one of your grandmothers sang.

### Shapes of sorrow

Sorrow takes a standard shape.

A definite weariness—  
and in old men, it sculpts  
a sinking stature of suffering.

They relax, forlorn images  
of lifetimes of exhaustion and  
oppression under mighty giants—

who still torment you and him.  
You feel life is a misery—endlessly  
brood but he just watches on. It is true:

The older men have always known greater sorrows.

## Smell

I smell different everyday of my life,  
making me feel. . .  
*Variety is the Spice of Life.*

Sadly, boredom sets in.  
I realize, I smell not of deodorant,  
Eau De Toilette, or cheap scents.  
I smell like Hard Labour.  
Physical Work. Toil.

My smell lingers with me, like it did  
With my mother, her mother, her mother's mother.  
It is the only legacy I own  
And I shall never lose.

Everywhere. . .  
I'm greeted with handkerchiefs, scarves,  
Shawls, saris and even hands, covering the holder's noses.  
I'm scorned by their senses. I don't care.  
If they work like me, they shall smell like me, and smell me.  
I wish to teach them, change them,  
If they are willing to convert. . .

Yet. . . I smell divine too.  
Of honey-sweet jasmines and crisp turmeric  
On Friday evenings at the temple,  
My sensuality creates  
forbidden ripples of lust.  
But the smell wades away  
seeking privileged bodies.

With my meager means  
divinity can't be rented for lifetimes.

### Why do the heroes die?

Unlike in fairy tales, young heroes die.  
All the dazzling princes, strong men of might,  
Robinhoods and Messiahs that never lie  
Are done to death, Evil winning the fight.

Heroes are bled; not just deprived of life  
God turns in his throne, the dead in cold graves  
And perhaps death ends the lifetimes of strife.  
Is slaughter the prize for not being slaves?

Brave men encounter blows, fight their case,  
Leave forsaking the world they came to mend.  
'Youth may arise and fill this vacant space'  
One faint hope; heroes reach the destined end.

Heroes get their Halos. Applause. Praise.  
All glories shine brighter with sacrifice.

## **Marijuana murdered him**

Noon

A gray rainy day—

On a road less traveled the patrol tracked down much:

Him (him is now an it, a crumpled cruel corpse for women  
To beat their breasts about); the wreckage (four black  
Wheels that speak of despair and a mangled red car-body  
Awash yet soiled and the cold apparitions of smoked glass  
And steel);

The crime record—

He stole at home he found no work he pimped his sis he  
Mortgaged his mom he raped a girl (the myth reads so: like  
A crow calling its kindred he invited the last of his friends to  
Join the feast, the fest, yes the plunder between her thighs)  
He stabbed his professor dad he lived on air and alcohol  
And insulin and morphine—but it was the marijuana that  
Murdered him as he screamed at the vengeful rain that  
Teased away his nirvana, the excuse of an existence. . .

No pair of exacting eyes to see the trees drive into a rage into  
His car that once swallowed whole black roads but for the  
God on his dashboard temple who had since returned to  
Formlessness, to a hundred and eight tiny crystals that held  
Psychedelic rainbows that outshone all the trapped sun. . .

### Precious moments

Asha is motherless.  
Legally, she has  
Two Living Mothers.  
Tiny legs dangle from a narrow bench  
at Sishu Vihar Block. She is dressed sweet—  
a fluffy pink frock, bubble gum pink sandals, oiled hair.  
A soggy biscuit in her hand.

Child No. 101  
Her life fills a single page in a tattered file marked URGENT  
of the Child Welfare Department  
Name : Asha / Age : Two / Eyes : Black / Hair : Black  
Identification : A mole on the chin / Report : Healthy  
Her future ends here.

She was to be given away as an adopted daughter  
to the Consulate General of the United States in India  
with her husband, an Ambassador in Brazil.  
A Posh Life. A Future of Gold. Now, this stands forsaken.  
The Newspapers scream "Child Selling Racket".  
Arrests are made. Meetings are held.  
Everybody of any importance condemns the scam.

In defence, local gossip thrives—  
Nobody likes The Poor. Getting Rich. Fates.  
Asha has spent her time in 'Precious Moments'.  
A Home of Love. Artificial. That has all gone by.

With its random brain  
a pressurized Government provides  
solutions—bereft of hope.  
"A month later, the children will be  
given for in-country adoption."

Borders have been drawn,  
Lines of control come to existence.

A would-have-been foster mother  
writes emotional letters bearing costly checks  
to lawyers who promise the fight.  
Asha, remains her hope  
And an homage to a dead daughter.

Elsewhere, in a dingy hutment  
her biological Lambadi pregnant mother  
sleeps on Family Planning posters.  
Her coming kid is already booked.

Asha can't go back to her world of birth.  
To be returned to her biological mother  
after two months at the orphanage is illegal.

But should Love follow  
the Indian Adoption Law ?

She will grow up and learn  
the convoluted Laws:

Two months,  
in an orphanage  
can sever maternity.

A day there had severed her childhood.

**Take this for an answer**

you press me into answering  
when and why and where and how  
i could start to dislike you

with your questions  
and with your arguments  
you grill me and you drill me  
you bombard and bamboozle me

like i was a worthless worm  
to be pecked away  
to be eaten  
to be torn

in your sharpness  
so that what remains of me  
is only an aftertaste in your mouth

i cannot answer your questions  
for like the worm silence is forever mine

also

i cannot help remembering  
that your questions were absent  
when you were madly hungry  
when you were madly in love  
when you madly needed me

i have lived the truth that  
against razor-sharp reason  
silence, like madness, is very comfortable.

## Songs of summer

*"I am happy, life is good."*

Heard at the end of a therapy class. . .

The heavy-duty brainwashing and you  
Remember your crores stacked away. . .  
Your Harvard airs helps in large doses.

Soon, the colors will peel away  
And there is nothing for you  
To do than wrestle with your yearnings.

*"I would like to make love."*

Wanna fuck? It is easier saying it this way  
For something that you paid for in cash  
And cheques and credit cards.

Forget the lesser action, the lack of poetry—  
What mattered was how you let go  
Of your hate and heat and hunger  
But never had the courage to talk  
To her of love or loneliness. . .

*"You are trespassing on my territory"*

You guarded it with LoCs and walls  
And barbed wire fences where hatred  
Danced like high-voltage electricity. . .

You killed creatures and cleared forests  
And wiped away the darker people  
And those of dreamy tongues with

Your agenda of a war-a-week, the  
Worlds-to-win and vengeance-to-wreak. . .  
Your Mushroom clouds and wmds and  
Poverty drafts and armchair chivalry and  
A collective manhood  
Of nuclear warheads  
That explode and penetrate. . .

*"She's mine."*

To make her yours and yours alone,  
You pushed her deeper into harems  
Where she could see the sunlight  
Only from the lattice windows.

Domesticated into drudgery she was just  
Another territory, worn out by wars. A slave  
Who maintained your numbers.

*"Let's make love."*

-all that you thought-

What's taking her so long to undress?  
Quick! Sooner!

-all that you said-

I m gonna fuck till ya faint. . .

*"Oh how nice to have made love."*

-breathless-  
Iminahurry. Cyasoon.  
-panting-

Here are the words, again—

*I am happy. Life is good  
I would love to make love.  
You are trespassing on my territory  
She's mine.  
Let's make love  
Oh how nice to have made love.*

On sunny green fields these are the only  
Six sentences the male of a grasshopper can ever say.

*But what have we done with words?*

### Sage in the cubicle

Even your tongue,  
Craves for the taste of tears. . .

And you are crying again.  
Misery is (you always believe) the only genuine  
Emotion and sadness, the way of the real world.

She wouldn't have any of it.  
Sage in the cubicle, healer of sorts.  
Three years your junior. She makes soul-talk  
Sound as prosaic as aeronautical engineering.

At the end,  
Her warning:  
'Stop this right now.'

What will you say of your feeling  
Living with a sister who terrorizes  
Even manic depressions out of your mind?



*slander is a slaughterhouse*



### Amnesia, selective

When memory decides  
To no longer bear the burdens—  
Of pain, or even plain indifference  
She has her winsome wicked ways.

Some day, years later,  
Life requires you to unearth  
Some event long past and you  
Set about browsing your brain  
Like a desk-full of office files and then—  
Come across a resounding emptiness.

Memories drizzle-fragile  
Are not to be found. What  
Greets you instead, through  
Those yellowing sheets of typed matter is  
The blank and ugly blotches of dried whitener  
So carefully applied, then. It has a fading smell of  
Chalk and chlorine: a blend, like memory, that works at  
Your throat. You try to scratch it and the faintest hopes are  
Betrayed as the caked pieces of the whitener crumble,  
Displaying nothing, but toe curling holes where crummy  
paper and ink once contained you.

### An angel meeting me

and may be we will  
almost fall in love. . .

I will look into his eyes,  
and he into mine—  
my one single eye,  
(the unfortunate other  
blinded by a disciplinizing slap)  
and we will agree, adjust  
that Love can be Blind.

And he, healthy boy  
well-fed, white with his rosy cheeks,  
will wonder about me,  
pity my bony body, those thin ribs  
and worry  
and feel my twisted ears  
and the scars on my hands,  
(reminders of the flirtation  
of my skin and a cruel cane)  
and perhaps lift my skirt. . .

Before he learns the greater horrors,  
I owe him the truth of me—  
So, I will say to him:  
"I went to school".

## Composition

At that brief time  
When you wait  
For the audacious cane  
To strike your skin,  
And the rest of you is flinching  
And cringing, with part shame,  
And part pain,  
Poetry dictates itself  
In your mind. Short lines  
Rip through, like bullets  
From a machine gun.

The poem comes with the  
Freshness of a life set free,  
Whistling its way,  
Painfully, like wind searing  
Through the palm fronds.

Then,

The cane thrashes  
Your skin, dancing cruelly  
And bouncing in wooden joy.  
Before you scream,  
Or shake, the poetry stops.  
And the Muse, is tentatively,  
Laid to rest, much before the  
Composition is  
Complete.

### **Aftermath**

(to consuming six glasses of orange juice)

the next morning in school during your english exam you take permission to go to the toilet where you throw up all the white and creamy breakfast milk. only it tastes sour and looks like bits of maggoty curd. weeks later, you get to know two things one of which will change your life for ever. first, you scored the highest in the english exam. second, you became a gossip item. you still don't know what affects you more.

because of your boldness and brashness and bunking classes your ulcerated vomit is taken for morning sickness. the sourness extends when you hear hushed whispers passing around. girls younger than you, point at you and speak such banal secrets. in staff-rooms, and in ungainly corridors teachers chatter of your child, so vividly imagined in the backdrop of your really empty womb. slander is a slaughterhouse.

even best-friends seek answers as the rumours inflame. your anger is mistaken to be towards a crude imagined lover who disowned you. you know the nauseous truth of your thighs: you are virgin. But evidence will not be revenge, for, so many smoky eyes implore you to supplicate, to admit alleged truths. impeaching faces lay down rules: don't shout or scream, but swallow the shame. next, confess the sin.

sin yes they will shred your innocent life to  
that yes you may fume or froth or boil or  
simmer yes you are their staple soup they  
need you just this way yes your fury takes  
its toll annihilating you not them yes anger  
and hatred seethe in your untamed tresses  
yes you know how gossip chokes even the  
tethered dreams yes something breaks in  
you yes dear yes you start the brute search  
for sleeping pills and chaste suicide ideas.

### Apologies for living on. . .

i am living on because  
providing apologies is easy

once—

i was making choices  
with insanely safe ideas of  
~~fleeing madly and flying away.~~  
i was a helpless girl  
against the brutal world of  
~~bottom patting and breast pinching.~~  
i was craving for security  
the kind i had only known while  
~~aimlessly afloat and speculating in the womb.~~

now—

i am locked away  
a terrified princess waiting  
~~for death and not any brave prince.~~  
i don't dream or think  
i just remember and wince  
~~at voices of the past smirking in sarcasm.~~

once—

i ran away in the darkness  
nothing beacons me more than the  
~~prospect of solitude and a caress of million stars.~~  
i ran into the arms of the ravishing night  
nothing pulled me back: not even the memories of love  
~~i had known & stolen kisses savoured for so long.~~  
i ran until terror stopped my tracks  
for, trembling i turned and saw that the moon was  
~~another immodest ogler and lecherous stalker.~~

## A breathless counsel

curiosity will catch you dear for you are a writer and it is your license to startle the world with a hundred thousand words instead of a dazzling smile or those occasional winks and even i don't want to probe because after all you are renouncing all the time and as such i don't want to stop you racing against life but i have been there and i have returned and i know what happens when it takes hold of a woman yes i know what happens then but i will not tell you the answers because i have sealed my lips and i have learnt how not to say what i must be saying somehow i don't want to be fledging you in security for what happens with all my parenting will only be a compromise darling child instead i let you free because i want you to ask the questions i want you to prick and not polish your wounds i let you to be hurt in the face of the world i want you to learn more than what you want to learn sometimes i feel i want you to get hurt badly hurt and bleed before the world and then i shall sit back and feel my work is done for once you have known what pain is then you shall know how to preserve the fringes of happiness so i want you to be alone in the ravenous world where you never know what happens next just so that you will no longer find routine to be so despicable and amidst that pervading fuzziness you shall long for an anchor for all your dreams only realizing much later that you are your safety you are your ultimate but till then you might screech and scream but when you retain your temperament you will find that life will always lie waiting like an hungry beast and at each turn you take i wish you would get to learn the greater horrors and now i confess darling i want you hurt because i want to watch you fight and fight and fight and desperately fight and i want to see you pull together those moonbeams of hope i want you to throb precariously i want you to be living on the edge i want you to learn the thousand one ways

in which you can melt the boundaries of saturation called  
death and the emptiness of life and the fidgetiness of what  
might be called love i want you to lose i want you to win but  
some day i want you to be free



*their daughters*



## Eyes meeting

Dear girl, eyes meeting  
May be the beginning of love. . .

But, when they come to see you  
For a possible bride, look at the floor  
The fading carpet and the unshapely toes  
Of the visitors who will inspect the weight  
Of your gold, the paleness of your complexion,  
The length of your hair and ask questions about  
The degrees you hold and the transparency of your past.

And at your wedding  
As he ties the three clumsy knots  
That shall put you in place, lower your lids  
And watch the fire's red tongues at the altar;  
Before you are whisked away to toil like the ancient  
Slave labourers of Mesopotamia who were called *Igi-nu-du*  
Which in the Sumerian meant "Not raising eyes."

### **Mascara**

The last thing she does  
before she gets ready to die  
once more, of violation,  
she applies the mascara.

Always,  
in that last and solemn moment  
the call-girl hesitates.

With eye-catching eyes  
she stops to shudder.  
Maybe, the dyed eyes  
mourn her body's sins.

Mascara . . .  
it serves to tell her  
that long buried  
hazy dreams  
of a virgin soul  
have dark outlines.  
Silently she cries.  
Her tears are black.  
Like her.

Somewhere  
Long Ago  
in an  
untraceable  
mangled  
matrilineal  
family tree  
of temple prostitutes,  
her solace was sought.

*It has happened for centuries...*  
"Empty consolations soothe  
violated bodies."

Sex clings to her devadasi skin,  
assumed superficialities don't wear off,  
Deliverance doesn't arrive.  
Unknown Legacies of  
Love made to Gods  
haven't been ceremoniously accounted  
as karma.

But still she prays.  
Her prayer words  
desperately provoke Answers.

Fighting her case,  
Providence lost his pride.  
Her helplessness doesn't  
Seduce the Gods.  
And they too  
never learn  
the Depth of her Dreams.

She believes—  
Cosmetics were once...  
War paints.

She awaits their resurrection.

When she dons the mascara  
The Heavens have heard her whisper,  
*Kali, you wear this too...*

## You

*"She sits down for a meal, divides a morsel.  
"Eat up!" I do. Or else I'll get what for!  
She bangs the pots and pans around, a goddess.  
She reads a book. And then she sweeps the floor.  
She pads around barefooted in my jacket.  
At morning, in the kitchen, she sings away.  
Love? No! Whatever gave you that idea?  
It's just that if she leaves me,  
I shall die."*

Evgeny Vinokurov, *Selected poems*, Moscow  
(translated by Alex Miller).

If, or when, she left you,  
I know you wouldn't,  
You wouldn't care to die.

You will simply search  
For a better maid (Yes, the pun implied).  
And you might get her too.  
Your rigid eyes and that hackneyed fascist charm  
Oh, I know some daft girl will come.  
And she too, poor creature will slave away.  
Singing in the kitchen. Barefooted.  
And you will tell to your friends,  
And others about: Your new goddess.

Your society always makes  
the spoon-feeding-the-man  
the pot-and-pan banging,  
the-sweeping-the-floor  
the masochist slave  
and other submissive women  
as goddesses.

And my kind, or my mother's kind,  
the ones that fight, rebel, hit at you  
the ones who wouldn't mind a swear  
word or two, are she-demons.  
We won't care..  
To us, it is an old story,  
From Lilith there  
To Kali here. . .

Oh, and that girl.  
Your new goddess.  
And that old goddess.  
It is true that it is not Love.  
It never was.  
And no one gave me any ideas.

It is simply an arrangement  
of convenience.  
For you.

### Give me the clothes

*"In 'I ask for it', I ask for people across different cultures to give me the clothes that they wore when they felt sexually threatened."*

—Jasmeen Patheja, Blank Noise

There they hang on Brigade Road  
Three exhibits, now part of public art,  
That record shame and violation and helpless despair.  
Three stories (five years apart),  
That have crushed womanhood  
To a fine, fragile delicacy held in place  
By tears, diary entries and censored memories.

Imagine a girl at eleven.

White shirts, bleached navy skirts  
Indistinct two-plaited brown beauties  
Walking across corridors, down steps,  
Running into a concrete-grass playground.  
Lecherous teachers, curious classmates  
Their eyes eating her, gulping her lethargic sway.  
'Her breasts that tease the air'  
Teachers teach  
(Hands brushing her)  
The fine points of dribbling and balls. . .

Imagine a girl at sixteen.

Anything  
She wears  
Anywhere. . .  
'S.A.'  
Everything could happen to her  
(Maybe, everything, short of . . .)

Imagine a woman at twenty-one.

Six yards of printed pink floral raw silk  
Blowing in wind like careless grass and  
Draped, on her, like a dream . . .  
'Her remote, breaking waist.'  
Someone keen or lusty  
Noted her sari-knot  
Tied below the navel.  
Then, called her a prostitute. . .

I might be one of them.  
I might be none of them.  
As if anybody ever cared at all?

Never  
Recite me the history  
Of all your pious girls  
Paraded like race horses. . .

Rather,  
Give me the clothes  
To wear and wrap over my  
Twenty-one-year-old naked heart.  
To heal old wounds, the armors to win wars

Give me the clothes  
That shall call home  
Our exiled cultures...  
We'll sweat in spun fabric dreams  
Freedom in form triumphing over  
Enslaved bodies and chained minds.

Give me the clothes  
That set me forever free. . .

### **Born of no placenta**

I will tell you what these old, sacred texts say  
And I will begin at the beginning, here we go:

Manu was the progenitor of mankind.  
But Manu, didn't mean man (a downright absurd guess)  
And if you follow Max Mueller  
It meant 'to know (the meaning of the sacred texts)'  
There we go again. . .

Manu was Suyambhu: the self-existent  
He was the father of the five tribes and the races of men. . .  
Almost like Adam.

And now, you ought to listen to the legend of the flood  
That a frail Brahmin remembered to narrate and  
It was passed on down the ages through many ears and  
Tongues and teeth because no one knew how to write  
And even if they knew anyway, writing would mean  
That you or me or rebellious women could read it and  
Perhaps write poems on it. . .

It was all an ear-to-mouth transmission  
Please imagine passing smoke swirls as a legacy and not  
Benson & Hedges butts or ashes or shining porcelain  
Ashtrays. Imagine smoke.

Now, back to the legend of the flood: almost like Noah,  
His ark and the crazy pre-perdition hullabaloo.  
This is a circumstantial story, but it is a story anyway.

A story that could make you  
Call Freud and teach him to turn  
His theories inside out like dusting off dirty socks.

Manu alone was (thank-god) saved by the advice of a fish  
It was a large and friendly fish with a weakness  
For that day's equivalent of popcorn and cake crumbs  
And candy cubes.

And inside his ark or on top of the tallest of the tall  
Mountains or when the waters receded (here the story  
Is really hazy) he began worshipping the thirty three million  
Gods (He had kept mumbling their names  
Through every ebb and flow of the flood.  
That was desperate prayer, not worship.)  
His oblations produced a woman.  
Now, Manu became a parent. A happy,  
Happy dad. And the daughter was named Ila.

Solicited (like she was available-on-demand)  
By the God of Water to become his  
She stayed with Manu, escaping one tyranny  
By choosing the safer option.  
Father over *Lover*. Father over *Lover*. *Father* over *Lover*.

And tragically, Father over her.  
With her, Manu reproduced the human race,  
Or so these holy, holy books say.

If you were that woman,  
How would you have lived?  
What would you have dreamt?  
Where would you have run away?  
What would a womb have meant?  
Where would you've learnt what a mother would do?

And why should this happen to you, Ila,  
First of our race to walk this earth,  
A fiery birth tamed by father fucking?

**Let my sisters title this**

[those with aversion to poet's comments can ignore mine]

mrs. \_\_\_\_\_

[i forget her name—forgive me for forgetting. she was content to be someone's (house)wife, someone's mom. . .]

wrote her first article

[i apologize at the outset for being harsh on a first-timer  
i understand the difficulties of getting published]

which appeared on the first page of *Woman's Life*.

[which is advertised as a supplement for the "second" sex  
and it comes every second day of every second week]

she wrote of how feminists are misled and how they miss out on the "small joys of life." now in her forties, with her husband away at work and her sons away at school she wrote movingly of how she discovers the pleasures of life by cleaning cupboards, sewing curtains and keeping home

[read on to know the small joys of life. . . life? hers or his?]

not to mention how she has renewed a primeval interest in cooking and these days she had even started grinding batter for idlis and dosas with her own hands and swore it tasted better better better yes yes it was the better batter and then came the mouth-watering end of her article

[which must have been written with the same chapped hands that mended and tended and . . .]

it was no damp squib of course it was kind of damp,  
bordering on the wet but it was nevertheless a good climax  
then she once again swore on how she had started grinding  
even the chutney using her own hands

[she didn't mistrust just the feminists  
she mistrusted even the machines]

and she spoke of the ecstasy, of the arousal, of the sublime  
happiness that filled her when the coconut blended with  
the hot green chilies and she came at last to speak  
of the contentment of being a woman  
which meant that she discovered  
the small joys of life and the small joy  
was the aroma of coconut chutney  
prepared fresh and hot to be served  
to her hungry husband and hungrier children.  
the feminists didn't bother with rebuttals  
after all patriarchy is very institutionalised  
et cetera. . . so some woman think feminism  
is a bad word and that being a woman means  
grinding grinding grinding and so on and so forth

and these women don't understand the sacrifices  
and sorrows that our mothers went through  
and these woman haven't heard of the courage  
and the liberty and the power and the power  
and the power that the revolution has given to us

o but i am writing this poem  
because i think for feminism to be  
grinded away in coconut chutney

and to be killed so femininely  
is a very disgraceful death.

### My lover speaks of rape

Flaming green of a morning that awaits rain  
And my lover speaks of rape through silences,  
Swallowed words and the shadowed tones  
Of voice. Quivering, I fill in his blanks.  
Green turns to unsightly teal of hospital beds  
And he is softer than feathers, but I fly away  
To shield myself from the retch of the burns  
Ward, the shrill sounds of dying declarations,  
The floral pink-white sad skins of dowry deaths.

*Open eyes, open hands, his open all-clear soul...*

Colorless noon filters in through bluish glass  
And coffee keeps him company. She chatters  
Away telling her own, every woman's story;  
He listens, like for the first time. Tragedy in  
Bridal red remains a fresh, flushing bruise across  
Brown-yellow skinscapes, vibrant but made  
Muted through years of silent, waiting skin.  
I am absent. They talk of everyday assault that  
Turns blue, violet and black in high-color symphony.

*Open eyes, open hands, his open all-clear soul...*

Blues blend to an unforgiving metropolitan black  
And loneliness seems safer than a gentle night  
In his arms. I return from the self-defence lessons:  
Mistrust is the black-belted, loose white mechanism  
Of survival against this groping world and I am  
A convert too. Yet, in the way of all life, he could try  
And take root, as I resist, and yield later, like the earth.

*Open eyes, open hands, his open all-clear soul...*

*Has he learnt to live my life? Has he learnt never to harm?*

## Their daughters

Paracetamol legends I know  
For rising fevers, as pain-relievers—

Of my people—father's father's mother's  
Mother, dark lush hair caressing her ankles  
Sometimes, sweeping earth, deep-honey skin,  
Amber eyes—not beauty alone they say—she  
Married a man who murdered thirteen men and one  
Lonely summer afternoon her rice-white teeth tore  
Through layers of khaki, and golden white skin to spill the  
Bloodied guts of a British soldier who tried to colonize her. . .

Of my land—uniform blue open skies,  
Mad-artist palettes of green lands and lily-filled lakes that  
Mirror all—not peace & tranquil alone, he shudders—a  
Young wife near my father's home, with a drunken husband  
Who never changed; she bore his daily beatings until on one  
Stormy night, in fury, she killed him by stomping his seedbags. . .

We: their daughters.  
We: the daughters of their soil.

We, mostly, write.

## *Publications*

**The Little Magazine, Volume 6, Issue 1 & 2, 2005:**

Becoming a Brahmin;

**The Little Magazine, Volume 6, Issue 4 & 5, 2005:**

Mohandas Karamchand, Maariamamma;

**Fresh Lime Soda ([www.freshlimesoda.com](http://www.freshlimesoda.com)):**

Elegy to my first keyboard;

**Great Works ([www.greatworks.org.uk](http://www.greatworks.org.uk)):**

Apologies for living on, How they prostitute a poem;

**Sweet Magazine ([www.sweetmagazine.co.za](http://www.sweetmagazine.co.za)):**

Betrayal, Inheritance, Excerpts from a study guide,

'Work is worship' or so they said. . ., A breathless counsel;

**Muse India ([www.museindia.com](http://www.museindia.com)):**

He replaces poetry, Justice is. . ., Cinquains, Take this for

an answer, An angel meeting me, You, Ekalaivan,

Reverence :: Nuisance;

**Kritya ([www.kritya.in](http://www.kritya.in)):**

Narration, Evil spirits, Why do the heroes die, Prayers;

**Cerebration ([www.cerebration.org](http://www.cerebration.org)):**

Aftermath;

**Thanal ([www.thanalonline.com](http://www.thanalonline.com)):**

Frenzied light, Non-conversations with a lover, Another

paradise lost, Meeting the prophetess, Advice to an

upwardly mobile man, Returning home, The flight of birds,

Sage in the cubicle

**Quarterly Literary Review Singapore ([www.qlrs.com](http://www.qlrs.com)):**

Their daughters

**Slow Trains ([www.slowtrains.com](http://www.slowtrains.com)):**

Sixteen elegant, untitled poems of everyday life in India

have been hosted in the form of an electronic chapbook

'*The Eighth Day of Creation*'

## *Prizes*

### **Indian Horizons, Volume 51, Spring Issue, 2004:**

"With a view to harness the creative genius of young Indian women, *Indian Horizons* conducted a pan Indian poetry competition on the occasion of International Women's Day, open to women born over the last three decades. Several thousand entries were received. A panel of judges comprising Dr. Aruna Sitiesh, Dr. Sukrita Paul Kumar, Smt. Mandira Ghosh and Dr. H.K. Kaul went through these poems in great detail," according to Dr. Madhup Mohta, Editor, *Indian Horizons*. *Mascara* won the first prize of Rs.10,000 in this competition sponsored by the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR), Government of India.

### **DISHA 2004**

*My lover speaks of rape* was awarded the First Prize in the All India Poetry Contest DISHA 2004 organized by International Organization for Crime Prevention and Victim Care, Chennai on the occasion of the International Day for Elimination of Violence Against Women.

### *about kamala das*

Recognized as one of India's foremost poets, Kamala Das is famous for her honesty of expression. Her book, *My Story*, created some controversy for its frank discussion of her search for love inside and outside marriage. She writes critically of the traditional conservative society in which she lives.

Born in 1934, she had an early inclination towards the literary life, inspired by her uncle Nalapat Narayana Menon, a prominent writer. Her mother, Nalapat Balamaniamma, was also a well-known Malayalam poet. She was educated at home and married at 15 to K Madhava Das, who was many years older. She bore her first child at 16, but her husband was often in a fatherly role to the children as well as Das herself. He encouraged her to associate with people of her own age, and also encouraged her writing. He was invariably proud of her accomplishments, even when they were controversial.

Kamala Das is bilingual, and writes easily in Malayalam (under the name Madhavikutty) and English. She has won several prestigious awards including the Ezhuthachan Award, Sahitya Academy Award and the Vayalar Award. In 1984, she was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature along with Marguerite Yourcenar, Doris Lessing and Nadine Gordimer.

In 1999 she converted to Islam, an action she said she had been contemplating for many years. Also known as a feminist writer, her other works include *Kamala Das: Selected Poems, Tonight, This Savage Rite, The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, Alphabet of Lust, A Doll for the Child Prostitute* and *The Descendants*.

In 2006, she was conferred the The Little Magazine SALAM, a lifetime achievement award for literary stalwarts of South Asia.

### *about meena kandasamy*

Meena Kandasamy is a 22-year-old writer, poet and translator based in Chennai, India. Two of her poems *Mascara* and *My Lover Speaks of Rape* have won first prizes in pan-Indian poetry contests.

Her poems have been published widely in India and abroad through journals like *The Little Magazine*, *Cerebration*, *Indian Horizons*, *Sweet Magazine*, *Muse India*, *Great Works*, *Slow Trains* and the *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*.

She was the Editor of *The Dalit*, a bimonthly alternative English magazine of the Dalit Media Network in its first year of publication from 2001-2002. It was a noteworthy media initiative that provided a platform to record atrocities, condemn oppressive hierarchies and document the forgotten heritage.

As a woman writer who dreams of a casteless India, she has contributed quite a few book chapters and research articles in various journals such as *Biblio*, *Communalism Combat* and so on.

She has translated more than a dozen books that run into over 1,500 pages. Significant among her translations are the writings and speeches of Thol. Thirumaavalavan (*Talisman: Extreme Emotions of Dalit Liberation* (2003) and *Uproot Hindutva: The Fiery Voice of the Liberation Panthers* (2004), Samya, Kolkota) and the poetry and fables of Tamil Eelam poet Kasi Anandan.

Having translated Periyar's views on untouchability, she is currently neck-deep in translating his thoughts on women's rights. She has majored in Linguistics and English Literature and plans to pursue her Ph.D. specialising in language teaching, technical translation or some other deeply boring, easily forgotten topic.

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