

FOLLOW YOUR TRAIL

I know love's sweet tyranny
when smoke and petals each
follow your trail
there are no fetters with their cruel bite
and yet, you can never be mine
our kingdom is the vast sea
our home the dripping forests
at night the northern lights
shine on us
we want nothing
we ride to the sun
lying under a spreading tree
till the rose on the sky appears

DIFFERENT RAIN

you have not experienced
our childhood rain
rain that awakens memories
the shadows of buffeting branches
the dark rooms of many windows
drums of heaven
welcoming the monsoon
next day our boots squelch
the tint stream is a white froth
we hear of savage earth and boulders
burying people in their sleep
we return home solemn afraid
mother sits with us by the fireplace
will it rain again tonight?

THE SWOLLEN WATERS

Wading through
the swollen waters
she carried a basket
she carried on her head
she reached the embankment
she put him down
her abandoned child,
she walked away
choking in grief
she turned back sobbing
for her son
only. only
the basket lay there

LEAVING

They left at night
when the moon did not rise
dark shapes, men and women
a child drugged
with a drop of opium
in case he cried
and put their lives at risk
they put out the brazier
stood for the last time on the carpet
looked at the familiar rooms
they did not lock the door
climbed down the stairs
it was too dark to see their tears
they walked down the hill
faraway the orange flames of burning chinars
strangers would live on their house from now on
others would drink from their silver cups
reclining on the walnut sofas
they walked on pale, dead inside
not knowing where this road would lead to

A DREAM SHOP

A grey afternoon
sulky clouds looking at puddles
aimless, with time to kill
i wander to the new supermarket
masked and hands sanitized wet as I stroll
The aisles I know nothing is healthy here
cookies cakes chocolates chips
frozen sausages chunks of cheese
tubs of chocolate with wafer crisps
i wanted nothing coveted nothing
it is as if life is over
and then round a corner
something fell off a shelf
in the middle of an aisle
deserted
fell in front of me a pinecone
i gripped it in my hand
wonder awakening in me
i walked out with the cone in my hand
suddenly life was abundant

BANANAS, YELLOW

The woman sits
in bedraggled chaos
by the side of the pavement
bananas are all she sells
why bananas? why not apples grapes?
dont bananas ripen and turn black soon
you cannot cheat people with rotten bananas
but she has been at her corner for years
her dark raisin eyes
bore into you
willing you to buy
challenging you to ignore her
in the swathes of her fading, voluminous saris
is a body, wrinkled, gnarled, dust on the folds of her skin
when her bananas do not sell
when customers hurry away
she mutters curses in a strange tongue
on the sacking of her cane basket
the yellow of the bananas
speak of melancholy sunsets, burning pyres
Van Gogh's fields, Wordsworth's daffodils
when I walk past her she wills me to stop and
with a grand gesture presses into my hands
an extra two if I buy
when it rains she pushes her wares into a shop
and sits rocking to and fro, puffing a beedi
there is something elemental in her
something ageless. immanent
sitting beside her fruits
she observes with her raisin eyes
humanity surging by

CHANGE THE CHANNELS

The war drags on
the visuals fail to excite
let us be lulled
by a nymphet
applying sunscreen
on her lithe arms
fake families gather
to eat at a groaning table
the stud contorts his body in impossible
shapes to sell cola
you hear of crises in nearby countries
switch the remote in a blink
we don't want to know
lovers bond over a chocolate bar
brides in glittering jewels
smug, complacent
each a clone of the other
switch channels
villages washed away
not good for the nerves
why are so many in handcuffs?
theft robbery rape scam
bad for the nerves
love it was that made us
but there is less and less of love
to save you, to save me

HIS PRESENCE

His Presence
The guests departed
The lamp flickered out
Before his portrait,
His thick lensed glasses
Made him look angry.
She went to all the rooms
He would never be there,
She lay in bed
Hugging the pillow
At three o'clock
She heard him call for tea
She sprang up
Her face transformed
With joy.

TRYING TO LIVE

Trying to live
it is true
a strange thing it is
to be made undead dead
you are banished from home
you are breathing in shallow gasps
to them it does not matter
your first child squirms
in the depths of your womb
they have no wish to know
the walls grow higher
another boy arrives you hold them smell their hair
banished from one family
you create another
they cling to you at seashores mountain sides snow drifts
the pain you carried in your heart subsides
the dark tide cannot reach reach your toes

OLD TOGETHER

Old together
With the weight of the years
things shift crack sink
her hands have roughened with detergents
his breath labours up the stairs
they gently mock each others idiosyncrasies
before visitors
they wait at doctors clinics patiently
these days they are cheating on diets
giant oily chicken rolls, salty samosas
the orgiastic delight of swallowing a rasgolla whole
their children's voices come across clouds fields
rivers
bound to their beautiful children who have outgrown them
at night when he wraps the blanket around her
suddenly she finds the love story
she had been searching all her life.

RAIN AT MIDNIGHT

Rain at midnight
The clouds burst at midnight
Like passions of a spinster
The rain loosened her tresses
And stringed her dark throat
With lurid lightning
Unchaperoned, she eavesdropped
Groped at warm bodies
Through open windows
Only to feel them recoil
Beneath her needling touch
Her throaty laughter reverberated
Through narrow alleyways Pariah dogs growled
At her wanton ways
Utterly spent
She stared at her
Haggard form in puddles
And with a sigh
Gathered up her tattered skirts
to slip away
for future spoils and stratagems
In other climes, other alleyways

CRAVINGS

She was a woman with a secret
it began when he left for work
her dilated eyes skimming over the glowing screen
she knew she absolutely had to have
shoes sheets Swarovski pendants
books bustiers blueberries
she nibbled cookies as she typed
then the parcels began to come
flying in from around the country
she made trilling demented noises
lavishly tipped the courier boys
she sat on the floor
tearing cellophane thermocol
one by one the gifts to herself
were revealed to her
she sat in a trance
all this was hers, hers alone
then why the yawning abyss within her?
she hid the things
washed her face
soon her husband would be back
would she talk of her loneliness?
no, she would not
he would force those pills on her again

DESTINY

A wet slab of stone
rising and falling
her arms
the thud of clothes
strands of hair escaping
from her untidy bun
wet clothes clinging to her
he told his men
to take the boat
near the shore
the oars rippled
the sun shone
the nut brown man in the white *mundu*
mouthed endearments
her eyes sparkled, her cheeks blushed
her washing was forgotten
her feet could be traced to the boat
nobody knows where they are
behind the rainbow
or some isle where the earth
is red and palm trees sway
their embraces are as ardent on the first day

WRAPPING THE SKY

A drop of rain
one monsoon dusk
we pulled the sky
around ourselves
we slid deep
into its cool embrace
luxuriated in its vastness
we floated like a dream
a thistledown
wrapt in the soft whisper of clouds
the rain washed us clean
our souls became clean of the old sadness
stale memories
our minds expanding
as we wrap ourselves in the sky
one monsoon dusk

TIMELESS MOMENTS

Sunshine and rain
the scudding clouds
the season of tumultuous love
secret meetings
whiff of cardamom
in her breath
he lifts and sweeps her hair
from the nape of her neck
love surges
a river in spate
a beam of golden sunshine
pours down from the clouds
to caress the two
a benediction from above

COME TO ME LIKE RAIN

Come to me like rain
falling off the grey, restless clouds
little pinpricks on my upturned face
and the nape of the neck
life is as jagged as rain slipping
down window panes
you are a gust of wind
dancing with the rain
people huddle for shelter
but for me the rain is you
familiar, awakening a
long cavalcade of memories
i always wonder
how many millions of raindrops
there are between us
and how many monsoons
we will see and how
each raindrop
whispers our story
cup your palms, love
and accept my offering of raindrops

THE OPEN WINDOW

it was the first window of my life
the threshold of ever new experiences
it was on the extreme corner of the
first floor
on a tiny room
where all unwanted things were stacked
old magazines, a broken chair
books, yellowing covers ripped off
whenever i lied or stole or uttered profanities
Father banished me to this room of discarded things
but he forgot about the window
the wide world it opened to me
a kaleidoscope of revolving scenes
slices of life unfolding before me
women in shawls going to church
office goers in hurried strides
the snake charmer with his turban and baskets
the man with the dancing bear
the smooth Bengali with his pan of sandesh held aloft
the conical basket of the potato man
funeral hearses moving in the serpentine road
the more the banishment,
the more my hunger for the sights of the world
till the day i saw a slender woman with long hair
looking up at me
I knew her, i knew her instantly
she was me of the future, the one i would become
that was a magical window that showed tomorrow
suddenly, I was afraid.

A HAPPY CHILD

I remember how you shrieked
with laughter
when I tickled you and kissed your nose
you were a happy child
darting around, chasing adventure
you were never still
your words tumbled over each other
like pebbles in a stream
your mother took you to so many classes
badminton, guitar, swimming
your neat handwriting was her heart's delight
then ever so slowly, the eclipse came for you
your dark eyes looked challengingly at us
the monster that you injected in your veins
the dazed half asleep look you gave
you lied, you cursed, you decimated a family
dreams that crumbled into dust
the music fled, the smiles vanished
your family cower for you to return
from your midnight jaunts
your mother's voice grows fainter
how shall I console her?

TOUCH-ME-NOTS

Sometimes
I see your name
On a signboard of a shop
From the bus I ride on.
In that moment
I feel you have always been inside my head
And had never ever gone away.
I was sixteen to your twenty four
I counted the difference with my fingers
Memories shivered
Like touch-me-nots.
You who had kissed
The inside of my wrists
Clasped the span of my waist
Touched the nape of my neck
With your nicotine lips
We were afraid of the future
Between us, we shared
Brushed lips
You never told why.
I counted the years between us
Weeping, devastated
The wedding card had a streak of turmeric on it
This is what I remember
And a packet of succulent sweets.
That night
And many nights after that
I kissed the inside of my wrists
The way you did
You have been inside my head,
All this while.

HAILSTONES

Your plane
Became a blaze
Of twinkling lights
In the immense grey sky
My tears were frozen hailstones
Waiting to melt
The airport was deserted
As stale as sandwiches
Behind the glass container
There was a man
With a gait like yours
Another whose hair shaggy
Like the way you wear it
Another, whose eyes had
the sadness of dark forests
Driving to an empty home
On the road, everyone a stranger
There is no future
Only the past
At the home you left behind
Your old, shapeless sweater
Forgotten in a hurry.
I clasp it to my chest
Inhale deeply
At last the hailstones
Begin to melt.

LIFE'S SORROWS

The river flowed below them
Boundless and free
Swallowing the sunset
With its wet mouth.
He likes her honest smile
She felt she could rely on his broad shoulders.
Her hours were spent at a clinic,
Pushing cannulas, checking pulses.
Holding the hands of the sick
The dying, the demented.
After those days,
She tossed sleeplessly at night.
He had his eight foot by ten foot stall
Under the shadows of *Maa Kamakhya*
Beads of rudraksha, clay oil lamps, vermilion for Ma
Someday he would have a bigger stall,
Someday.
Now it was enough
To love his slender woman
With her open smile and sorrowful eyes.
They held hands, quiet,
Walking down to the river's edge
Where the mud was velvet, and stones ancient.
There, on the very edge were a pair of slippers,
Frayed, cheap
Worn with use,
By its side, a small heap of clothes.
Someone, somewhere was
In the depths of the black river
There was a knot on her throat.
Constructing, tightening.
She began to cry, heartbroken.
Leaning against his chest.
At that moment he knew
She was the one
Who would be the mother of his children.

SONG OF PEACE

Today with new eyes
I look at the colours
of a fading sunset
the waters rippling at *Dighalipukhuri*
the old dreaming houses
witnesses to history
I see mothers fondling their young
lovers holding hands in the park
the humble fruit seller on the sidewalk
people crowding around the tea stall
for the sweet, hot brew
i pray one day slips into another
uneventful, predictable, without heart-stopping incidents
but if you see the images on the screen
all that is precious...and life itself
stands on the edge of nothingness

VOICE IN THE DESERT

We have had years, dearest
To turn our love into something rich and ripe
In your chest I found
The salt of the sea
In my palms
The kindling of a gentle fire
Why then turn all this
Into ash
Dead leaves
Cruel rocks?
Why do I now try to unremember
The years frozen in photos...
Holidays, the children, the garden parties
Today you create new, many hued memories
With the one whose name I do not know
My world is rubble, sand, a dead fire