

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,

.
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)

Beastly Tales: Animal and Human Fables



Naseeruddin Shah and Ratna Pathak Shah performing in Beastly Tales

Beastly Tales : Animal and Human Fables

A review by Manohar Khushalani

READINGS: Beastly Tales

Poems by Vikram Seth with Stories by James Thurber

Presented by Motley

Recitations by Naseeruddin Shah;

Ratna Pathak Shah; Heeba Shah; and Kenny Desai

Produced by Jairaj Patil

17 November 2022

Beastly Tales was billed as readings by the well-known performers, Naseeruddin Shah, Ratna Pathak Shah, Heeba Shah and Kenny Desai. Produced by Jairaj Patil for Motley, the heavily attended event included poems by Vikram Seth, from his book 'Beastly Tales with stories by James Thurber', TS Eliot's poems from 'Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats' and Robert Browning's Legendary poem 'Pied Piper of Hamelin'. The starkly designed presentation had no bells and whistles. Led by Naseeruddin Shah, the four performers stood behind their individual lecterns and read out the poems with a flair and perfect diction. Each one read their own piece individually and sometimes, in perfect synchronisation, in a chorus.

Spiced with humour, the content of the performance was deftly curated to reflect idiosyncrasies of contemporary times with follies and foibles of its people juxtaposed against an animal world which reminds you eerily of 'Fables of Aesop' and 'Panchatantra'. The animals were near human too, but unlike the complexities we fallible folks suffer from, the cat, the lion, the tiger, the elephant, the owl were more focussed with a single idiosyncrasy each. This curious fact, along with the pulsating rhythm of the poetry delivered with a punch and an aplomb by the actors brought out the message of each piece with precision.

Let's pick a few stanzas from here and there and see for ourselves the merriness of the mirth involved.

The Tortoise, in Vikram Seth's poem, initially maintained the

original story with who won the race thus:

“And the cheering of the crowd
Died at last, the tortoise bowed,
And he thought: “That silly hare!
So much for her charm and flair.
Now she’ll learn that sure and slow
Is the only way to go –
That you can’t rise to the top
With a skip, a jump, a hop”

But here comes the twist in Seth’s version, it is in fact the hare, who became the hero of the hour:

But it was in fact the hare,
With a calm insouciant air
Like an unrepentant bouncer,
Who allured the pressmen round her.
“And Will Wolf, the great press lord
Filled a Gold cup – on a whim –
And with an inviting grin
Murmured: “In my eyes you win.”

Each of the selections had interesting, and sometimes mind blowing twists and turns, that be made you realise that, as in real life, in these fairy tales too you cannot take a happy ending for granted

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Animal and Human Fables

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■ MANOHAR KHUSHALANI



5

SHE WANDERS IN THE WILDERNESS

I am Pather Panchali

I roam in the wilderness of dawn

The mystic magic of the woods attracts me,

The silence of the grassy meadows lures me,

I have an existing exile in the region,

I know not any.

I don't own your doubts about me,

I don't care about your suspicions,

I am here to wander in the leisurely hours,

Feeling detached of all and sundry.

Why do you think I am?

Who do you think I am?

I cannot answer your questions,

For I am a response never tread upon,

All those that see me, feel none of my pangs,

They are just there to frown upon my torn and tattered land.

People call me dowdy, trollope and laugh at my misery,

Some even slap my urge to seek solace,

Some negate my identity,

Some call me unfairly keeping funny names,

And some insult me with their horrible words of disdain.

Yet there IS something that keeps me going,

And certainly this one thing helps me survive,

These wild plains I inhabit,

Keep me intact.

I sit and cry here for hours and they hold me tight in
embrace,

They tell me everything would be alright, when I learn how to

fight.

They tell me " YOU are an amazon" do not give up your strife,
For there will be a day when you will be rewarded for all that
you sacrifice.

The right to be treated nicely is what I give up everyday,
And the woods restore my lost spirits comforting my soul each
day.

I know not the language of the rich,
I know not the luxury of the privileged.

But the woods tell me they know I will earn it all some day.

So here I am treading amongst these forests,

Waiting for that one clear call,

That can lead me to my desired destination.

I am the pather panchali,

Thus I roam in the wilderness of the dawn,

In search of a divine messenger,

That can lead me towards the kindly light of the fair morn.

For comments if any please write in the box below:

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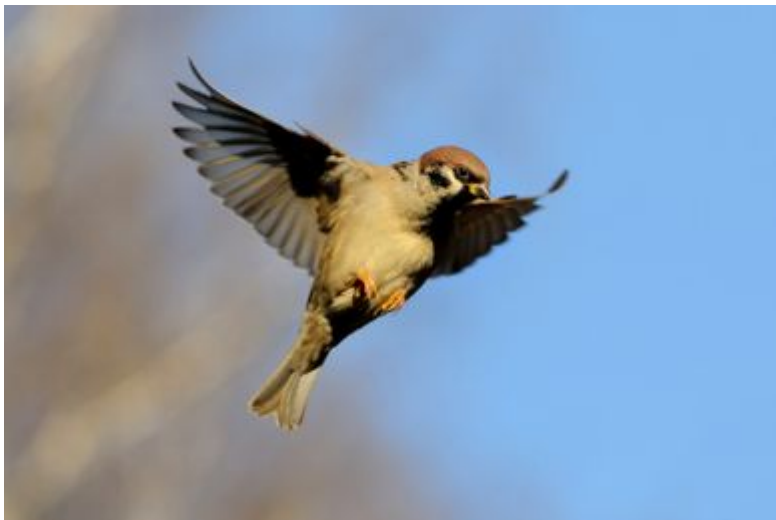
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我們 知道 許多 事情 都 是 在 這 個 世界 上 發生 的，
 但 是 我們 卻 不 能 確 定 這 些 事 情 是 否 會 在 這 個 世界 上 發生，
 這 就 是 說 明 這 些 事 情 是 在 這 個 世界 上 發生 的，
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राजेश कुमार शर्मा, Delhi Police. (Studied in MSJ College, Bharatpur)

MY HEART IS AN ALIEN SPARROW and other poems in English and Italian



MY HEART IS AN ALIEN SPARROW

Ah my heart, my heart is an alien sparrow.

Ah my heart, my heart, which dance of love,
that dances a comma of your land.

Ah my heart, my heart,
in the summer fire
between thirsty slopes,
in the clear sky,
between your roots

.

Il mio cuore è un passero alieno

Ah il mio cuore, il mio cuore è un passero alieno.

Ah il mio cuore, il mio cuore, che danza d'amore,

che danza una virgola del tuo terreno.

Ah il mio cuore, il mio cuore,

nel fuoco d'estate

tra pendici assetate,

nel cielo sereno,

tra le tue radici.

(Antonio Blunda, © 2022)

YOU COULD BE MY SON

You could be my son

Ah...My son...How could you be that!

I can't forget your name

In the days that is yet to come

I will end up soon

But it will be you

To find me among the dead

Together we will fly away,

Sail in the wind

As evil is all visible

And goodness is hiding

Come and hold my hand

At your leisure

POTEVI ESSERMI FIGLIO

Potevi essermi figlio.

Figlio mio, ah come potevi esserlo!

Non perderò il tuo nome,

nei giorni che restano.

Finirò il mio respiro,

ma sarai tu

a trovarmi tra i morti.

E voleremo insieme

come una vela al vento,

come il bene nascosto

nel male di questo mondo.

Tu allora, d'un conforto,

verrai a prendermi per mano.



You could be my son Image: ColumbusDojo

THE SOUND

The life – it's our strongest hold

We are in this world

And with our light

We lift ourselves from the ground

Life is so beautiful

because it has its rhythmic sound.

A sound

That I hear from the bloomed flower

by god's grace

I listen to it in love and compassion

The sound

Of trains in the railway station,

I listen to it even in the still clocks

And in the passing winds
The sound that lingers
Inside the rooms of my house
And I am ever listening to my own sound
The sounds that make you feel things around
I hear it from behind my tears of the youth
And still from the green paths of those small roads
Now I feel it in my middle age
Life...my life
the sweet sound of it
But yet something more to be heard
Life...you are the light so heavenly
And the sound –
The moving reason behind
All those fluttering butterflies

RUMORE

La vita
è la mia cosa più forte.
E' caduta appena
per questo mondo
d'una mia luce breve,
e mi solleva da terra.

La vita è così bella

perchè fa un rumore.

Un rumore che conosco

nel fiore dischiuso

nella mano di Dio

nell'amore amato e coincidente

nel cerchio della mia pietà

.

Il rumore che conosco di tutti i treni

di tutte le stazioni con gli orologi fermi

di tutti i passanti nel vento

.

Questo rumore

che va bene per tutte le stanze,

per le stanze della mia casa

dove, da sempre,

ricordo il rumore.

.

Il rumore di cui parlo,

il rumore che ti fa sentire le cose

.

qualcosa già prima

per ogni mia lacrima

.

Perchè ho pianto, in gioventù.

E nel cammino verde

della piccola strada

sento adesso la via

così a metà della mia vita.

.

Vita, mia vita,

vita mia,

immenso dolcissimo rumore

di tutto il mio vivere.

Rimani ancora qualcosa.

.

Tu che sei la meravigliosa luce

e la ragione commovente

delle mie farfalle.

YOU NO LONGER KNOW WHAT WINTER IS

(To my father)

You no longer know what winter is

a winter of the Thermopylae kind

the hatred
sickened by love
the road
perspiring from medicine
the cold
in steam from water
all this cold
like the last unfinished
speech at six
the kind that discards me
like a defeated soldier
inoculated
and kicked like tin cans
that discards me
with all the candy souls of radiators.

TU NON SAI PIU' COS'E' L'INVERNO

(A mio padre)

*Tu non sai più cos'è l'inverno
quest'inverno da Termopili
l'odio
ammalato d'amore
la strada*

nel sudore della medicina

il freddo

nel vapore dell'acqua

tutto il freddo

come quell'ultimo discorso

incompiuto delle sei

da scartarmi via

con la resa d'un soldato

inoculato

in calci da barattoli

da scartarmi

con tutte le anime di caramelle dei radiatori.

TELL ME I LOVE YOU

Tell me I love you,

I who hardly can say it any longer.

Tell me I love you,

so that this house, for once,

will not remind me

because the last sunset

seems a story told

because "I love you"

is something immense

in this silence
that vibrates so much
tell me I love you
and I swear to you
that I will have slowly counted
all the swallows"

DIMMI TI AMO

Dimmi ti amo,
io che quasi non so più dirlo.
Dimmi ti amo,
perché questa casa, per una volta,
non me lo ricorda
perché l'ultimo tramonto
sembra un viaggio narrato
perchè "ti amo"
è qualcosa di immenso
in questo silenzio
che vibra così
dimmi ti amo
e giuro
che avrò contato piano
tutte le rondini

The Grand Inquisitor

But, he was only a shadow.

He was not
the Prince of Darkness

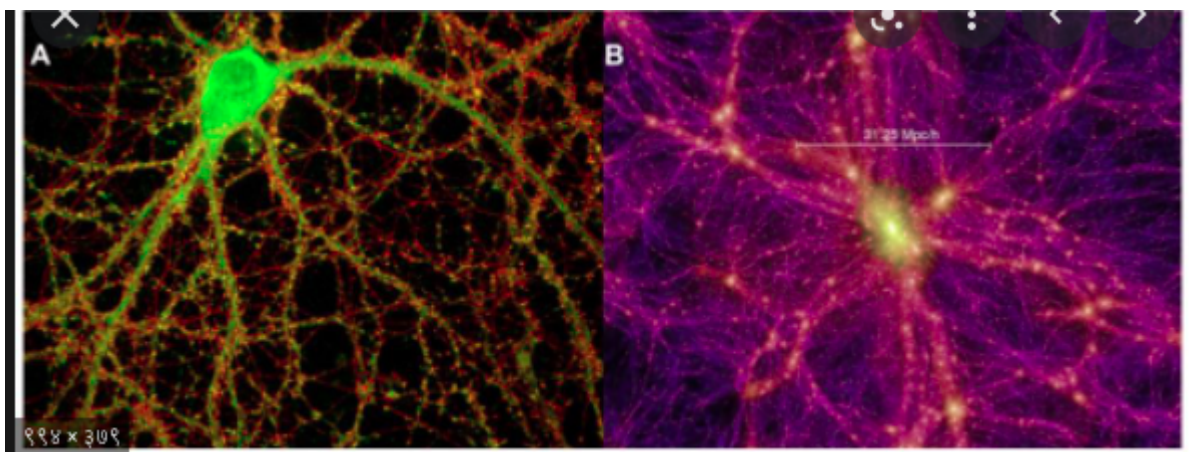
the veiled Mistress
smiles gently.

She gave me an address
and instructions

He lives on

The majesty of willing life-in-death
in Absolute Zero

Night's Neurons



The Weaver (June 2007, Mumbai)

Betwixt waking and eternity
the corridor twists

and turns
darkness peeps out
of many doors
left ajar.

Out in the open
a man steps out
of the lamplight
into the rain
he wears a long, black coat
his voice
is breaking
and his eyes are earnest.

He drives off
in a van, full of people
into mortal danger
there are no digits
on the number plate.

The corridor turns
like a thread for Sydney Carton
on a spindle
in his weary hands.
He reeks of midnight's oil.
The rain drips off
his shoulders
like a chill
into his heart
His lamp is burning
and the door is shut.

Wait Until Dark (February 2014, Mumbai)

The wings of night are spreading wide
the Morgul Lord *unmounts*
his hands are cold as ice

his breath
forks like a tongue
a sheet of flame, twisting and unwavering
his eyes the usual
empty sockets
hopelessly out of sync
for it is daylight that he haunts.

The night, the pristine, the undying
night
keeps us safe,
unmirrored
untouched
within Her bosom
for if any of Her creatures should see the day
be it an owl, besieged by ravens
or a candle flame
in a pile of amorphous wax
or a student grappling with a crowd
of random cadences and flashing rhythms
a fastening of fancies
into tens and fives
and sevens and their noises,
if one of us forgets a turning, strays
into the deepening shadows of daylight
and forgets the way,
the noonday sun will have his fill
and let us go
and She will find us
where She left us
in the midnight hour.

To Swell A Progress (March 2015, Mumbai)

A voice: What will you do
when you're free?
When the memory of this tiger and that
no longer snarls
at your gate?

When your bones have left their grating
at chalkboards
squeaking clean
allowing
no dust particles to settle with ease
at the counter
dark matter
white matter in a parallel universe
I answered - almost.
My eyes are tired
from too little widening
the muscles are stretched thin
now blowing out
at elliptical fault lines
cavernous as hot air balloons
and just as vacuous in their leaning
into the bitter air.

And yet, there is a way
of gentleness
a deathly stillness
that rips the sky open
and in between the seconds
uncountable millennia
leave just enough
breathing room
for a promised freedom.

Class (October 2001, Philadelphia Suburbs)

Your curses clamor through the walls,
the crickets shrill, the boiler's rumbling grin
a grin,
not quite a laugh, a grin
escapes the boiler room below
muscles in its chin
contort in heed, in heat,
to conversation's end.
Pieces of your soul are strewn like coals

into this empty din.

I read between the minutes of the night
freezing autumn night unquenched
the boiler's heat in rhapsody, in flame
in flame upon my back
in chill upon my feet.

I read between the minutes of the night
your face
caught in a struggle
with my swearing friend
I looked at you
with brave and tender eyes.

Other Poems by Acushla Sarswat

Blood and Rain



A View from an Ex-Aristo (Mumbai, 2014)

Mother of God!
There you stand
tall and proud
the blade across your torso
angled
like a grey black sports bra
but you have no breasts.
Why no breasts?
Only straight lines
running true
without curving
without bending.
I stand for my turn
sometimes sit waiting
always waiting
for you
to christen me again
your pen

writing my name
in blood,
in drops of red ink
rolling,
rolling with my severed head
across the floor
my thoughts disembodied
stuck in limbo
for a soul to pick them up
somewhere
off the mainline.
I think they've lost my number
I've been waiting for hours
the never-ending minute
seems to stretch across eternity
like a rubber band
carrying within it
infinite tension
never breaking
always teasing
just a little further ...
Your blade is dull today
it carries rust
there is no one to whet it.
We are saved by gravity alone
Madame la Guillotine!
May Thou always be
so merciful.
Hallowed be Thy Name.

Sand and Yang (Mumbai, 2014)

The safest place in the universe
is the eye of a hurricane.

Walls of steam rise up around me
making havoc of buildings, trucks
breaking trees like pencils
carving messages into uranium
reactors that pop and fizz
like corks and balloons

now spurting blood
as if some wrathful Goddess
eyeless
in the steam-colored garb of Isis
drawn like oil paintings
from the wells of fantasy
threw a party
for a fan following of misshapen clowns
and half-baked misanthropomorphic entities
hanging out
the bored masculinity of the ancient desert
having been assured
that there is no water on the red planet
and no little blue men worth waiting for
hooded or otherwise.

The balloons we live in
are fragile
and yet the storm
protects us
for the whirlwind has no center.
His dark anger spins Him
in the vortex
of memory.

And who are you
to talk of fantasy
said He
you who live in the land of Bell Curves
and Sorting Hats?

August (Philadelphia, 2002)

As you walk by
the air becomes so heavy
I am pushed against a wall
Is it you or is it just the heat of August?
Hiroshima breeze
you are so heavy
I am hanging like the leaves
on the drying summer trees

pulled down towards the earth
Is it you or is it just the August air
that makes me droop with so much longing?

The August sun was always known to burn
us lesser mortals
with his august glare

We sacrificed an apple for the rain
I kissed the earth
I heard a little girl cry out
as if she knew the presence there
If August comes creeping
like a whisper
through the hollows of your mind
tell me, love
then does September trudge behind?
If you were a pebble
in the walls of Jerusalem
would they come crashing down?

Is it you or is it just the mushrooms clouds of August?
Sodom and Gomorrah lifted out
like mushrooms from our lore, our fantasies
borne into reality
and christened Hiroshima, Nagasaki ...
hanging heavy in the firmament
laden with their sixty years
of ripened weariness
your glance is heavy as the August rain
shining through them and the trees.

The stares of the undying lifted through the skies
reflecting points of consciousness
the dying steps of the millenium
now reborn into the new
thunder like the heavy August rain
and you.

Waiting for Rain (June, 2005, Mumbai)

Climb, gaze
up where the steeple meets the sky
scribble someone's name
into the dust-filled clouds.

Casino in the heavens
lit by lightning
somewhere the westerly wind
sits poker faced
covering diamonds
about to be scattered
wait for the sparkling rain.

Shards of Light (October, 2005, Mumbai)

In the shredded darkness of this night
dazzled and undeafened
stupid
stupid, staring eyes
stuck in the stupor of unceasing sight
the heaviness of nothingness plodding
through
tortuous miles of wakefulness
and twisting arms of time
tick-ticking through eternity.

Arise! Awake! Shake off your sleep!
You swept through the room in all of your magnificence.
An army of rays assailed us
nailing me to shadows
that have dared remain.

Eyelids jammed are not like doors
the lock of sleep
cannot be forced with chisels

chisels are at work
carving out my name
into each terrifying minute.

Acknowledgments: I have quoted song lyrics by Iron Maiden and Megadeth in some of my verses.

Other Poems by Acushla Sarswat