

# Nagaland and other poems



Hornbill Festival

## **Nagaland**

Conversations with old friends  
Remembering the good old bad old  
Days in Nagaland.  
Bonding and exchanging of views.

Talking of the Hornbill festival,  
Weaving and craft traditions,  
Bamboo and indigenous knowledge  
Folklore and folk songs.  
Rice beer and dried pork  
Dal, chaawal and laipatta.  
Having squash and kachu  
And fish pie.  
Christmas songs and blessings.

## **Graduate School**

Reading Structuralist Poetics

And Writing and Difference  
And S/Z by Barthes brings up  
Old memories of  
Graduate school in Syracuse.

Poetry workshops,  
Celestial Seasonings tea,  
And Fig Newtons.  
Inspiration.

### **Chinese New Year**

Celebrations in Syracuse  
With friends from Mainland China  
And Hong Kong.  
Dances and food and cheer.

Walking to Westcott store  
To get groceries.  
Walking back on icy sidewalks.  
Going to the International Student's House  
For get-togethers and celebrations.

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# **Working Women's Hostel and other poems / Rachna Joshi**



## Working Women's Hostel

High walls, unkempt lawn—  
Inside the lounge, a dusty picture of Adhya Jha hangs  
Covered with cobwebs.

From the mess, Rajrani waddles through the door  
While Jaswant and Babu Lal laze in the sun,

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It's the month of Magh  
The coldest of the year.  
Freezing in heaterless rooms;  
Fingers numb with cold, Sheela and Sonia  
Wring socks and undies in dingy bathrooms.

Togged up for outings to Hauz Khas village  
We drink orange juice at wayside stalls  
And splurge on a bandhni sari for lohri  
Or the occasional party where you meet the bohemian crowd—  
The bearded painter delighting everyone  
With an impromptu sketch;  
Visits to Belu mamu near Sangam cinema.

Glued to Aap ki Adalat on TV  
We hide the hair dryer  
From the snooping eye's of the warden's pet.  
Forging signatures in night-out registers;  
We eat Manipuri chicken and dosas  
And drink beer in camaraderie  
Behind closed doors.

Late at night, when all are asleep.  
I can hear Dhaneshwari sweeping the floor,  
Rotting food, and cats overturning the garbage bins  
As Rajwati bunks the third day.

Everyone waits for release  
From the hostel,  
Which comforts and cramps

Stifles and protects  
Sanctuary or cell.

(From Crossing the Vaitarani, Rachna Joshi, 2008, Writer's Workshop, Kolkata)

### **Jageshwar**

Twelve ancient temples in Jageshwar.  
The initial pines lead to the inevitable deodar.  
Its green, dark needles—vertical layers moving in wayward  
lines.  
We tramped (modern half-breeds, urbane, mixed-up),  
To seek the benediction of the ancient world.  
Like plants that become deformed in their reaching back,  
The roots entwined, the leaves losing sap.

The constraints of caste and region have feathered  
And tarred our faces. We are the pariah Indians,  
The few idealists,  
Who seek oneness in a country torn  
By every known difference.

Could I say when I reached the humped group of temples  
Guarded by the sentinel wind of the Himalayas  
That I desired union?The lingam leering at the obscenity of my  
prurient soul,  
The world, yes—the flesh and paradise,  
The same old grind-show of everyman and god.

I have tried to taste of the tree of knowledge,  
Have aspired beyond the limits  
Of an Indian Brahmin girl,  
Born with a bewildering array of puritan forefathers  
Who recited hymns and shlokas  
For all occasions.  
For birth, marriage, childbirth, fornication  
Adultery, murder and what have you.  
With sacred threads and grey ashes,

They broke the coconuts of inauguration.

I rise like a throwback—I muck up everything down the line,  
The generations-old intellect, the strict decorum.  
My blood wants the palpability of earthly love,  
Not to obscure the predatory passions  
Within the sanctified code.

Till I passed Jageshwar,  
The clotted deodars, the smokewood huts,  
The scattered pines, the humped shrines.  
Shaggy closeness of rhododendrons, smells of raw peaches,  
The leopard-tracks, the wild bird's cry  
The pit-viper's slither, the pariah's bark,  
The mountain streams and the twisted trees,  
The wooden mounds that burn the dead.  
I felt like a girl going to harvest new green stalks,  
The first of the season,  
In an old village set in the pines—with twelve ancient temples  
And the bells chiming for the snows across the valley.

(From Configurations, Rachna Joshi, 1993, Rupa & Co., New Delhi)

### **Writing Poetry**

Those days I wanted  
To write big poems,  
Full of words, blood images, multiple voices, epilogues  
And prologues.  
It was the first flush of love  
After reading the Waste Land.  
I wrote about violence, assumed roles, hammered out  
Universal truths  
In short, I was prolific.

And then condensation—  
Like the tower we saw from the cockpit.  
Imagining from it Delhi's green trees, yellow laburnums,

Neat roads;  
Leaving out what passed between  
Your strange disheveled being—my robust, fanciful self.  
And now it seems such a marvelous paradox,  
Like a dinosaur that has lived on.  
Poetry is dead, Marxism defunct, what survives is computers.  
I'm going to California to be a beach bum.

Why has the fragile, the knotted, the perplexing gone?  
Einstein who could put  $e=mc^2$  on a sheet of paper  
And still play the violin.  
Words engulf me...intertextuality, semiotics, phenomenology.  
Maybe writing was not what I thought.

It is to me warm and moaning, like Gilbert's *Pewter*,  
*The Science of the Night*, *The Fly*, *The Seagull*.  
It is so many things...so many sacraments.  
It is Tuesday afternoon...reading what Kath or what Karen  
Or what Ruth has to say.  
It is Yeats...it is Sheila invoking the loons.  
It is my mother at home,  
To whom I write of my attempts, my trials, my failures  
It is hysteria at times.

And when I glance out...the world has moved away  
My childhood has come again...the words I heard  
Are still true.  
The red mud and dry pine needles of Shillong Peak  
Still flow down while I, ten years old, and my brother,  
fourteen,  
Squabble up the mountain trail.

Our boots are muddy, and this is North America.  
There is still a blue lake, the leaves are withering.  
O look! They fall...and the orange sunlight  
Falls full on the trees—the leaves yellow, and brown and red.  
And you, my friend, talking of Walden, of Relativity, of  
intuitions,

Showing me at other times your paper machines, your  
laboratory,  
Your crazy oak tree from the forest of Sherwood.  
The trail never ending...the low voices of otter.  
It is a deerslayer country, it is the land of the Mohicans.  
(From Configurations, Rachna Joshi, 1993, Rupa & Co., New  
Delhi)



## MONSOON

The Yamuna swells  
across field and marsh  
as wind and water lash the city.

A curtain of rain  
catches scooter and cyclist  
in its wake.

Rain falls through me  
Through my past  
Through memory

Through grandmother's eyes  
When they would water.

The magnolias fall to one side  
and the Ashok and Eucalyptus  
shine with silvery glow.

Telephone lines go bust  
electricity and power surge and wane  
and connectivity is a poor Morse Code.

E-mails dysfunction  
Friends blotted out  
News blotted out  
What happened to Khashoggi  
Did Obama get elected  
Or did Urijit Patel resign.

Rain flows out  
washes the roads  
and fuses the landscape.

The rain unravels like music  
Mallikarjun Mansur singing Megh Malhar  
Fuzon belting out Saawan beeto jaye piharwa  
Jagjit Singh singing of saun da mahina  
And woh kaagaz ki kashti, woh baarish ka paani.

A loving refrain  
it inundates my being,  
envelopes the spirit  
washing out the day's drudgery.

Crossing the Yamuna by metro  
I see again scattered hutments  
and withered fields of grain  
needy farmers waiting  
for the river to replenish their fields  
by forgetting its banks



and spilling itself widely.

The river will withdraw into its channel,  
silt-laden banks will sprout again  
lush and green.

I too feel like rich accumulated  
silt, ready for the language  
of change to grow in me, say  
things I've never said before.

(From Monsoon and Other Poems, Rachna Joshi, 2020, Tethys, New Delhi)

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## **In The City Alone ... and other poems / Rachna Joshi**

I walk through the old market  
fascinated by cowbells. Himalayan cedars  
and pines cover the slopes around.  
Dew soaks through the foliage  
and the cold vapours settle everywhere,  
branches and leaves hang in a myopic mist  
green, white and light blend.