

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

"Circum the Gesture"

by

Yasmin Ladha

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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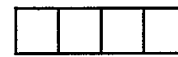
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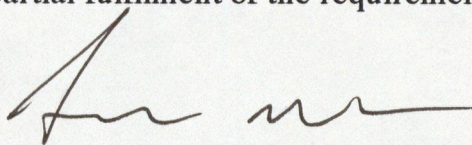
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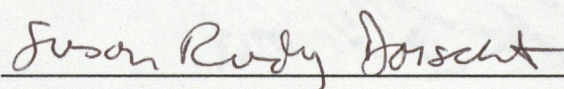


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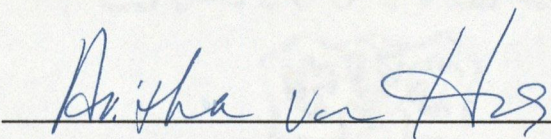
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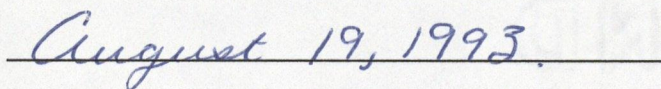
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ABSTRACT

My thesis is a collection of eleven creative writing pieces. This thesis of multi-genre fictions is comprised of short stories, poetry, verse-stories, ficto-criticism, bio-fiction and a documentary-fiction. All writings in this project play with the notion of an immigrant woman as a nomad. (The characters in most of the pieces are East Indian.) The nomad-woman shuttles between two frontiers, her homeland and the West: her mother tongue and her adopted language, East Indian sexist ideology and the persistence of (inverted) colonization by the West, clanship and individuality, rituals, lore, faith and *feminitude*. The nomadic woman resists settlement. Instead, she occupies a nomadic freedom, being in-between the old and new countries. She calls this in-between space a rooftop. This rooftop is her imaginary homeland, which allows her the freedom to belong to her own woman-*jati* caste, embracing her own poetics, language and aesthetics. In a process of self-questioning and self-interrogation (in her rooftop space/imaginary homeland), she occupies a constant state of re-departures from the frontiers of her homeland and the West.

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Introduction

Circum the Gesture an act of reverence like
circumambulating Ma Tulsi in the courtyard, *ma*, ma, mama, *amma*. Incense,
hibiscus, *tasbih*, cymbals, Kaaba. Gesture of *roti* round, breath in, breath out,
gesture of gesture, circle Allah, circle Readerji, circle sexist policeman, to soften
border between I-woman and them. Breath in, breath out. I bloom in your
courtyard, *ma*, ma, mama, *amma*.

Mother.

The problem is that the bones often do not exist prior to flesh, but are shaped after a vague and broad shadow of its form is discerned or uncovered during beginning, middle and final stages of the writing.¹

There is an internal landscape, a geography of the soul. We search for its outline all our lives.²

Lakho hi musafir chaltain hain
Thousands of travellers walk on

Manzil pai pohonch tai hain do-ek
Two-one reach their destination

Aai aehlai zamana
Aai you world

*kadar-a-karo*³
defer to this comprehension

The above quotes foreground the immeasurable difficulty a prober (woman, man, farmer, artist, daughter, elder, child, shaman) submits to in search of the elusive "bone." Though the flesh pushes out from the bone, growing away, at the same time, it remains in contact--in fact, hugging the bone.

Though the prober is aware of this subverted, organic connection between bone and flesh, the former eludes her, until she comprehends how to unpack the

¹Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987) 66.

²Josephine Hart, *Damage* (San Francisco: Chatto and Windus, 1991) 1.

³Insha, Ibne, "Dhoondo ge agar," sung by Abida Parveen from *Meri Pasand*, audiotape, TC CEMCP-6028, EMI, Vol. 2, Karachi, Pakistan, 1990. (Note: lines translated by Yasmin Ladha.)

flesh. In fact, the word "bone" itself is paradoxical because it is as invisible as it is concrete:

when I knock my knuckle on my collarbone, I hear it thud;
 a small bone, like the one in my internal ear is an ossid;
 a bone is dull white;
 a bone is made up of calcium phosphate, and for calcium, I drink milk so that
 my bones will not turn brittle.

A bone is physically concrete, organic, and inexplicable. The quotes selected (page one), intimate bone with: (i) root, core, and centre; (ii) as the inexplicable and a prober's desire to link with it.

On a physical level, I borrow the locution of the elusive bone from the terminology of Chicana lesbian-feminist writer, Gloria Anzaldua. On a spiritual level, I prefer the pliable Hindi word, *rasa*. Not only has its English counterpart, "essence," become blunt with over-use, but it is an elitist word, used by clergy and scholars. It functions as a theoretical word rather than a persuasive word. *Rasa's* direct translation from Hindi is "juice." *Rasa* has *that* agility to induce leaps in anyone because the pliable *rasa* flows in a shape which a person senses organically (inside), though she may grope about or try to articulate a reasoning on the surface. The bone-juice flows a prober's way, and then pulls her to an alien edge from where she may chance a leap. The juice, though strange, is simultaneously, instinctive. She instinctively recognizes the juice as her nourisher. Now she "rides" contradictions: bone-juice, strange-instinctive.

In the context of this project, the image of a bone is a good example to demonstrate what I am trying to accomplish. I am a writer, but more accurately, I am a word-shaper, creating and shaping words that are very strange and at the same time, natural. The purpose of crafting words newly is to spur, ignite something hidden, in both the reader and myself. In writing then, I want to evoke *rasa*: juice, dance, music, magic, startle, both for my reader and myself. Anzaldua writes:

The ability of story (prose and poetry) to transform the storyteller and the listener into something or someone else is shamanistic. The writer, as shape-changer, is a *nahual*, a shaman.⁴

My intention (and hopefully my reader's) in this project is singularly a palmer's intention: to leap, jostle, bond, *bonbon* with bone.

Being woman, Muslim, immigrant, first-born, thirty-five, beloved, plaiting the prairie in my craft, sprouting multiple goddess arms in the grasslands, occupying feminist theory, abandoning theory, Hindu-ing Allah out of my Gujarati Hindu heritage, writing out of the landscapes of Janpath-Delhi and Kensington-Calgary, incorporating Urdu calligraphy in English, whamming imperial English in a racist policeman's face, also form my intentions in writing the project, "Circum the Gesture," but only as thoroughfares as they steer me in the direction of an inward geography.

The mode of transport I choose to discover the bone/juice is by being a woman-nomad.

Woman:

As a woman, I travel differently from men. For example, in unpacking my relationship with Allah in the story, "Circum the Gesture," I choose to dialogue with Allah as a daughter rather than confronting Him as a follower whose gender is female. I choose this route because I have a greater chance to be heard within the patriarchal Muslim fold.

Being a woman, my language and imagery is different from that of a man. Most importantly (and this is celebrated in the project), my language is circular and organic, and out of multiplicity (daughter, woman, wife, story-maker, nourisher, ma-earth).

Nomad:

⁴Anzaldua 66.

Being a nomad allows me to break away from an established pattern of thought, vision, dominance, belief and culture. It forces me out of such complacency and open up to myself; break up my defences and resistance. My writing stems from the shift of perceptions which occur out of such an exercise.

Being a nomad also gives me access to re-departures and returns. Re-departure means I never bid a place goodbye. I depart from a place only to return to it again because my nourishment stems from its ever changing landscape. Who changes its landscape? I do. I gather momentum (nourishment) from the place of exit by leaving something from another place or continent there, making the point of exit more complex (matted). It is no longer an exclusive continent but an unrestricted continent. Re-departures are my geography which extend into my writing. I do not know the shape and ridges and contours of a single or exclusive home nor do I yearn for one.

I am born in nineteen fifty-eight, two years before the independence of Tanzania and know very, very early that Africa is for the Africans. When I am eighteen, my mother, brother and I disembark in Toronto as landed immigrants. For me, home is a dictionary word. A hard word I tend to forget. But I do have a home. It exists in my re-departures. My language stems from a layering and matting of words, images, songs, folk stories, from a myriad of places: layering Indian *thumri* in a *Kudoki* ballad; Trudeau's red rose in the pink city of Jaipur; plump Shiv *lingum* cresting Crowsnest Mountain in Bellevue, Alberta.

Speak hyphen, speak:

Often my language has a physical hyphen which is not a border-restraint between words but a trans-evoker, arousing a collective energy from a double or triple hyphen. The hyphen is an extension of my identity, home. Re-departures represents celebration in "Circum the Gesture." Re-departures are my homeland where I rest, feed, strengthen, and then, "push-off."

Readerji, I nomad from Plaza to Allah
back out of Allah

into Crowsnest Pass, maybe Sunday
 this constant of exits, my permanent address
 will you move me a love note?⁵

I reside in writing which consists of back and fro jumps, strange words, flouncey grammar, un-northern English, cots on which women pile up to brouhaha, "smelling-up" patriarchy with organic woman-language, and creating an exclusive female space using the image of an Indian rooftop ("Two Friends," and "To my Woman Readerji").

I call this activity which I live in (both physically and in my writing), a poetics of re-departures--a movement of leaving and entering places, woman rooftops, streets, coffee shops, Janpath, Kensington, Dodoma, my Guru's office, Seventh Avenue, Higher Ground (opposite the Plaza) and Heartland Country Store (where you get fish coloured bean soup).

Another writing trail:

With the exception of "A Take-Off on Mississippi *Masala*" (Shanti Bhawan, New Delhi), "Season of Gulshan" (Akhanda Jyoti, Bangalore), and "*Samaan*-luggage of a Bride, of a *Mujahideen*, of a Nomad" (147A Defence Colony, New Delhi), this project has been written in Calgary. However, my hardcover writing book bears the address:

Yasmin Ladha
 147A Defence Colony
 New Delhi - 110024
 India

What if I lose my ledger of varied words, ideas, quotes, sketches, notes, religious gestures, cussed thoughts, slang, criticism from teacher, etcetera? This question has not disconcerted me enough, to compel me to use a more accurate

⁵My Hydrabadi Earrings,' "Readerji Love Poems," 137.

address in Calgary. Secondly, assuming that the book is lost in Canada, the finder may be more inclined to post the book within the country than all the way to Delhi. I abandon both precautions because the Delhi address submits to the poetics of my recordings, which transpire from all over: Kyoto, Dar es Salaam, Ayodhya, Crowsnest Pass, Bangalore. Instead, I occupy the Delhi address in a practical and applied sense. This concept of poetics in an applied sense from American poet Charles Bernstein, who writes,

Or else I imagine poetics as an invasion of the poetic into other realms: overflowing the bounds of genres, spilling into talk, essays, politics, philosophy. . . . That is, poetics as a sort of *applied poetic*, in the sense that engineering is a form of applied mathematics.⁶

The exercise of writing an introduction for my reader

is also a process of disclosure to myself. For instance, perhaps this time, as I pursue backwards and recapitulate ideas for the benefit of my reader, I may also be able to blunt the sharpness of some questions that I may personally have:

- why does a personal love poem terminate with the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya?
- why do I banter with a particular word?
- why do I not yearn for a homeland?
- why do I choose the words I choose to womanize English?

In the exploration of articulating my poetics for my reader, what also occurs, is the opportunity for me to discover what I have written. Now I may be able to realise the "bone" alongside my reader. Writing *that*, I discover *this*.

Writing that to discover this--

only possible in the presence of a reader:

⁶Charles Bernstein, "Optimism and Critical Excess (Process)," *A Poetics* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992) 151.

In the "Introduction," what I want to emphasize is that I do not write for a reader, as much as I *create across* to her. Meaning, I do not want to "tell" her a rose. I want to "show" her a rose. I call this process, transcreation,⁷ where the "juice" of a thing is what matters, hardly the word. The function of the word is that it has to be pliable. That it can be squeezed to release *rasa*. *Rasa* does not exist in a word but in its suggestiveness. When words are rigid and occupy a utilitarian function:

This is a coffee stir stick,	don't call it a pipe.
(but it looks like a pipe),	don't call it a pipe.
(but...),	DON'T call it a pipe! ⁸

rasa dries up. The word remains a word. Utilitarian.

"This is only a coffee stick."

or

"Close this thesis."

Transcreation for me is a process where a word is written and picked-up suggestively.

The only time I intended to write *for* a reader was in the introduction to this project, and the exercise fails because word-shaping is a joint venture, a co-creation of a reader and writer. When I (writer) start off writing an introduction for my reader, what occurs in the revision process is that I am now more in tune with the subjective "why" (bone) of the piece I have written. This is because the flow of *rasa* is not a linear flow, from writer to reader, from knower to consumer. Sometimes the reader gives, sometimes the writer. For a word-shaper, discerning the bone out of the "vague and broad shadow" of writing occurs in the proximity of an evoker, the reader, whom I call *Readerji*. More examples of *Readerji* as an evoker occur in the process of this introduction.

⁷As cited in Fred Wah, *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1975) n. pag.

"Not the qualities merely, but the root of the qualities
is transcreated. How else could it be a birth, --a creation?"

Coleridge in *Literary Reminiscences* (1839), IV., 166

⁸"*Sarai*," 155.

Dismissed east by a consumptive reader:

Neil Bissoondath in an interview with *Rungh* comments:

Labels will often create a stereotype in the mind of the potential reader. They will come to your work thinking that you are, let's say, an Indo-Canadian writer. People will pick up a book expecting a kind of eastern mysticism or exoticism.⁹

Because I write about the mysterious bone and leaps, I am wary that a mainstream reader may instantly stereotype my project in the ghetto of eastern mysticism. Furthermore, I think that this text is even more vulnerable to such staple consumption because my language is circular, indirect and ambiguous. Therefore, filed "Asiatic." How do I "unfile" myself?

Calling my reader, Readerji, is a tool. A technique:

One of the "tools" I implement in order to do away with a consumptive reader is to address my reader, personally. Her name is Readerji. In Hindi and Urdu, the suffix "ji" added to a name is a polite form of address. I also use "ji" as an endearment: "My Readerji," "Ooi Readerji," "Come back, Readerji!" In other words, I seek a connection with my Readerji. The section titled "Readerji Love Poems" are poems of celebration, addressing and dedicated to Readerji.

Healing in the margin:

I create from the margin. I define the margin as belonging to immigrants from non-Western countries who have settled in the west. They speak their own English, using imagery and rhythms connected to their own cultures. Their intent is to free their English from white culture and dominance (centre). The margin intends to liberate its own English, borne out of its histories of white imperialism.

⁹Neil Bissoondath, interview, "Escaping the Cultural Imperative: A Conversation with Neil Bissoondath," by Ali Lakhani, *Rungh: A South Asian Quarterly of Cultural Comment and Criticism* 1.4 (1993): 11.

Though I write from the margin, I do not intend to explain from the margin for the benefit of the dominant race. Explanation is a form of subjugation and approval from the establishment or colonizer. I intend to break the conviction that the English language is exclusively British and North American. One of the techniques I use is that of transcreation, which I have briefly discussed in this Introduction, and explore at length in "Sarai." The other technique is cyclic, addressing and readdressing an aspect, word, theme, or a couplet, over and over again throughout this project so that Readerji becomes familiar with the word or couplet. Like a fish, Readerji nibbles here and there. What she does not grasp now, she may grasp later. What is foreign may still be foreign, only now, familiarly foreign, a perfect temperature in which *rasa* occurs. Or as writer and film-maker, Trinh T. Minh-ha writes: "A creative event does not grasp, it does not take possession, it is an excursion."¹⁰

Pratibha means a flash across the mind:

a suggestive revelation characterised by immediacy and freshness:

To break up consumptive reading, I employ the technique of addressing my reader as "Readerji." From this practice, I discover a successive tool in which *rasa* grows potent. This tool functions on the principle that a particular piece is not a thing but a "who." Its identity contains the presence of a person. This person who in the course of a conversation (*ghazal*, image or shop-talk) brings to the epidermis a vague rippling, a brief moment when my body slides into a more instinctive position. In this project, I have retained his/her real name to infuse that moment of realization deeper. By not changing the names (Derrick, Sadru, Anita, Mummy, Roberta, Syed, Teacher), I feed and create out of that potent moment lent to me, and in this way, attempt to sustain the ripple of "jostle" in my writing. In this

¹⁰Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Cotton and Iron," *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 26.

context, there are no protagonists in "Circum the Gesture." Real names become an organic motion: from the outside, in.

*I write from a point of rest versus confrontation--
a winding explanation:*

Writing from a point of rest is a potent location. It is here that *rasa's* edge (like the edge of a diving board) steepens. Steepens to startle both the reader and writer. I have already indicated that I engage in "creating across" to Readerji. In the craft of transcreation, I attempt to catch the spirit of a thing (story, word, image) rather than tell its exactness: "show" a rose, not "tell" a rose. Transcreation allows language to push out of expectedness:

A woman knows any love slide easily gotten like ginger but so precious only don't arrest, *sarai*...savour. When her lover stirs his coffee, he calls it a pipe, not a stir stick, she manifests in the whirl of his language, outside English's arrested physique. What does anyone know that this whirl, excruciating as a heart or tooth, but in the nib of a pen, swells into an inverted skyrocket, launching words out of Kundulini loins.¹¹

Transcreation allows for an on-going process as opposed to closure. A thing is addressed and readdressed, other stories may join-in or fall-out, may join-in once again. This allows for a story to gain polycentric dimensions. The same bone jostles Readerji (evoker) and myself (writer), differently. A story or experience or image is not a set formula. They affect the co-creators distinctively.

Writing from the process of rest via transcreation disallows for dogmatism in language. I would like to discuss this point in a very particular context, that of language and the community which I write from.¹² In the margin, the original

¹¹"*Sarai*", 163.

¹²Within the collective margin, there are many sub-margins with their own histories of white subjugation and colonization. What I suggest in this section may

intent of exploration and reclamation of English as being hyphenated with folklore, music, history, rituals and aesthetics not white-English, is hemmed-in. The margin is engaged in a battle with the centre, where language is repetitive in its accusation of, "You colonized us." I suggest that one of the reasons why it fails to move out of this condition is because it occupies a dogmatic language. A winding explanation:

- (i) The repetitive language generated from this accusation becomes a lingo. A patented lingo. If a writer does not speak the lingo, even though she is from the margin, her work is not recognized. It may even be dismissed as romantic, idealistic and useless. Why? In the margin, lingo has become synonymous with solidarity. Now it is not a matter of using language as an aggressive poetics but occupying the correct lingo. Lingo is only a style of confrontational poetics. And if over-used, lingo creates closure in language;
- (ii) speaking a lingo or "uniform" language still leaves the margin in the clutches of the centre, as all its energy and creativity is directed the centre's way. The centre on the other hand, has become familiar with the lingo and counter-lingos back. It has also become immune to the constant accusations of hearing itself as the colonizer. Its ears are closed. I am of course, simplifying the chauvinistic imperialistic traits of the dominant race. However I am more inclined and interested in understanding what is occurring in the margin because I am from the margin.¹³

relate to other sub-margins, but my criticism in this case is directed at social activists, artists, and theorists, from the East Indian margin.

¹³While other writers are in confrontation with the centre, I am interested in issues taking place within my own community. For example, part of the essay, "To my Woman Readerji," deals with the gunning down of Kulwinder Singh and her

As a woman writer, I find any linearity or dogma in language unnatural to me. I am interested in pursuing the idea that if a woman's multiple identities are in harmony, that is, she is sincerely tolerant of differences:

. . . my name is also *Niyyat*-sincere. Third and last daughter. I, *Niyyat*, create, errand, keep and nourish in relation to *Baba*, sister, brother, buddy, husband, *Didi*. *Relational to* is a woman-organ, ask any *Niyyat*, ask any woman. Only this organ, without physical space, unlike breast and womb. Call her *Niyyat* or *relational to*. To give her a physical space on my body, I name her in italics.¹⁴

then why should she approach creativity from a point of conflict? Is conflict the only way to confront?

In the confrontation between the margin and the centre, lingo presides over creative language. Lingo is merited with substance and expertise. Language which is suggestive, that is, which startles or jostles an internal realization is branded as romantic and apologetic. The margin--impatient with such writing because it is not utilitarian enough in its confrontations with the centre. On the other hand, the centre feeds on the text, exclusively in terms of exotic language, has no inclination to go beyond. As a repellent against such abuse (of not being an active co-creator/reader of a text), I have not provided a glossary for foreign words in this project. Naturally, as a writer, I on my part, must practice the skill to evoke something intrinsically familiar to the reader, so that she may catch the "grit" of foreign vocabulary.

husband, Gurdwr Singh Dulay, on March 19, 1991, in Calgary, by Kulwinder's brother, Daljit Singh Dulay. Daljit Singh kills his sister and her husband because she has brought shame and dishonour to her family and community by eloping with Gurdwr, her "cousin." In Daljit Singh Dulay's community, Gurdwr is considered a relative, a cousin, because both he and his bride are raised in the same village in India.

¹⁴"Circum the Gesture," 56-57.

I share many of the concerns of the confronters writing from the margin. Concerns pertaining to resistance, politics of location and language in terms of depowerment and decolonization of white domination. In the long run, however, I find the strategy of direct confrontation to be linear and all creative energy directed toward the centre, which means, the latter *still* occupies power. In my writing, I intend to be nourished by things I pick up on my nomadic sojourn instead of being re-colonized in the process of decolonization.

Neither am I inclined to "talk back" linearly within my East Indian community. In an East Indian community, such an approach is useless because it is too direct and less caring of other opinions. Likely, this is what my people will do: they will return to their kitchens to fry an order of two hundred *samosas* or go back to their smoke shops, shaking their heads, mumbling, "*top-yaari, top-yaari*," under their breaths, meaning, one with the sun hat, meaning, I have become westernised, meaning, a copy-cat.

Black-American activist, bell hooks writes:

The opening essay in my book, *Talking Back*, describes my effort to emerge as critical thinker, artist, and writer in a context of repression. I talk about punishment, about mama and daddy aggressively silencing me, about the censorship of black communities. . . . I had to struggle and resist to emerge from that context and then from other locations with mind intact, with an open heart. I had to leave that space I called home to move beyond boundaries, yet I needed also to return there. We sing a song in the black church tradition that says, "I'm going up the rough side of the mountain on my way home." Indeed the very meaning of "home" changes with experience of decolonization.¹⁵

¹⁵bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin," *Yearning: race, gender, and cultural politics* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1992) 147-148.

In my East Indian Community, talking back in Canada is equated with "you have become westernized," the shoddiest brand of stereotyping against an East Indian person, and most likely, a woman. It means she is selfish, disrespectful, loose, big mouth, space spiller (taking over male space). For the story, "Circum the Gesture" to be workable within a Muslim community, I evoke images, rhythms, and language which are pleasurable to ordinary Muslims. (A subverted way of "going up the rough side of a mountain.") My intention is to craft a sturdy point of rest which is able to sustain diverse thought. And particularly, since the *fatwah* pronounced on Salman Rushdie by the late Ayatollah Khomeini, to write out of a cautious sensibility. One of my intentions in this story is to loosen up Muslim patriarchy and its monopoly on Allah. Instead of direct confrontation, I rift toward *rasa* (by imagery, rhythm and daughterly attitude) which arouses a Muslim sensibility and poetics. What do I mean by a Muslim poetics? In a Muslim poetics, the patriarchy is tender toward a daughter, and in the story, "Circum the Gesture," the female-(feminist) approaches-(confronts) her father-(patriarchy) via a daughter's mode. In this secure-(sly) niche, she demands equality. Her gender-(niche) is not woman but daughter, a gender favoured outright (by the patriarchy). For she is a daughter-in-the-box who is indulged, loved and treasured (by the patriarchy). She (who) will soon leave the box-(*zenana* quarters) when her marriage is arranged (by the patriarchy).

Writing from a point of rest is often considered to be idealistic and non-political, both by the margin and the centre. The margin and the centre coerce me to write from an established platform of anger and confrontation. My poetics is *rasa*: juice, startle, magic, suggestive vocabulary, out of which social activism occurs. Anger and confrontation do not drive my poetics.

One of the explanations I have in this regard is that I am a post-colonial immigrant, and that my border is a border of inclusivity.

I have not been subjected to direct colonial rule. In the case of India and Tanzania, which received independence from the British in nineteen forty-seven and nineteen sixty-one respectively, the post-independence generation did not suffer the colonization of their parents' generation. This generation did not suffer from

inferiority and awe of the white race to the extent of their parents' generation. For example, Sujata Bhatt, a Gujarati-German, born in India in nineteen fifty-six, titles her first book of poetry, *Brunizem*, which is a dark brown prairie soil found in Asia, Europe and North America, claiming a home in all the three continents. Yasmin Ladha from the generation of post-independent East Africa in "A Take-off on *Mississippi Masala*" writes, "Didi (Mira Nair), here in the West, mother's generation is easily satisfied, grateful."¹⁶

In "Circum the Gesture," many of the characters who arrive in Canada are post-colonial immigrants. Their experience of colonization and displacement are different from bell hooks' stance on African-American resistance. Neither can I write from Gloria Anzaldua's point of view, when the Spanish and later the Americans invade her land. So acute is her pain that she breaks off writing in English (it has become the colonizer's language) and reverts to Mexican-Spanish, a homeplace, where she can convalesce. No translation is provided. When she reverts to English, she writes: "If I look real hard I can almost see the Spanish fathers who were called 'the cavalry of Christ' enter this valley riding their burros, see the clash of cultures commence."¹⁷

In this respect, the psyche of immigrants from post-independent countries is both less traumatic and less collective. But it is more (personally) individualistic. As a writer in Canada, I feel cramped when this space is not given to me by militants from the margin and the centre. Also, immigrants to Canada, particularly as of the early Nineteen-Eighties, have not suffered the prejudice and racism of the Nineteen-Seventies. Therefore, I cannot write a haunting novel like Moez Vassanji's, *No New Land*, which deals with racism in Toronto at that time.

In interviews following the publication of *Lion's Granddaughter*, most of the interviewers (margin and centre) became frustrated when I informed them that I could create out of a platform of anger and confrontation. For me, this is an

¹⁶"A Take-off on *Mississippi Masala*," 65.

¹⁷Anzaldua 88.

inverted form of objectification, that all coloured writers must speak out of such a pulpit. This is a subverted form of *tamasha*, entertainment.

"Circum the Gesture" is a project of celebration. I celebrate with words, friends, Allah, space, religious items, Mother Lakshmi, ambiguity, soils. From a point of rest, I explore out of pleasure. My point of rest comes from being a nomad, thriving out of re-departures. I write out of a poetics of ambiguity emerging out of my hybrid landscape: East and West. I am keen to know what a wanderer packs in a knapsack:

- On his travels, seventeen century Japanese poet and diarist, Matsuo Basho packs a sparse and an unambiguous satchel: "the paper raincoat, the cotton-stuffed mantle, the hat, the stockings. . . ." ¹⁸
- Chicana feminist writer, Gina Valdes, throws out coins (they are too heavy) from her knapsack along with muni-bart metromaps, but retains a knife, journal, tape recorder and a can opener. She also retains her auspicious eagle feather, rattle and drum, pieces of bark. Finally, she also packs in her eyebrow pencil. ¹⁹
- The traveller in "*Sarai*" packs different languages and European comforts:
 - . . . trekking across senseless field is *ma'abar*. (Seduce Arabic in English, we are all adults) and traveller no longer Eddie Bauer though I, nomad-woman, partial to a Swiss Army knife ²⁰

Like Gina Valdes, my geopolitical position is between the East and West and not in either one of them, exclusively. Restricted to either one of them would stifle my identity: in the East, to be stationed behind a man. In the West, to be re-colonized as an immigrant. My identity is a multiple-identity, transcending out of multiple

¹⁸Matsuo Basho, "The Records of a Travel-Worn Satchel," *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches*, trans. Nobuyuki Yuasa (Markham: Penguin, 1966) 73.

¹⁹Gina Valdes, as discussed in Anzaldua 82.

²⁰"*Sarai*," 155.

connections: womanhood, womb, soils, diaspora, British colonization, patriarchy, Allah and female connections. My *rasa* (suggestive poetics) stems out of a lack of singularity.

My istyle Inglis not English

I write out of a hybrid language, which enables me to "seduce Arabic in English" and remove the *phicca* (bland, pale, Northern imposition) out of English. I respond to English by colouring the language in Arabic, Kiswahili, Japanese, Hindi, Urdu, Chinese and Dogri; to woman-ize, immigra-tize, mantra-tize and accen-tize it. My ethnic identity is analogous to my woman-nomad linguistic identity. *I am* this language, alive. For me, imperial English is a ghost in brocade tatters. I appreciate the incongruity of such a statement as English is still a language of invasion. Vancouver poet Roy Miki writes, "It is the language of government, power, law, fear and intimidation."²¹ But I also have a story to tell: that as a self-assured post-colonial Canadian immigrant writer, I concede that the imperial ghost needs a talisman to settle it in its demise more than I require protection from such English.

Shaman English--Om, Bismillah

Hybrid English or hyphenated-English must be a moment of privilege for the story-maker and the story-reader. My hyphen is a tool-*tasbih*-rosary to jostle the bone. A writer must practice the skill to "transcreate across" a story, the reader be able to develop the skill to catch *rasa*. Colouring *Inglis* is both a play and a sacred activity. Reader*ji*, enter my (our) poetics.

²¹Roy Miki, "English: Writing with an Accent," *Rungh: A South Asian Quarterly of Cultural Comment and Criticism* 1.4 (1993): 35.

Her Teacher who does not bother to staple pages and undutiful to word on page. "I can't read," he says, only hears language in a wolf's ear: hungry, taut. In class, he performs magic:

*"Spit! Ratt-ttt-le, s-s-s-iii-d!
Now back off like Buddha,
pupil, this is syntax."*

Season of Gulshan
(for Gulaam)

Gulaam

"Last I see him is a black haze, moving back. My train, pulling out of the station." "Back," my Aunt repeats, drawing her left hand to her chest, as if putting something back. Even when a love story is intact, when departure between lovers, only a short duration, four days, a week, even a month, but the hurtle it socks in the mouth so bad that teeth go soft.

Not aeroplanes (airports belong to immigrants and dreams), but trains are notorious for socking lovers in the mouth. When a ball of wool slips out of hands, the yarn unfurls so fast, it leaves a sag. The sag of sudden distance possible only on trains.

When my dazed aunt repeats, "Back," I taste rust.

Though her tears are large, they are not free. Not even after forty years.

"Did he call you Gulshan?"

"Called me *Jaani*, you know." She has very soft eyes. They see me, then disappear.

My last piece before coming to Bangalore to write my Aunt's story is also "*Jaani*." My *Jaani*, prairies just north-east of Calgary. Though I still can't go on hikes on impulse and have not seen a bear's blueberry shit but recently the sundog prairie has sprouted multiple arms. She is Saraswati with a musical vina in one hand and a fruity lotus in another, in another set of hands (she needs both) to carry a laptop, and in the final set of hands, she carries a winter boot and a thermal *kangri* pot. (The goddess too vain to wear a toque, even in minus thirty-five.)

Jaani is heart

Jaani is sweetheart

Jaani is valentine

chocolate aside

Jaani is lover's gut just for beloved

Even if I tell my Aunt of the coincidence of just written *Jaani*, she can't hear me because she is at the train station in London with Gulaam, only this time not on

a departing train, only this time, nuzzling his neck on the platform, sucking his smell. Pushing his gut inside her stomach. Red, alive. *Jaani, Jaani, Jaani.*

In a smooth commercial for butter, perfume or Vidal Sassoon, lovers part on a train. Trench coat, tears and fluffy hair. How to protect my Aunt from such an inference? Not a hurt more on her blue body. I will not call her by name but "my Aunt," and draw a protective circle around her. My ink, camphor, lightened by Saraswati. I imagine Gulaam's face. It is dark as a woman's hair bun. He is not a dispersed blur to me, but solid as the fact that he is from Dhaka. And his darkness, a good omen . . .

The day before my Grandfather dies, he is adamant that someone left him a palmful of hair. Grandmother turns everything upside down, looking for the hair, auspicious, in our home. It is all connected: a wandering Brahmin wears his head shorn except for a tuft of hair which curls into a question mark at the back of his head--what is life? When a webby knot of hair appears to the person dying, it is a sign that the journey onward, like Grandfather's, will be lapped in milk, honey and *kumkum*. My Grandmother, being Muslim, never applied *kumkum* in her hair parting like a Hindu woman, but I have often seen her quickly brush the red powder between her breasts until Grandfather dies. Now she does not need to wear the auspicious power, sign of her marriagehood and to protect her husband against evil.

My Aunt sees Gulaam for the last time on the train rushing away. Two weeks later, Gulaam and his sister-in-law die in a car accident. I leave this grief as is (even though eye on paper feeds on detail):

Too sudden -death's habit

Too bare -white shroud, Muslim way

Gone. Only motion of a sudden sag. I taste rust.

At home in Canada, a guest mentions my Aunt. It is inevitable that she would be mentioned. It's only two days since I have returned from Bangalore. With heroic self-knowledge, he relays, "God, is she still as beautiful? But *hai*, what black *naseeb*. She was going to get married to this Pakistani and only shortly before the

wedding, he is finished in a accident." I draw Gulaam of Dhaka even closer and pack him inside my gut. Seal my mouth. Mum is the word.

But in this story, my Aunt's and Gulaam's history is not over. I want Gulaam to kiss my Aunt. Suck back all the blue *kumkum* hardened on her by lovers. (Most loathsome, Zaki, though he is never her lover. Gulaam's heart-felt-*yaar*.)

Gulaam,

kumkum is always red, like gut, except my Aunt's. In this history, do not sprinkle lean powder like some skinny ant trail, but the thick of red thighs in her hair.

Gulaam, I know you are only twenty-four. Can you cope with such splendour? Spread such red in her hair? My Aunt no longer wears her hair in two Indian plaits. She has grown haunches of mother-earth who bears pain tasty as salt, who bears blue decadently as a *holi* carnival. You should see her in action. We have not told anyone that I am here to write on her. Am interrogated endlessly:

- "Only books, you mean you are not a journalist?"

- "You must write romances, no?"

- "*Acha*, then Children's stories?"

One woman attired for a kitty party, in a leafy organza sari, with peach varnished half-moon nails, inquires if I write recipe books. I can't believe my ears. She tells me that she loves foreign breads. I inquire back if she has heard of the Angels Institute, right in the city, close to Tippu Sultan's fort, trains women to bake sweet breads to serve on Doulton china and naughty gauzy desserts for kitty parties, "And of course *Madamji*, even The Cha Cha Cha." But Gulaam, your *Jaani* has a more impressive suggestion, "Darling, tell them you write porno for middle-aged Bangalorians."

My Aunt Arrives in London on a Dakota

She cannot adopt the British custom of baths only on Sundays. Everyday after school, she goes to the public baths by Victoria Station, where she gets a warm towel and hot water. The bath-woman drapes her clothes on the heater. She returns home from school in a crunched and warm uniform. Venturing to the public baths is one worldly thing about her. The other thing is she wants to become a doctor. Her father's wish. At home in Dar es Salaam, she bandaged her father's diabetic wounds and gives him his daily doze of insulin. Though her father has four sons, he decides to send his daughter to Great Britain to become a doctor.

At the age of twelve, my Aunt arrives in London on a Dakota. First the plane stops in Nairobi, then Cairo, then Tripoli, Casablanca. In my mind, I watch a black and white film. The names of the countries conjure up small *kehwa* coffee cups and men in maroon fez hats. Blue-eyed paternal gods in khaki who grab wheezy culprits by the neck. Natives, cross-eyed in looks as well as deeds, dirty fingernails, heavy-scented opium music, and women in burqa hurrying down narrow gullies as if a *coup* assault is just round the bend.

It takes her ten days to reach Britain. She creates a quite a stir at the airport. An Indian girl travelling on her own all the way from Africa. Perhaps this is the only time my Aunt does not respond to a crowd's stir. She had not slept. In each of these transit countries, she sits on the hotel bed petrified that the plane will leave without her. At home, there are at least five beds in a room, packed with cousins. Bunking together is both rest and a social activity. Eating spiced *achar* in a rolled *roti* and using spit to imitate Madhubala's kiss curls, the sensational heroine from Khyber Pass.

Three letters later, her father dies in Dar es Salaam. The first blue bruise and perhaps the hardest, like the initial sting from a salted whip.

Kiss me once
and kiss me twice
It's been a long, long time

When my Aunt returns to Dar es Salaam, I have got my first period. The cramps make my toe-nails blue but I won't let her touch me because my crimpline trousers are fastened with a safety pin and she is a film star. Being a doctor, London-Returned only adds to her grandeur. I give her a space in the sky.

Her fierce red hair is wound in a cashew-nut bun and she only wears *kancheevarams* from Madras. She doesn't wear saris any more. "Too much of an effort, maybe on Baba's birthday," she says. Nowadays, she wears long skirts and blouses and silver tribal jewellery. Still folds her hair into a cashew-nut. Sometimes it looks like a vulva. I see her more and more as mother earth. Her film star quality prevails in the photographs I take. Maybe it is her high cheekbones. Or is it me? Taking photographs of her in the context of a tragic history? As she steps out of her Indian Ambassador, Murli, opens her door. Click.

When Gulaam dies, my Aunt marries her guardian, a wealthy, alcoholic solicitor with a penchant for flat-chested women. He has had his eye on her for a long, long time. My Aunt isn't flat-chested but a good East African girl who speaks British properly. (Blue bubble blisters. Nineteen, long Indian plaits, English Oxfords.) In this marriage, my Aunt breeds the art of stepping out of a Rolls Royce, taut legged, giving the illusion of length. In Dar es Salaam, she smokes cigarettes like heroines with cut apart eyes, and her voice has always been un-Indian husky. First thing I do in Bangalore, after all these years, is stand beside her in my bare feet. Sure enough, her vocal chords vibrate under my feet as they do when I am twelve.

"It's between Baba and me. Ten years ago. Only time I littered India." (My Aunt's hatred for throwing trash out of car and Indian toilets.) We sit under the huge leafy tree. This tree in Puttaparthi where my Aunt threw her last pack of smokes. I ask her the name. Romantically, I want it to be as reputable as Buddha's Bodhi Tree. "Never bothered to find out," she says. Can see Baba's ashram with pale pink and blue icing-cake colours--colours with the same quinine-gray of having sat on a shelf far too long. Before we leave, she pours some milk on the trunk. Leaves packages of dry fruit.

My Aunt, always on the go

Go, go, go! The only time when it is quiet at Akhanda Jyoti is when she has her bedroom door closed. She is meditating. When she comes out, her front hair is in curlers.

"Doesn't your scalp prick with those sausages?"

"Helps me meditate, open your mouth," and drops in a pinch of *vibhuti*-ash from Sai Baba. Perfumy. She rubs some ash on my neck. Then goes out to Murli who is washing the car, "Mur-a-li, *prasad* from Baba." In the dining room she lights incense by Baba's photograph. There is also a Ganesh who does not have tusks. Someone left a candle on and burnt his tusks. The phone rings. International, long distance, local. Bread in toaster and the electricity goes off. Danielle, next door, is three weeks in India. All her work disappears from the screen. "Gulshan!" she screams. My Aunt spends an hour with her, phoning the Karnatak Electric Board. Due to the monsoons, a large tree toppled on the power lines. Danielle says, "Don't they have a better excuse?" Now Danielle's maid will keep out of her mistress' way until tea-time. Then we are off to the tailor. I can't remember the name of his shop, always drawn to his slogan, written in ochre:

Tailor made well made

Beside his shop is a police booth, Honesty Police station. Then we go to the market in Shivaji Nagri, which is a Muslim *mohalla*. The *mohalla* smells of roast *tikkas* and kebabs. At Akhanda Jyoti meat is not cooked.

"Nor sex," my Aunt tells me.

"Who would want cooked sex?" I ask, but message is received.

"So ... Michael?"

"Not at Akhanda Jyoti because this is Baba's place."

A friend of my Aunt's first placed the building documents at Baba's feet. Only after Baba gave his blessing did my Aunt proceed with the construction. Even when she is in London, the *mandir* at Akhanda Jyoti remains open. There is a direct entrance to the temple from the outside.

Green *chadars* of the Prophet's colour are sold outside the shops in Shivaji Nagri. So I ask a passerby if there is a Pir's *dargah* close by. He only puts his hands in his pocket, looks down. Just finished Anees Jung's *A Song of India*; writes how women at one time wore the burqa as an ornament, enhancing the sense of privacy or *hijab*. Exquisite. But in Shivaji Nagri, I only see them as mobile black prisons. As they pass by, I catch the whiff of rose attar. We have lunch at a *dossa* shop on Mahatma Gandhi Road (hip to say M.G. Road). My favourite temple is at one of her friends' homes. The room is large as a dancing hall and in the middle of this bare, cool room is Krishna's *murti*, steadily washed by monsoon rains, the ceiling directly above the *murti*, cut open. Sometimes birds come and sit on Krishna's flute. From the garden, smell of ripe jackfruits invades inside, a candied smell merged with onions. We get three jackfruits to take home. Murli protests, "*Aka*, my car!"

Pale as custard and texture of thin rubber petal. Is a hat for my forefinger. Shake it off in my mouth, s-s-s-sweet! And no onion taste! S-s-s-sweet!

Then my Aunt is on a hound mission to hunt down her evasive electrician. "Mohammed going to the mountain instead of the other way around," she says. He is not at home. Tells his wife, "Ask him to come and look me up for a change. Wouldn't that be wonderful?" The next day, the electrician arrives when her bedroom door is shut and finishes the work swiftly. On Fridays, she buys a couple of saris from Shivaji Nagri and distributes them to beggars on the streets. She will give food and clothes. Money only if a beggar absolutely handicapped.

The most wonderful memory of this red-soiled place for me is going for car rides outside Bangalore, listening to sexy Tamil pop. My favourite, "Sambo, Sambo." Don't understand a word but the beat is heady. Salsa and santoor. Voices full of beach. "Murli, louder please!" Murli raises the volume, also rolls down the windows as we whiz by. Out of the blue, my Aunt remembers how her British speech teacher insists that she speak from the pelvis. This cracks us up. Especially when she attempts "The Rain in Spain," in her hearty voice, pushing from her pelvis like she wants to do toilet number two. (My Aunt is a very, very difficult foreigner when it comes to toilets. She can't stand the filth of Indian toilets. No compromise.

We have had to drive all the back to Akhanda Jyoti or the Holiday Inn, depends on which is closer.) When she attempts to translate "The Rain in Spain" to Murli in broken Tamil-English, not forgetting her pelvic push, he tells her seriously, "Madam is too funny, and home is not here and Holiday Inn, far way." We can't stop laughing and Murli rolls up the windows. (*Hijab*-privacy from curious trucks. Tears down our cheeks.) Then my Aunt asks, "Murli, are you hungry?" (Her very short attention span, zip-zipping, *whrrrooom*!) Murli replies, "Madam, my hunger ended six months ago." She has been in Bangalore for six months now.

Once my Aunt is invited to a wedding in Salem. (Not Salem, America.) The pundit, fascinated by her, and after the marriage ceremony is over, the floor, cleared for dance space. The pundit brings her partners. My Aunt can't stop laughing (or dancing). Murli is mad and walks out. He writes to Michael in London to tell him that Madam is not behaving too good. He tells me, "*Aka*, Madam is too lucky to have Michael *saab*."

Object in motion

On the way to Kodaikanal, Murli gets a cold. After the twelve hour journey, my Aunt also books a hotel room for him. Not done. Murli is to share the room with one of Aunt's Brahmin friends. Murli sleeps in his room but when he wants to watch TV, he goes to my Aunt's room. "But Murli, you have a TV in your own room!" She sends him back. Next day, Murli goes to see his father in Ooty. When he comes back, it is late, and the Brahmin friend has locked the door from the inside. Murli is sick but he won't knock on my Aunt's door. He understands his place.

My Aunt is an object in motion. She carries change. She starts once again. The time, cunning. Covert. Murli no longer permitted to eat elsewhere when her group is having lunch in a hotel. Murli is part of the group. First Murli sits a table apart, sticking to *sambaar* and rice.

Murli does not like Madam's spiceless foods. He says it breaks his stomach. "And *Aka*, when Madam moves so fast, go here, go there, like light, now London, now here, now Salem, so fast-fast, like thunderbolt Indra in space, *thaaa! thaaa!* then *Aka*, By God, my stomach is broken."

A new widow breaks her bangles
 Spiceless food breaks Murli's stomach
 My Aunt, a warrioress
 snaps a Brahmin's pristine thread
 Aunt, Murli, Brahmin, beggar, *Aka*-writer
 equal as ketchup

My Aunt Sits Sideways

in her bamboo chair, not looking at me. Before morning tea in a printed housecoat with a yellow trim. (She likes her tea very British, milk, sugar and a tea cozy.) At Akhanda Jyoti, a lot of morning teas (and guests) before breakfast. Sometimes, breakfast at eleven.

When she has a large breakfast, her face slumps and she bites her lip, "I've had four toasts and peanut butter galore." Peanut butter available in India last four years (not the chunky kind as yet.) She pronounces "t" in "butter" or "tart" sensual as an off shoulder fabric. I try to imitate her "t" in the mirror, pushing tip of tongue against my teeth. Not quite right.

In this early, early morning, Bangalore still spiky from the nightly monsoon pour. Not a phone call as yet, nor Ansuya asking, "*Amma*, what to cook this evening?" Or newspapers or wrenching morning coughs of smokers constructing a new house adjacent to Akhanda Jyoti. Even the Tulsi floor in the inner courtyard not yet watered. But my Aunt does not yield to this wet, rosy lush. I continue, "Gulaam, what was he doing in London?" My Aunt does not yield to my question, neither does she resist. She leaves the patio once again, sitting in her bamboo chair, eating blue cotton candy. Sometimes she puts something back in her chest. My Aunt's mouth, a bee puff sting.

Kiss me once and kiss me twice

It's been a long, long time

Why does my Aunt's grief become a dreamy cinema for me? There is a young man on the platform in a dark actor's sweater. His hands are behind his back in adopted British formality. Gives a European edge to his Muslim upbringing. I see white washed walls and my Aunt on a swing eating glistening pomegranate seeds from a white side plate. Maybe I dream, so that in this history, my Aunt is indulged and lavished upon, possible only in a Muslim home, where there is always someone in the household to turn to in *hijab*-privacy, where courtesy is mellow and in couplets. There are silk curtains in the car and safety, just like the time a girl wraps

herself in her mother's wedding sari and dreams slow dreams, trusting jewels in the large faded velvet box. Though I can't explain, I intuitively understand how a Muslim woman can wear her veil as an ornament. My Aunt's cheeks ooze red-*ie*-red. Gulaam's *Jaani* on the swing, and *Begum*, outside their boudoir. Home.

*Three months after his death
Gulaam come down the chimney.
"Jaani, come with me, this world is brutal."
He departs forever.*

"So he must have known of Zaki?" but my Aunt only shrugs.

Gulaam, my Aunt marries her alcoholic guardian. Only thing matters now: that she become a doctor. When she is sixteen, her guardian promises to take her to the cinema. Awfully handsome, even in class with Satyajit Ray in Bombay. She likes him awfully. On her birthday, she waits and waits. She makes another worldly trip--goes to his digs. She sees a bra hanging from his bed post. Several such incidents. That's why she doesn't get off the train but watched you disappear farther and farther away. That day, Zaki tells her that there are other women. No, she never confronts Zaki. Says doesn't matter, any more. Her husband does not forget you. Sends Zaki with her to shop for her wedding dress. Zaki refuses to give her the dress. She quietly buys another. Her husband always invites Zaki over and watches my Aunt. Whenever there is extra rice, her husband pours water on the plate, so that Elder-Mzee Ibrahim and his wife are not able to eat the soaked food. Gulaam, if you had married my Aunt, Mzee Ibrahim would have probably come to Dhaka, part of her dowry. Mzee Ibrahim comes to London with his wife to look after their mansion. He learns English and typing and keeps my Aunt away from her husband. Raises their two children and when my Aunt becomes the guardian of the two boys, Manjunath and Govinda in Bangalore, Mzee Ibrahim comes to Bangalore.

Is Zaki up there, Gulaam? He died in Edmonton. Are you like my Aunt, it doesn't matter, now? Though I am not Rajput by birth, I am a Rajput in war. Give me your sword so that I may slit my thumb. My blood on your forehead, Gulaam. Look for Zaki. Or should I cup my hands together and recite with the congregation in the mosque, "Allah, forgive his sins?"

I read her pieces I have written on you. You know what my elegant Aunt is doing? Pressing my pants, crying softly. Gulaam, she is with you. Come down the chimney (*round route red kumkum*). *Kumkum* Christmas.

The Restaurant

Gulaam, should I tell you about the meal? But we arrive late. The kitchen is closed. Your Jaani informs the manager, "But we are only half an hour late!" Later at tea-time (today at eight), I find out she sets back her watch by half an hour, always, so we were late at Shanti Sagar Hotel by an hour! She tells me, "Bangalore has a loose half-hour patched to the front of her watch, dear."

Your *Jaani* does not watch or see or observe reactions. She escorts reactions, biting her lower lip and hardly in penance. Her face broadens, even her forehead, and laughter spills chin. Gulaam, is she as wicked at nineteen? What charmed you about her? When my Aunt bites her lips, I know she is up to no good. I feel her under my neck, a child's head under my neck. Where is her film star cashew bun? This woman whose attention span, minuscule, like Murli says, "*Aka*, when Madam moves so fast, go here, go there. . . ." comes to me with such expectation, I am flattered. Sure she knows it. At Shanti Sagar, the manager, too. Falls flat. Kitchen doors open.

Charm is a chrome word, shiny. My Aunt is not shiny. My Aunt alternates current.

Gulaam, tell me about your season with my Aunt.

Crisp ghobi manchura, nauratna (nine-fruit-curry), roti, paneer tikka, basmati chawal, pineapple yogurt, masala cashew-nut curry, karai vegetables and Love in Tokyo ice-cream.

My Aunt's Bangles

We are on our way to Bangalore after Sai Baba's *darshan*. At the ashram, I keep looking at Baba's feet. They say he glides. The same shock of Afro hair though. Wonder if it is soft? My hair turns rubbery because of Puttaparthi's water. But everyone washes their hair before going for Baba's *darshan*. Baba has a faint mole (rather spread) under his left eye not visible in photographs. The lady next to me wants me to pass her letter of Baba. I am too scared. There is a strange French woman who has been at the ashram for fifteen years. She loves Baba so much, she tells my Aunt, she wants to brush his teeth. I concentrate hard on my mango juice. But in the car, tears burn my eyes. Murli says, "*Aka*, she Madam's deep friend but I don't take her on M.G. Road, she just rolls down window yelling, 'Sai Ram, Sai Ram' to everyone!"

It is raining heavily in Bangalore. Closer to the city, we switch off the hymn tapes and listen to "Sambo Sambo" in the monsoon pour. We stop at the Railway Crossing and watch the Brindavan Express speed to Madras.

At Akhanda Jyoti, my Aunt takes the bread basket which is on top of the fridge and lines it with pink face tissues. (Don't say kleenex in India.) She puts her wet bangles in the bread basket.

My Aunt wears a bindi on her forehead. Very cosmetic: purple and pink with a pearl dropping from it. She calls it her tizzy third eye. Her anklets have green and turquoise stones. She has her own brand of sun screen protection. She hangs her head down so that her silver necklace dips (it is two inches wide). In the space created she loops in her *chunni*-veil and spreads the fabric across to cover her neck. With the bottom portion of her *chunni*, she shields her nape.

When I ask her if she is as alive in London and I don't mean work, she tells me of a biological change in her. The switch.

She tells me, "When it is time to return to London, I crave baked beans on toast and creamy dressings, cheddar and custard tarts."

The only thing un-Indian about her in Bangalore is she has cereal before going to bed but she has it dry. She thinks buffalo milk is fatty. That's what available in Bangalore. (Brings skim power from London.) Very English when it comes to her figure. When she returns to London, Michael is at Heathrow. She knocks-off until he returns from work. Next day, she joins Nutri-System.

Neither Manjunath nor Govinda like butter

When they come to live at Akhanda Jyoti, Manju is six and Govinda, four. When I toast their bread one morning, Govinda watches me with painful eyes, and finally tells me, "I don't like toast. It spoils the taste of bread."

When Akhanda Jyoti is under construction, my Aunt sees Ansuya, Manju and Govind's mother, working as a labourer on a neighbouring site. My Aunt has no other mission. Trying to construct Akhanda Jyoti, without going bankrupt with all the *opla* money she has to keep coming for the contractor, electrician, painter, banker, lawyer, builder, and the dreaded permit bureaucrats, saps her of all her energy. She crocks at the end of each day.

When the house is ready, she employs Ansuya to look after the garden. A year later, Ansuya begins to work inside the house. She has not mentioned her children. One night, around ten, my Aunt sees Ansuya drag two children back to her village, a short distance from Akhanda Jyoti. When my Aunt asks her about the children, she tells her they are hers. She placed them in a remand home because she did not have enough food. Now that she has enough food, her children play near the house until her work is over. This is when my Aunt gets the idea of clothing the children and sending them to school.

She builds a room for Ansuya and the children in the inner courtyard. Ansuya does not like the idea of windows so they are bricked up. After five years, Govinda still sleeps under the bed.

Go to the South

My Aunt's husband dies in a fire. Their house burnt down. My Aunt is shaken. Who would want to murder him? I can't get her story properly because she leaves out enormous patches, jumps years. For this research, I have signed an ethics form that I won't pressure her into anything. And she is not an immigrant and I not a border-officer, dig-digging answers out of her.

. . . There is a phone call for her son at the boarding school, first thing he asks is if his father is dead. Her daughter left home many years ago. Her alcoholic father struck her. My Aunt said, "But she had not finished her *karma* with her father. Why else would she marry another alcoholic who beat her?" Six months later, her daughter seeks a divorce. Her *karma* completed full circle. My Aunt's belief.

Baba never came to her in a dream, beckoning her to Puttaparthi. A Hungarian refugee who has been in Baba's Ashram in Puttaparthi for over ten years, begins to receive signals in South Africa, where she is camped. *Vibhuti*-ash appears on her desk one day. She dusts it off. Then on flower petals, the ash would just pile and fall, right in front of her eyes. Baba, finally stands in front of her, *vibhuti* spilling out of his palms.

An entire Indian family immigrates to Puttaparthi from London. The wife is now on a war-path with Baba because Baba has asked to stop meditation; she is distracting him with her powers. But in London, Baba comes to her in a dream. Tells her to sell her house and come to India. She had never seen India in her life! Ask an immigrant to move from the west to India--no way! Sometimes ash, sometimes sweets, sometimes Baba's face, begin to appear all over her home. Same as in London, she is a nurse in Baba's ashram. None of the family members ever think of returning to Britain.

My Aunt meets a woman on a train in Bombay where she is recuperating from the tragedy. She cannot remember the woman's face, except her words, "Go to the South, a holy man waiting for you."

In Bangalore, she comes to know of Satya Sai Baba whose ashram is in Puttaparthi, a four hour motor ride from Bangalore. At the Ashram, there are threes of people, waiting for Baba's *darshan*. My Aunt's interest, more in the crowd and watching her purse. Her attention to snippets, like, Baba does not walk, he glides. My Aunt though a Muslim, closest to Jesus.

During *darshan*, Baba stops by my Aunt and asks her to touch his feet. My Aunt obeys out of politeness. She feebly touches the top of his foot and all of sudden, she is holding his big toe, crying uncontrollably. He asks her to see him in his chambers. This is the only time she has had a private interview with him in twelve years.

In the private room, there is a chair for Baba. But he does not sit down. He pours *vibhuti* into my Aunt's hand and asks her to eat it. She stuffs her mouth with both hands, but the *vibhuti* keeps on coming and Baba telling her in English, "Eat, eat." Then he disappears from the room. When he enters again, he has two packets. He tells her that these are for his children, that from now onwards, he will look after them. As she is about to leave, he tells her to marry again, this time, she will be very happy. He also tells her that her husband's death will remain a mystery.

When she opens the door of her room at the Ashram, right in the centre, there is a letter from Michael. How did it reach her here? Why hadn't it been retained in Bombay by her hosts? She is in Puttaparthi for only three days. She lets me read the last line of the letter, which she carries in her handbag, ever since. (*Samaan, prasad, vibhuti*.) Michael's hand writing is scrambly as if it climbs trees:

"I love you. You are my Krishna and I am your *gopi*."

My Aunt's *kumkum*, blue. Krishna's blue colouring.
Camphor, yellow silk, *gopi* waiting in chapel

When she returns to Bombay, my Aunt realises that she has so many questions to ask Baba. She returns to Puttaparthi. But this time Baba ignores her. My Aunt devastated. Her connection, broken.

A couple of nights later in Bombay, about three in the morning, she sees Baba with blood streaming out of his palms.

She decides to build a house in Bangalore because she wants to be closer to Baba, volunteering her services in his ashram in Whitefield, twenty minutes away from Akhanda Jyoti. For my Aunt, the notion of "home" merely followed as a consequence.

While submitting a research proposal for this story, I had assumed that like other immigrants, my Aunt yearned for a homeland and managed to concretize her dream by creating a mini-globe at Akhanda Jyoti, where citizens from all, India, Africa, Britain, and recently Canada could live. Prior to meeting her, I romanticized my Aunt's imaginary homeland. Even *Mzee Ibrahim's* story turns sour.

Where Murli now stays, originally *Mzee Ibrahim* and his wife's quarters, surrounded by a guava, papaya and hibiscus trees. The best part of the garden. When my Aunt is in London, *Mzee Ibrahim* starts drinking and abusing his wife. He writes to my Aunt saying that he is in love with a Ceylonese girl whom he saved from a bicycle accident and being in a foreign country, she is dependent on him. She writes back that he does not need her permission to marry the Ceylonese woman, but she will not be allowed to stay at the quarters. *Mzee Ibrahim* does not bother about the children, becomes abusive to Ansuya, pulling her hair and shutting her out of Akhanda Jyoti. After an emergency phone call from Manju, Michael and my Aunt return to Bangalore.

In writing the research proposal, I exoticised it, falling in love with dashing travels across continents. Now I want to summon the proposal and rectify it in the context of a woman's allegiance to love.

Proposal:

"Season of Gulshan" is a bio-fiction of a woman who actualises her imaginary homeland in Bangalore, India. She manages to live in-

between the frontiers of Asia, Africa and Europe in her imaginary homeland. She is even able to transfer citizens from the countries she has lived in (Britain, India and East Africa) to her imaginary homeland. For example, this woman has adopted two children in Bangalore. Since she is not in Bangalore for the entire year, a Black Tanzanian *Mzee* (elder) and his wife are the parents in charge when she is Britain.

This fiction will also explore and "unpack" the detached loyalty the nomad/immigrant has toward the West, that is, the West as a utility place for materialistic comforts whilst celebration and spirituality (for her and many other nomads) abound in an imaginary homeland.

My Aunt is not detached. A person who wears blue *kumkum* never sits on the fence. Her bruises won't allow her to. Parts of her sprout all over. Call her my Aunt, call her Mother Earth, she connects to others with love. Pressing my clothes, loving me.

Like Murli, I have a broken stomach, drawing attention to the proposal, but I do not want to bruise the red *kumkum*, germinating in this text. It's colour still delicate, delicate as pink pomegranate.

To My Woman Reader*ji*

Readerji, my Woman-Readerji
you may say this is poetry or story or essay
the trail is yours
it always was

A rooftop is a woman. There is bunchy gossip on rooftops. Back and forth, *dupatta* scarves move with the wind on rooftops (here the wind sweeter than Chinook). Now and then Readerji, wipe your hands, for my ink is sticky from warm cinnamon on saskatoon berries. Lick some off your fingers. A woman's ink is nourishing. Sometimes I squelch berry juice on my palm. Saskatoon-henna is scarlet orange, riper than any bridal henna from Delhi or Delphi.

The distance from a woman to her rooftop (so what if her rooftop is in Delhi or Delphi) is not a journey but a lull. And never on a flying carpet. For a flying carpet is male-ridden. He holds all magic. And a woman's throat harnessed to his razor rope, "tell a story, or else . . ."

Readerji, a woman vanishes to her rooftop on a swing. Sometimes it is a lull, sometimes a thick flight, but always, always on a swing. Hair newly washed, gossip, *dupattas* dyed dreamy, mango pickle on chapatti, twigs, berry juice, tea, and lazy, lazy sleep are landmarks of a rooftop. A male's invasion on a rooftop is unholy as entering the mosque in shoes. On a rooftop, Gaea sprouts red soil and jasmines. A mustard veil sails by. Here, two friends or three press secrets:

On a swing
 from a Jamun tree
 into Saturday night dream
 up-up-again
 a thick flight to

beloved, beloved

The first time I learn the shape of a rooftop-woman is in a prairie parking lot. Phyllis *bibi* (you will meet her Readerji) in her yellow jacket and it is shortly before the lilacs of May, we are caught in a spring rain. The tight frozen ground twitches

and turns to rubbery waves in the warm rain. Spring in Calgary is raw or already summer. But today, we catch her in transition. We catch the wispy green reddening to summer and want to seal this startle in a thick curry. (A worthy curry must startle the tongue.) Now Phyllis *bibi* and I crave for warm chapatti to dunk in the curry. (From the parking lot we can see *Smitty's* revolving oval.) The rain melts the coarse winter skin around our nostrils. We do not go to *Smitty's Pancakes*, neither do we make it to lectures that day.

But in Delhi, *Readerji*, a washerwoman banishes me. No, no, let me withhold the story awhile. My Reader, have *you* been a washerwoman to the ghost woman? Of course you know her. She is a spooky beauty who is new to your town of Dodoma or Turner Valley. Stories about her: someone said she was driving the car-- she killed him, the boy you knew and wanted. Of her motionless black eyes and how mothers covered eyes of children (even their foreheads still soft as custard) then retreated from her. Never leaving their backs exposed to her motionless eyes. There is another story that on the second night of their marriage, the ghost woman pressed her thumb on his voice box (the boy you wanted), then lay by him until morning. So many stories. But what happened?

I have seen the ghost woman dancing in a slip in an empty gym. Such an otherness about her. Her powdery collarbone sifts light. She dances on the periphery. The dead space turns to mercury between her legs in flight.

In the Mahabharata, Arjun the archer, is allowed the privacy of single balance, application. He is allowed to practice Tai Chi uninterrupted. Full-circle motion, concentration, brings him an athlete's success, a warrior's success. But a woman is not allowed Tai Chi hush. And like the ghost woman in the gym, not even the privacy of pain. In creativity or pain, a woman is surrounded by *bazaar* hassle and *bazaar* domesticity. Alberta poet Victoria Walker writes, that there are "pots and pans in a woman's piano."²² *Readerji* you may offer a wise-salt opinion that a

²²Walker, Victoria, "Woman House," *The Alberta Diamond Jubilee Anthology*, ed. John W. Chalmers (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1979) 261.

woman naturally connects to the familiar when she seeks the unfamiliar. That in this is her rhythm-beat--everywhere she is organically connected, womb connected. That is why she is never angular, singular. But Readerji, her simultaneous connections are harnessed by male for his containment. That is why I call a male, Big Mr. Dam. He locks woman-water. He delivers woman-water. He turns her instinctive, curious, independent nature into a salt-rock. (But salt is a wise and keeping spice.) If a woman behaves independently/singularly/angularly, Big Mr. Dam calls her unnatural, unwomanly--a shame on a woman's name. He frightens her with stories of a salt-rock or an eerie ghost woman. (On the Bagamoyo coast, I hear another tale: of a ghost woman who carries her ravenous sex organs in her sucking spine.) Terror and shame govern Big Mr. Dam's woman. He tells her all women have salt-rock, ghost potential, it is a matter of harnessing it. When she deters, he asks her in his slow-slow master voice, "My dear, is this how I delivered you?" Take the example of a woman who laughs a lot, openly, widely. Fatima Mernissi in *Women in Moslem Paradise* writes:

A modest and humble woman personifies total submission to someone else's will. Laughing is an explosive gesture in this situation: when you laugh, you raise your chin, throw your head back and plant your gaze high up in the sky which doesn't fit with the place society has decided for women.²³

In Mr. Dam's dictionary, such a woman is loose/lay/ready. Her strong white teeth (he gives her a Paris apple once and crowns her "Miss Pearly") "horsy." When a woman dissents, Big Mr. Dam brands her irrevocably ugly. In his eye, her womanhood slumps. No good.

Readerji, I am an East Indian woman who likes to lick chocolate in retreat, who wants to unclasp the sweaty burden of marriage from my neck. Such a woman

²³Fatima Mernissi, *Women in Moslem Paradise* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1988) 5.

is said to be shameless-*besharam*. By Big Mr. Dam. There are several tribes of Big Mr. Dam. I speak of Big Mr. Dam from my tribe.

Shame/*besharam* starts in a small way. As a child if I did not sit "golden," thighs pressed together, Grandmother said I was without shame. One day, she tied my breasts with a gingham cloth because my breasts jumped up and down when I skipped rope. Shame becomes big when I cannot leak sons, so I throw my daughters, one by one, into the Bow. I jump in last. The final baby-woman in my arms.

And I am . . . nine bullets in my body because I bring shame to my tribe. I laugh on your TV screen, my mouth full of creamy sweetmeat. Since the day we eloped, my husband drives me to the Indian sweet shop on 17th Avenue. He buys me two *burfis* with silver under-paper. He places the box by my legs so no one can see -- our snatched secret, and one more touch. My *kurta-pajama* is yellow with a red border. Red is auspicious but yellow is a wet colour. Yellow is Gaea in spring. I wear yellow sluggish and a thicket of lips cover my arms. Rotund and lazy, stretching limbs when . . .

My brother outside the video store by *Mac's*. Eighteen bullets in my husband's body. My brother's hands are very dry.

That is my father outside the Court House. His beard, prophet flowing. His son has restored the hymen of the tribe. The membrane through which a tribe's honour enters. A man delivers a woman by entering her. My father's eyes are dry like my brother's finger on the trigger of his AK-47. Male abode is always dry and territorial. In patriarchy, this is how a hymen is kept intact. My father's clan sticks close to him, reserved of western publicity. In anxiety, one of them eats roasted peanuts. How to explain that back home, my husband would have been beaten to death by a barrage of hockey sticks? Only a father or brother hands over a woman's hymen. My brother gives a thumbs-up signal to father when he is led to prison. My brother drenched my wet months.

The crow swoops low, unerringly low, even though there is a cat nearby. Crow, take a message as you do in daughter stories. Tell my mother I am happy

under the Babul tree. I do not want to beget sons. Babul home is a girl's home before marriage.

There is a washerwoman who banishes me from Delhi. I still hear her noise: "Quick, out of here, *fatafat, tout suit, pronto!*"

"Your foreign woman blood, a bleat of blood, husk-dry in three days." (Who told you so?)

"Ours bleed lustily, so dark, it gives off purple. Purple as a Java Plum." (I forget whether the mango or the plum is sacred.)

Frizzy hair (I have left them open) and airy breasts are worse. Worse still is an unfastened East Indian woman. Not fastened to my woman neck two gold nuggets (heavy droops of ruby nipples). An Indian-comely-Kamla has breasts full of tigress milk.

I rush to Phyllis *bibi* who is drinking wine on the rooftop. What is she up to? She is watching a groom's wedding party below. Oh no, Readerji, she is dangling wine right above Allah's Head. He is with the groom's wedding party! With His smouldering Eye, He will boot us out! "And where?" asks Phyllis *bibi*. It is true, He cannot terrorize us with hell because women have been in hell for a long, long time. Neither can He coax us *houri*-nymphs with baskety hips. Allah promises Big Mr. Dam if he is religious and performs good deeds in life, He will reward him with *houris*. *Houris* are singularly Allah's benevolence. These nymphs remain virgins, night after passionate night. They lounge around heaven in silk underwear, digitalized into action as soon as Big Mr. Dam enters paradise. (My Allah has forgotten to reward woman.) Suddenly Phyllis *bibi* spreads like a mother bear to protect our rooftop space, "Well, don't bring Him here!" Of Woman-paradise, Mernissi says, "Paradise is not having to live up to someone else's standards and expectations, even GOD'S..."²⁴

²⁴Mernissi 12.

Ooi, there is Nazareth-wallah Jesus. Oh Readerji, his oval nose still *dukhi*-sad as in a Renaissance painting. He still walks with a glide. Who is Phyllis *bibi*, you ask, Readerji? *Ooi* Readerji, she is our Canadian-walli poet:

Hieratic sounds emerge
from the Priestess of
Motion
a new alphabet
gasps for air.

We disappear in the musk of her coming.²⁵

I am partial to Phyllis *bibi*. With her, my timidity vanishes quick, *pronto*, *fatafat*. Only in a dream of audience halls, am I the dauntless heroine, spitting poetry in Khomeini's face. Readerji, on my rooftop, I am the bold heroine, in the company of Joan of Arc and the fearless Rani of Jhansi. "Sorry this is not a nuclear shed," Jhansi's response, and bombs an ancient temple behind which the British troop hide. The British underestimate her war skills. She would not dare explode a temple. Jhansi dares. On my rooftop, I am a bold heroine spitting poetry in Khomeini's face:

When Rushdie *Babu* comes home
I'll knead flour with flying fingers

Have you not got it as yet, woman-Readerji? That in her roof-top space, a woman dreams and builds courage. That a woman's map is romance. A woman loves herself thick. Not the glittering moonlight kind, that too, but she has the capacity to romance Allah, as well as baby. In her lies a strange other capacity. It comes out of her rooftop, her she-space, her push, like a baby pushed out of her womb, like a teacher pushes open her pupil: pupa, pupil, push.

Hair newly washed, gossip, *dupattas* hued with Saturday night dreams, and lazy, lazy sleep (these days wine too) are landmarks of a rooftop. Here, two friends or three drink tea, drink wine, press secrets.

²⁵Phyllis Webb, "Naked Poems," *The Vision Tree: Selected Poems* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1985) 89.

My woman-Reader*ji*, on rooftop today, the wind is sweeter than chinook.

Circum the Gesture

Muhammad is the Messenger of God, and those who are with him are hard against the unbelievers, merciful one to another. Thou seest them bowing, prostrating, seeking bounty from God and good pleasure. Their mark is on their faces, the trace of prostration. That is their likeness in the Torah, and their likeness in the Gospel: as a seed that puts forth its shoot, and strengthens it and it grows stout and rises straight upon its stalk, pleasing the sowers, that through them He may enrage the unbelievers. (Arthur J. Arberry, trans. "Victory," *The Koran* [Toronto: Oxford UP, 1983] 535.)

Baba, for me, you do not come first today, on this flight from Delhi to Cochin. Though at home, I have been well taught that *Baba* comes before anything. To always steer with prefix, "Only if *Baba* wills." But today, flying to the south from Delhi, almost leaving India, I would only meet strangers and I don't even speak Malayalam. This my thought as we land in Cochin, but when I raise my head after the "fasten...." sign has been switched off, a man rises and rests his hands below his chest, impervious to the jostle of arms stretching inside coats or the smack-smack of the overhead cabins. *Baba*, in front of my seat, I see a knot of familiar quiescent hands resting below the chest,

right in the aisle! This gesture of countryside hands looks beautiful then: vulnerable yet nourished: figs, yogurt, fowl. The shoulders wide-out, solid, nothing short of a sower's shoulders but right at the edge, they droop (almost to soggy corners) pouring arrogance to the floor. Heart in this world and heart in prayer is Muslim way. *La Balance* in Islam. (Cochin, September, 1992).

My Allah, why do You roar in the Book? Who-whom to explain that my *Baba's* roar is instantly cool? Loud hot, then right away, cool. Even that my *Baba* is womanly. Watch *Baba* beckon-ing, wash-ing, spill-ing, chor-ing like a woman's fingers. A woman's fingers -ing constantly in aerobic rhythm: skillet/iron/rest/pump. Now lifting a pot of *dal* on a winter stove (her ginger root warm as toddy), looping thread around a button until it is stiff: tuck and-a-snap! And

much later
at the kitchen table
she bends over assignments
a familiar burn right here
between her shoulder blades
waft of Bounce (curtains in dryer)

Like a woman's chores, *Baba* -ings forever: beckon-ing, wash-ing, spill-ing. It is at odd hours, I act up, break discipline of prayer five times a day and dinner punctuality. At odd hours, I am starved for prayer and will not let such love climb out of the mosque dome to the sleepy, washed and waiting. I mulch *azan*-prayer in bread or push it inside my soap crusted navel.

I, *Baba's* jugular vein
I, *Baba's* jago-roused vein
I, *Baba's* jugnu-firefly pretty
I, *Baba's* Jamun purple fruit favourite
I, *Baba's* Juma-Friday moon

Baba whispers sweet j-j-j, jelly-bean treats in my ear

jago jugnu Juma
rise firefly Friday

out of the ear of the *mullah/Khomeini/terse mujahideen* and then He is off to brandishing swords with the Torah-keepers and Christians, "Come on you infidel!"

Sometimes, I overstay at the Plaza Cinema, then I am in for it with *Baba*, when I hang with Roberta outside the Cinema. Unexpectedly, I see her after the 7

pm show. "Roberta!" and we are off arm-in-arm to the Higher Ground Cafe. She and I (like women before us) chuck out barrister-male-din of

"When women plaits meet, they break a verandah."

Translated:

"Women are destroyers of dwellings, warpish gossipers."

Sometimes men sulk:

"Only flies enter a dirty mouth."

Who is a dirty mouth? Never a man, always a woman who talk-talks, ignoring man-the-monitor, be it husband, brother or *mullah*.

Men even threaten to chop off our tongues. But we chuck out the barrister-male-din, anyway. Woman brouhaha is always hymen closed to men, even *Baba*.

When I head to Higher Ground opposite the Cinema, at home, there is a raucous at the dinner table. But I am unhungry after tucking away layers of *azan*-prayer (today, strudel layers before pre-rosy dawn). And when I am ordered out of prayer once a month by tyrant *Baba* and His lot, that is when I crave *azan*-prayer, oyster oily, slippery as warm clot. Indeed, I even report on vigilant *fajr* time: precisely after dawn and before sunrise, when the call for prayer rises from the minaret.

Outside Higher Ground, *Baba's* car makes zoinky noises because "Why is daughter not at home?" The *cafe au lait* drinkers being on higher ground have a great seat and stare at the ethnic spectacle below. *Baba* and I lend to Kensington's folksy globe just like Dan Jenkins' green and red castles opposite the Plaza, just like the two-storey decor of naive-abroad Africa in Harry's Africa (*lot-ta* zebras and ice-creams). All on the Kensington strip, carrier of international papers, even *The Cochin Malabar News*.

But there is raucous at the dinner table, tonight. Who-whom to explain that *Baba's* musket sound, carnival excess? "So you are an apologist?" the media nutshells my dilemma. Go away, I am conversing with my blustery father. Who-whom to explain that

mullahs have beefed up Allah.

Saudi eyes auction women.

And when Baba turns chauvinistic, he fits me into male hands, who in turn, banish me to the couch when I talk back:

I, Muslim woman
 live in a mirror house
 which does not break
 instead
 adheres to images
 (as is business of mirrors)
 fickle images of woman nature.
 Spill on-and-on
 about Prophet and woman's charter of rights
 in Mecca-Medina century.
 The Prophet has passed away
 my mirror house still endures
 iron tough
 as museum chastity belt.

In Urdu, to conjure up mirrors is to lose one's senses. Who has gone potty, *Baba*? Rabbits breed a barrage and mirrors are multiplied on women by the *mullah*-clan. In Arabic, she is *fitna*, one name for chaos and beauty. In Urdu, she is *rundi*, whore. She is *rundi*, widow. Only mother is woman and heaven is at a mother's feet the Prophet said. Contemporary *mujahideens* throw acid on purdah-naked woman. Then *Baba*, I want to denounce you thrice as is the solemn pronouncement in our Book

I divorce you once
 I divorce you twice
 I divorce you thrice

but I do not want to discard like male, instead I, Muslim woman, follow my own cadence. It is true, so true

when Rushdie *Babu* comes home

I will knead flour with flying fingers

My *Baba* has a girthy forehead. He is my jugular vein. The soil/(soul) I mated/(matted) does not have a clue of *Baba's* girth, or *Baba's* revulsion to pig flesh or His heart-Mohammed, partial to perfume. Dominant in my new domicile is the media-*jati* caste and I cross the North American expanse shielding *Baba's* forehead. If I am permitted to circum His forehead, I will matt my new soil in stories chubby as collarbones that my *Baba* is not *mullah* blind but salt warm like bed-time story mother tells me of her three sisters on her forehead, "This is your Malek *Didi*, This is your Zarin *Didi*, this is your Dolly *Didi*." I caress my aunts on mother's forehead, two light and a dark mark. Never ask her which mark, who? Never matters. My *Didis*, a huge mass watch my eyes grow heavy. *Baba's* forehead this girthy. (*Baba-0-Baba*, when You of the girthy forehead advertise virgin-*houri* treats in heaven, it is so kith!) Let me shield Your woman forehead from the spicy eye of the media. (They are locked in the entertainment of polygamy. Still saucer-eyed magic for them.) My gluttony with You, of mulching *azan*-prayer on bread, sometimes push it inside my soap crusted navel, who-who would understand?

Ooi Baba, come back! How *churro*-sure you are you have won daughter back! But I speak the language of rebellion underneath. I don't speak to you as a woman. What's the point? "Pah!" probably your response *Baba*, and would shove me aside for Turkish coffee with the *mullahs*. But as daughter, I heat your heart, and I do what my *Didis* and Grandmaji have done before me, heat the heart of the matter in the process, come to the core this way and that, giving You time to warm up to woman-nosh. *Baba*, "nosh" out of "nourishment." A woman nourishes a shape to embrace a word, learning its heart.

When I disobey You and the *mullah-jati*, then I am discarded as the first and second ugly sister in a fairy tale because I refute woman-ban and take over male space/public space reserved for m(ale). But my name is also *Niyyat*-sincere. Third and last daughter. I, *Niyyat*, create, errand, keep and nourish in relation to *Baba*, sister, brother, buddy, husband, *Didi*. *Relational to* is a woman-organ, ask any *Niyyat*,

ask any woman. Only this organ is without physical space, unlike breast and womb. (To give her a physical geography, I name her in italics.)

Oof Baba, open the car door this instant! Don't you know it is illegal to a brandish sword in public! You are lending to C-grade pulp of another unshaven actor to play a Muslim terrorist, accomplishing a kith job of shoulder shrugs and Omar Sheriff accent!

To be a sower is to be Lakshmi benevolent. (*Baba* cringes because I am hued by the goddess.) Lotus Lakshmi who tolerates, lets others before her, be it fortune wooers who won't let her take a breath, rest and mend. Or be it her Lord Vishnu, most polite and civilised of all gods, but husband-typical, he consumes all limelight, the goddess walks a few steps behind. Lakshmi's *relational to* organ is most sincere. (When I circumambulate the Sacred Basil in my courtyard, I don't think of Lakshmi as Lotus-Venus, but Basil-Lakshmi whose elbows, crusty tired. I lavish all water on her).

This man in the aisle is Lakshmi-sincere, and even, and even, old-fashioned chivalry prevails in his courtesy but I have banned "gallant" and "chivalry" from woman language. For no matter how spread the chivalrous cloaks, woman crosses small. But neither do I want to discard his traits unequivocally, to lobotomize him of male celebration. So I embrace the man in Urdu "*adab*" اَدَب courtesy. Courtesy that is homey and palatial gallant. For me the shape of *adab* drips warm in my ear--let me in, I am home.

Grandmother had a fountain pen she dips in warm medicine ink (that's what she calls it)-- "In the name of Allah, the most beneficent, the most merciful," and plotch! in goes the fluid in my ear. Warm, at the same time, familiarly foreign. Plotch! My shoulders clench as collarbones angle outward. Delicious. Neck in Grandmother's settled hands. *Baba*, You, on my jugular vein, even closer.

I *Baba's jugnu* - firefly pretty

I *Baba's Juma* - Friday moon

Soon I am asleep, all ear ache gone. There are even colours in gesture of *adab*

ارب:

mendicant ochre / ghat / basil
but also formality of tribunal turquoise

Good things in life, like You say, *Baba*.

prostrate / pleasure
homey / courtly
inside / out
Muslim / Allah

This is *La Balance* in Islam. Today, I want to forget

Sheiks heaving on scrawny Bombay women
rupees, rupees, *rupaiya*!

and celebrate (*salut*) this *adab*-courtesy of the traveller-nomad, in Bulgaria, Cochin or Calgary, this gesture of right hand over left wrist in rest-wait.

In the aisle, I play a child's game: with my little eye, I spy four fingers and a thumb. Peep at the spaces between his gallant fingers. His thumb lax as a basking roof. This time, not afraid of Muslim male legs (in my imagination, they are even pressed together, not like Arab sprawl in five star hotels). This time, as the Muslim man makes room for others to pass in the aisle, "Allah willing, my turn too." (Plotch! I hear in my ear.)

Elsewhere (let me forget)

The Arab with fierce hair admits
he thrust the bomb
in the bag
of his blonde girlfriend, pregnant.
The broadcaster's eyes turn enormous

Back in Calgary, I can't stop circumambulating the gesture. I phone up friends.

"Sadru, you know why we stand this way?"

"Your Grandfather, too!"

"My Grandfather stepped out of bathroom with his hands folded, always (*la la Allah la*)."

"But isn't it a form of hierarchial respect? The hand maid presses her eyes to the floor in front of her *Begum*-mistress."

"On *Unsolved Mysteries*, yes, yes, that same guy with the fuzzy sandy face. Yeah and the gray trench coat. In this story, when the police-woman comes to visit this Muslim's taxi-driver at his home--she is the one who rescues him after he has been shot. This guy stands with his hands folded above his stomach, even with one eye popped out!"

"Oh, I remember the gesture. When the sultan of Zanzibar was driven down Main Street in his scarlet motor-car, Prophet's green flag on the bonnet, and ten miles an hour pomp, Zanzibaris folded their hands and dropped their eyes. Isn't this gesture also one of the *namaaz* positions? Hang on, I have a *salat* book, I will find out."

"*Yaaro*-friends, after all this circum brouhaha, tell me, tell me, does the gesture move you?"

This gesture of hands folded below the chest leaves a mark on Muslim shoulders. This time, as men lift a white sheeted body on their shoulders. I (always) stop crying then, shifting all grief on their shoulders. Who-whom to explain this giving over of grief to copious, abundant shoulders.

Oh if it isn't the professional nutshell. No one shot the man, Mr. Nutshell, you didn't miss a thing (as if all Muslims go to Allah this way, bang, bang) but all Muslims are wrapped in white shroud and lifted on a brother's shoulder.

There are stories of Muslim and burial:

A heroine's melancholy *filmi* couplet to her lover:

when my coffin is lifted

do not lend me your shoulder

And the story of the last Mogul, Zafar the poet, exiled to Burma by the British. Never to return to Delhi, not even to claim his final two yards of burial plot. Agha Shahid Ali, a contemporary Kashmiri-American poet writes:

I think of Zafar
led through this street
By British soldiers, his feet in chains
to watch his sons hanged

In exile he wrote:

"Unfortunate Zafar
spent half his life in hope,
the other half waiting.

He begs for two yards of Delhi for burial."²⁶

The British buried him in Rangoon.

A Muslim's white sheeted body carried from shoulder to shoulder, uniting shoulders. (In Kashmir, I hear same wood-*ka*-coffin used to carry all departed.) Allah, Yours returns to You. Give a shoulder, Brother.

My stomach swells. In the aisle, I want to grasp this man's hand and press it to my right eye, then my left and bring it to my lips. My jugular vein shivers. There is familiar stomping. Who is there? The stomping changes gear to nimble feet, silver mobile. Sleek. Today, *Baba* is an elegant mood of glittering sabres (not swords or kukris). "Infidels! My sowers will show you!"

²⁶"Agha Shahid Ali, "After Seeing Kozintsev's *King Lear* in Delhi," *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1987) 25.

A Take-off on *Mississippi Masala*

3 September, 1992

From: C-23 Shanti Bhawan, New Delhi

Dear Mira *Didi*:

This letter is *ghup-shup*, yak-yak all from my end. This is not a review for *Cinemascope*. But I admit, there is a long, long line-up in Calgary, winding past the Kensington Building. Plaza's doors to open in another half an hour. Lot of whites in the crowd line-up (they are everywhere) but my eyes gawk at Indian housewives in starched summer saris, resembling Mina's aunty (*Chachi*? Or is it *Maami*, Mina's mother's brother's wife? Who is she?) who wants to grasp all toilet paper on sale. When Mina glares at her, I laugh, and Shani next to me laughs, and Shelina next to her, laughs. Our two rows bunched together laugh. (I will tell you about the two rows in a bit, *Didi*.) Because we of the two rows often conduct Mina's sulky stance, here, out West. She has brought her Aunty (chaffing, like us, when asked to run an errand by elders) to the supermarket to purchase American cartfuls of homo milk for the wedding *mithai*. *Didi*, I wish there is more of the Aunty in the film. I just know this Aunty makes *gor keri* and lemon pickle in the four O' Clock Mississippi sun when she has finished her regular chores. (She would never buy Patak's sealed pickles. Just know.)

Back to the line-up outside the Plaza in Calgary:

An Indian housewife has slits in her heels
indifferent as brown thread

and Indian university women with thick cropped hair--oxidized silver bangles, shorts, no lipstick, white, white teeth. Mummy is in the line-up too (in East Africa, we never call her mum), in her mid-length cotton dress and bob-cut hair. Your Mina calls her mum, "Maa." Sounds lyrical--she would have also called her Mummy. It sits on the character you try to flesh-out: in Kampala, Uganda, their drawing-room (we called it sitting-room in East Africa) is lampy-western, African carvings and rugs (a child in such a family would call her mother, Mummy. Mina calls her African Uncle, Uncle--western style. I forget what Mina calls her father--Papa?)

Didi, should I tell you first that I saw *Mississippi Masala* in Vancouver or discuss the strangeness I felt when Mina kisses her little Ugandan playmate. Her playmate who is their servant's child. *Didi*, let's celebrate first!

Even now, I hear Lakshman Subramaniam in my ears, over the oceans, as the maps of the continents move across the screen. (Cornily, I want to use the word "migrate" instead of "move.") On the red ply screen, names of countries dance in yellow. Is this true? Or my imagination? Red and yellow are auspicious colours, my colours, from Ganges India, carried to East Africa, carried to Canada. *Didi*, did you carry red and yellow to America? It is verandah-warm in the cinema. Shani clutches my hand. We are moving with you, *Didi*. This is *our* film. This is our *mehfil*. And snatches of ghazal by Jagjit, for our ears only.

*Sarakti jaye hai rukh se naqab
ahista, ahista*

Let me tell you of our two rows of seats, filled by Indian *yaaro* from all over: Shani is Caribbean, Shelina and I are from Tanzania, which is not as ritzy as Kenya nor fertile as Uganda, but we share East Africa. Ashok born in Bhopal but never seen Bhopal. (*Didi*, these "buts"--tender hyphens.) Today, in Vancouver, it is our father's cinema. There is a couple, a white man and a Japanese woman who sit in front of us. Ashok's seats are taken! No way! I am timid (except on paper), not Shelina (she runs a business in Granville but I am partial to her long Kashmiri nose) tells them the seats are reserved. (In Vancouver, Ashok of Bhopal who lives in Calgary is always delayed at the *Paan ki Shop* on Main street. He likes a good spread of the chalky stuff and nugget betel pieces. Definitely none of the sweet, red paste.) The Japanese woman gets up, miffed (typical Asian or African reaction, no?). The man smiles affably--*yaar*, these Whites grin affably in an Indian ghetto: Indira Gandhi International Airport, *mehfil*-gathering, or film. Today, it is our father's cinema.

Didi, when I was young, maybe eleven, my Grandparents moved to Canada. This was my last visit to Dodoma in the interior of Tanzania where I did my primary school. One of our oldest servants, *Mzee* Juma, saw me on the street. It was *Idd*

and I was carrying a tray of *mithai* to a friend's home. He was with another Black man. I waited for him. He stroked my forehead. Didn't say a word. His fingers were rough from cutting, peeling, washing, ironing, lifting, farming, building. His African friend grinned. Another sly way an African manages to touch an Indian. *Didi*, so creamily little Mina kisses her Black Ugandan friend. *Didi*, this is cinema affection.

In 1972
an African touched my breast
I walk the street
with hunched shoulders

Between Asians and Africans in East Africa there was no innocence. Your sunniness isn't agreeable to me. *Didi*, friendships like the one between Mina's father and his African friend may have been possible. You should have interrogated, unpacked further. Unpacked to heal instead of consumptive cinema. Then I could have retrieved Kiswahili words like *pole*/sorry.

Soft Kiswahili like
pole I have exiled.
You say *pole* to a leader in jail,
to a young child
whose wobbly feet can't stand alone.

Perhaps then I could have licked Mina's creamy kiss because such friendships didn't occur in my ordinary Indian home. Because even as I was four (younger than Mina?) I knew that Africa was for the Africans. *Didi*, being an outsider, you have done an outsider's thing--romanticized the diaspora of Asians from Uganda.

There is another scene you skirt around but don't unpack. I am talking about the embrace between Mina's mother and their African friend. It must have happened for the first time between them like it happens for the first time when *Mzee* Juma touches my forehead on *Idd*. What occurs between Mina's mother and their friend is too fast, too quick. *Ahista, Ahista, Didi*. Slowly *Didi*, like the veil in the snatched *ghazal*: this purdah/curtain descends from the face (*Sarakti jaye hai rukh*

se naqab) s-l-o-w-l-y. It never just slides off. *Didi*, now who am I to tell you that history just doesn't slide off?

To my history: we are crossing the border. From Kenya into Tanzania. The Black Tanzanian inspector smiles. It is about two in the morning. My mother in a yellow sari, travelling without a man, travelling with her two children. The inspector looks at her breasts. As she fills out the declaration form, her *pallauv* slips. She asks for a paper clip, and the inspector takes the paper clip pot with both hands (sign of respect) and holds it close to her breast. Smiles. An East Indian woman harassment by a Black man in East Africa. In the Seventies in Tanzania and Uganda, there is a lot of cornering. Indian women dodge. Wild running down the street. *Didi*, ban the prescriptive embrace between Mina's mother and their Black friend. Oh, the brown-black colour is there. . . The White-*jati* caste (my mother asks do I have to be so rude?) would probably smile affably and say, "so what was the problem?" *Didi*, such an enormous chunk of history/my flesh you abort: an Indian woman (even if she wears a European cotton frock) is like a Brahmin, any other man besides her husband, an untouchable. And you exhibit an Indian woman clasping a Black man, chest to breast. My mother insists there is an awkwardness conveyed in the scene. She is satisfied. (*Didi*, here in the West, mother's generation is easily satisfied. Grateful.) I say, *ahista, ahista, Didi*, s-l-o-w.

In film analysis, my teacher slices things apart. Colloquially, she is sharp as a kukri. She says that Nair (but I call you *Didi*) pulls the rug from under our feet when Mina tells Demetrius, the morning after, that she has something to tell him. Allah! She tells him it's her birthday! When us Indian women want to find out whether she is a virgin or not. Pulling the rug from under our feet is urban film direction, a Western quick-step; I am a rustic and want to know how Mina gets birth control pills (I never go to an Indian doctor for pills) or does she pick up condoms from the hotel. How? When? Show us Mina, *Didi*. Such an expert at lovemaking, no? How does she know it all? While her male cousin is *ulu*-goofball number one. Dig digging Mina, yes, that's what I want. (Part of Mina exists in many East Indian

women in the west. I am one of them. So *Didi*, you can't say that this is your film not ours!)

From what is shown of her family, the concept of virginity must be fused to her jugular vein shame. Where did I get this from, you ask, *Didi*? *Yaar*/friend/*Didi*/sister, we are talking about Indian shame, a compounded mass of woman shame, family shame and tribal shame. Then there are valves like Sita-purity and husband is Godji--these tighten a hymen until the proper time of henna, wet as Uganda soil, doctor-grooms, tycoon-grooms, and sweet *mithais* made out of homomilk.

Didi, Mina and her lover's heavy kisses are spitty and wonderful, but their lovemaking, on a Hollywood bed. But in true Indian *filmi-istyle*, out of the blue, Mina's red *chunni* is draped around her when she phones her mother to say that she is going away with Demetrius (this rustic loved the detail!). Oh, and you should have unpacked the hair-scenes. Yes, there is the scene when Mina's mother gives her a hair massage as they *ghup-shup* about Mr. Hand-Picked groom. But on the beach *Didi*, on the beach, Mina does a *jura* with a flick of her palm. I want to celebrate this motion not as a single exotic detail but repeated many times because it is vernacularly Indian. Indian women do this all the time when talking to their "*wohi*" (or when they are in a huff with their "*wohi*"). You may argue *Didiji*, that Mina isn't from India, that she wouldn't think of her beau as "*wohi*." Really *Didi*, you are an outsider to East Africa! My *Didiji*. I don't want to enter into a *bahez*-argument with you, and what the hell, I am partial to *juras*! Moreover I confess that I think of my "*him*" as "*wohi*" even though I am from East Africa. That's the Indian dilemma. Was fed on Sita, Draupadi, fiery Bengali heroines through the umbilical cord of my second generation East African mother.

Why did you make this film first for the White-*jati*? If you had made this film for me, an East African Indian homing in Canada, I would have asked you to take me to a bed where love is made Indian East African *istyle*. Wonder if there is such a thing? I am talking about Jai (lovely hero name) and his wife. He plays with her *jhumka* (she has short liberated hair in Mississippi). Jai and his wife clink glasses in

her liquor store (from housewife in Kampala to running a liquor store in Mississippi). Husband's pillar. I have witnessed such East African women many times.

husband gone to town
again
to fetch goods and urban pleasures
(as urban pleasures anywhere)
she sits in her *duka*
interior of the forest
unmarked in history
braver than Livingstone, Stanley et al
kichri pot on fire, baby in box
selling
flour, Vicks, oil,
blankets, lanterns, Aespro

My salaams to these women. I clink glasses with them. *Salut*. But why didn't you push on Jai and his wife's actual sexuality. I am keen on how my parents' generation in East Africa made love. In India, there is the matriarchal mother-in-law who instructs daughter-in-law to take a glass of milk to "*wohi*-him". But in East Africa, what love words or prods did my parents use? Did my mother wear (private) *jhumkas* on such days. I want this nearness opened. I dream it must be moist yet gauzy like a mosquito net.

But Mina and her "*wohi*" is the hot masala theme. On my way to Delhi this time, I briefly stay in London, where I am invited to dinner at my Aunt's (never Aunt) friend's home. Her daughter, born in London, an Indian Londoner. The daughter draws up her knees dreamily at the romance in the film (of course between Mina and Demetrius) and says to me, it is a sunny film. I choke on my *muskaki* (by the way do you like *muskaki* barbecued East African way? If you don't eat beef, forgive me.) But I cannot blame her, *Didi*, this young Indian Londoner; Mina's T-Shirt as it slides up her loinic belly and Demetrius who is first class Mr. White in a Black skin--yes, yes, I witnessed fried chicken and corn on the cob in this Hollywood masala.

Didi, now I will waffle all over the place. Raw thoughts, processed thoughts, whatever comes to mind. So waffle with me as I heat unformed thoughts: Mina washes toilets (bright yellow gloves), her low cut tribal *cholis*, frisky miniskirts, *ornis*, and girdle-belts brim with confidence, security. Personally I know that the psyche of Asians from East Africa has taken years and years to repair and they (Mina's family) have not left Uganda in all the years they have left the country--Mina's father writes demanding letters to the Government of Uganda for the return of his property. In light of Kampala, unforgotten, how can Mina fall in love with a Black man so effortlessly (even though he is a Black-American)? Can she shift so soundly? Does she not remember her mother's harassment by Ugandan soldiers on the day they leave Kampala and ironically what's playing on her cassette player is Mukesh's: "my shoes are from Japan, trousers from England, hat from Russia, but my heart remains Indian." (Bad translation; *Didi*. Sorry.)

For a person who is deeply tied to her family, wounded as deeply as they are (in fact this is Mina's personal landscape), her loyalty to Demetrius shifts *fatafat*, quick-quick, or a proverb is Kiswahili, *bandera ufata upepo* (flag follows the wind). *Didi*, bring in the melting pot, or as we Indians say, even bring in the father of melting pots, Indians just don't melt that easy. Wrench the real Mina out (not the imagined one.) Show her conflict and I will accept her choice. Portraying a Mina who only seethes under the skin won't do. Actually, I consider this another form of Hollywood re-domination, i.e. a heroine, foreign exotic to boot! Though Mina lives in an American Mississippi, she also lives in an India-Mississippi (music parties, videos, saris, arranged marriages, fair brides). *Didi*, you are portraying an Indian girl with a western vision of her Indian world. This is the dye of a mainstream-wallah. This is how a western character might grasp my world. Leave everything and ride off into the sunset, like Mina does. Mina is westernized (I am you) but not western (but I am also not you). I wanted my Ugandan film to be interrogative (Mina's sticky-tribal Indian blood; her woman identity out of her political and cultural history; Mina who is her parents' protector/soldier).

Didi, your film is affable and sunny. Your Uganda. Prescriptive. You subject me to Hollywood's *darshan*-glory.

Love,

Yasmin

P.S. *Didi*, after the 15th, I'll in Calgary. So drop me a line. I hear *M. Masala* will be on at the Plaza again in October. Popular film, no?

Two Friends

The first time I learn the space of a rooftop is in a prairie parking lot. A rooftop is woman and Saturday Night dreams.

My friend and I
 catch *barish* rain
 in a prairie parking lot
 fingertip drops
 light as
 hair/strand/chatter
 turns furious on trees
 green webbing
 tangled impossible
 like hair just washed.
 In this thick spring
 she and I have
 no crocus thought
 or sober rain
 for the farmer.

Instead
 we catch
 bunchy *barish*
 on rooftop elsewhere
 the baked earth hisses
 sprouts grass
 glaring
 as green chili
 then
 my *sakhi*-friend and I
 crave for
 roadside *paratha*
 so brisk and round

and hot, hot *chai*
out of steel tumblers
in a prairie parking lot.

Teastall *chai*
thick as maple syrup
she says
thick as Golconda Ruby wine
Vineyards in Goa? Andhra Pradesh?
I can't remember label
but the Ruby
tasted of cream-soda.

Coyote, Atwood, maple red on white
(haven't ever had saskatoon berries)
bears out there
wear bells
rocks run blue
after their blueberry feast in fall.
At the Conference in Delhi
how I filch
credit for the Rockies,
my warm host beams
"how you say, from Canada, eh? No?"
C'est moi
international poster. Seducer.

But on rooftop the dance is round/an elephant's gait
 and milk poured on dreams
 to placate Gods
 there are dreams on rooftops
 heavy as thighs.

A mustard veil sails by
 romance is flushed bangles
 windy giddy with colour
 clutches another veil
 pink as restless feet.
 A rainbow tangle
 on rooftop
 and
 one slender flute.

Readerji, the flute reminds me of the mercury dancer in the gym, dancing alone. She has thin collar bones ... doomed, exiled. And like the flute, apart. The slender flute is Krishna's mistress. But Krishna is Radha's. Her devotion to him, torrential. On the rooftop all know without Radha there is no Krishna. So what if he is a God? Yet it is the bamboo mistress who shares the intimacy of his breath.

Story of flute on rooftop:
 She is flute
 sealed between her lover's grasp
 (a lover's grasp
 tough as mother's womb)
 the lover has forgotten
 other shapes. All.
 "That kept one"
 Radha sniffs.

Everyone knows
 without his Radha
 there is Krishna
Radha bina Kanu nahi
 but even Radha
 said to her Kanu
 "tear that wretched bamboo
 from your mouth"
 and place *her* at your foot.

Bamboo flute/other/eternally
 torn from siblings
 holed in peak flesh
 for one beloved's breath.
 When he billows inside her
 her breast holes sting
 she reels
 higher than bells

such is romance
 out of rooftops
 full of tears succulent.
 It is on rooftops
 a lover is made
 most perfect
 then pressed behind eyes
 and winds on rooftops
 sweeter than Chinook.

A bride draws a map:
 Don't know why

I turn shy
 when my *sakhi* tells me.
 On Campus
 our backs turned, slunk
 from starers, joggers
 thighs pressed in secrecy
 she shows me his photograph:
 he wears an earring
 collects Sher-Gill
 (from now on we call him Sher-Gill *wallah*).

romance, romance, romance

Walking across the snow field
 after 3 bottles of cheap vino
 my *sakhi* and I holler hot words
 a pile up:
 your brother-fucker
 from your
 mother's sister's side
 mathematical intoxication/freedom
 romance is loving yourself thick
 and
 come home to serve tea
 to guests from Edmonton
 one, a world-wide matchmaker
 her coast-to-coast including
 Punjab, UK, Amrika (that's
 how she says it)

home base: Canada
wobbly hips
but eyes like planted feet.

Like parents
we want them
full of science:
fed on doctors and engineers
day one in Canada.

Immigrant dream
persistent as polyester pants
straight to laundromat from school
on birthdays
no funny socks with lipstick kisses
but university fertility
now a double-barrelled passport to freedom
an East Indian's frontier.

This one's not bad
a lawyer who collects Sher-Gill paintings
not the earnest engineer
living room full of drilling manuals.

But there is another bride who turns bitter:
Great lakes on her palm
at the Delhi Conference I strut
her Rockies personally as breasts.
Her family tea with monarchy
postcard Mounties

1st of July...

Readerji

this familiar postcard map

but I draw another

of Canada, a bride.

She is an arranged wife

selected by her immigrant husband

landing her "...unsizeable virginity"

someone wrote

sturdy haunches and a lush dowry

North bride asks:

(Readerji, I map her pain

on rooftop space.)

Never to ask me, ME

an arranged wife

your hostile giving

to my dowry

a dark blue passport

(my immigrant husband

no longer shuffles

in Third World queue)

Dominant husband

(immigrant in name)

between you and I

egg shell virginity

mosaic hymen.

A woman looks down

one hefty foot
 on the boundary
 of her rooftop
 bellows to pale northern bride
 in adjacent verandah
 "what you cooking?"

I have a rooftop here

I swear

bracketed, dreamy:

(Trudeau or Pierre? Shy choice. But I fetch you
 [collars dashed up] green trench coat, colour of powered henna
 in the pink city of Jaipur. Red rose).

*Readerji, my sakhi has gone to the tailor's for wedding measurements. The limbs are
 differently thick now, that's why we call them wedding measurements.*

Sher-Gill wallah's mum says to my sakhi:

I *laav* you

her *moi* full of french shoulders

not like "my" in English: lukewarm at the same time possessive

Punjabi-French *moi*: a burst

heart/soil/chipped nail/rose

ooi moi changi-girl, moi soni-girl

all jaunty praise in Punjabi

but I *laav* you

Sher-Gill *wallah's* mum says in English

and

sakhi and Sher-Gill *wallah*

continue their romance:

"you are my *kiker* tree's shadow so cool"

"you are my tube-well's sweet, sweet water"

"you are my canola flower."

"Oh my buffalo's manure." (Mushy *sakhi* bored)

Why their romance in a Punjabi field not in prairie snow?

A pale bride who accused her husband:

Between you and I

egg shell virginity

mosaic hymen

Not always, dear bride:

I left a love note on a birch bark

beside your fallen hairpin.

I know of spring flowers,

not Kamasutran laden

but crocuses and buffalo beans

growing out of the armpit

of a brown prairie spring

whose murky colour like *Guruji's* eye

warming in pleasure

snow gone soft these days

old-timers tell me

but I don't let go of

winter boots till early May.

I laav you sakhi:

At her wedding I give *sakhi* an exiled flute

familiar landscape in a woman's map

milk-tipped strawberries (gods must be placated)

Many greet her milk and son wishes

I heap baroque henna:

Sakhi, sakhi salut

here's an uncircumscribed rooftop

unending as a hairline

restless feet

full of Saturday Night dreams.

Heating the Heart of the Matter²⁷

²⁷Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1989) 1.

Had Noorjahan taken a linear approach to explain how one of the birds escaped, their subject-Ruler relationship would have prevailed. Emperor Jahangir would have punished her for such carelessness. However, Noorjahan waffles with cunning, "heats" things her way.

I want to write about not conveying a clear thought. It is true, I do not know how to pursue the cultivation of conveying an unclouded thought.

Follow Instructions:

- 1) First, hoe.
- 2) Then a dry packet of seeds, followed by rain water.
- 3) In absence of rain water, proceed to ungate dam water.

Yes, there is this way, which is precise, controlled, and technological. But to insist, this is the only way to cultivate, is domination. It endangers me. You see, I cultivate by suppression.

Are not domination and suppression the same thing? Yes . . . no, maybe not. Like the *Dam-wallah*, initially, I am also confused. But soon thereafter, we part ways. The *Dam-wallah* wants clarity: I must respond by a check-mark in either the "Yes" or "No" slot. There is no slot provided for wafflers. The *Dam-wallah* insists I not dialogue in a manner unconfined to slotting. Exasperated by my sulky retreat from slot commitment, he checks out my credentials.

Deviation: Trinh T. Minh-ha writes:

Never does one open the discussion by coming right to the heart of the matter. . . . people approach it [heart of the matter] indirectly by postponing until it matures."²⁸

However, the *Dam-wallah* is incapable of understanding that when I shuffle or waffle, I am actively heating the "heart of the matter." Instead, this is how I am read on the *Dam-wallah's* computer: (*positive green blinkers flash*)

"valid, licence to unconfirm."

(*explanation*)

"writer from the margins . . ."

(*green blinkers*)

"season of the margins" (*blink, blink*) "let her be merry."

²⁸Minh-ha 1.

This is how the *Dam-wallah* organises me. He calls me Other. He is the Centre. He calls me Third World. He is First World.

The *Dam-wallah* insists on how I dialogue. He slicks me into linearity when my shape is womb-*Om*. He defines/culminates/presses me into a catalogue/category/coolie/condiment. "Cut", says the director *Dam-wallah*, when I do not actress-coo Third World, as set out by the First World. (Readerji, why the frown? Third World is everywhere these days: computer screen, Hollywood screen, Toronto glitz. Heck, it is our season!)

The truth is what does the *Dam-wallah* know about me? That my speech sings (*gayati*). My speech protects (*trayate*). I come from Prajapati, who creates. When she sings she is Gayatri. But in the *Dam-wallah*-centric land, I have been granted a season. Gayatri is housed in a museum. The *Dam-wallah* is a damn, fine collector.

Pssssss--Cultivate by suppression, forsake the obvious:

When I was young, my grandmother rubbed my hair with coconut oil and like an ancient Chinese master repeated over and over again, "Toast your eye on the invisible, all visible is cataract vision."

Suppression is magic because it is suggestive.

Domination is linear/clear/subjection.

Trinh T. Minh-ha writes:

Clear expression, often equated with *correct* expression, has long been the criterion set forth in treatises on *rhetoric* whose aim was to order discourse so as to *persuade* . . . clarity as a purely rhetorical attribute serves the purpose of a classical feature in language, namely, its instrumentality . . . to *mean* and to send out *an* unambiguous message. The language of Taoism and Zen, for example, which is perfectly accessible but rife with paradox does not qualify "clear" (paradox is "illogical" and "nonsense" to many Westerners), for its intent lies outside the realm of persuasion . . . Obscurity is an imposition on the reader. True, but beware when you cross railroad tracks for one train

may hide another train. Clarity is a means of subjection, a quality both of official, taught language and of correct writing, two old mates of power: together they flow, vertically, to impose an order.²⁹

The Dam-wallah asks me: "If there is no water, how will your crops grow?" My cultivation thrives on paradoxical bliss. There is a Rajasthani proverb:

ammar rachyo

me machyo

If the sky turns crimson-red

it will rain heavily.³⁰

But for my crops, the sun comes down personally, doing away with the messenger, the crimson-red sky. The sun wears fiery red anklets, dances on my crops. My crops bloom because they are in love with the sun and mistake its fiery red for water. There is an Indian legend that the moonsical moony *chakor*-partridge eats blistering coals, mistaking them for moon fragments.

Once again, the Dam-wallah's rationality.

"Impossible, how can one eat what one loves? Don't take me for a ride!"

"My moon-eyes, *I am* taking you for a ride! Paradoxical reading compels that one jump off the edge. Then realises the other shore. Jump! "

But trust me my Dam-wallah-ji, I shall not cheat you unless you are the peck-pecking tourist on the streets of New Delhi, for quicky tourist consumption. Let us, you and me, back-up to your rigid, "How can one eat what one loves?" Better still, meet Sara's Granny-*amaa* in *Meatless Days*. This *Dadimaa's* penchant for Allah and

Food, too, could move her intensities. Her eyesight always took a sharp turn for the worse over meals -- she could point hazily at a perfectly ordinary potato and murmur with Adamic reverence "What is it, what is it called? With some shortness of manner one of us

²⁹Minh-ha 16-17.

³⁰D. R. Ahuja, "Riddles, Proverbs and Sayings," *Folklore of Rajasthan* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1980) 161.

would describe and catalog the items on the table. "*Alu ka bhartha*," Dadi repeated with wonderment and joy; "Yes, Saira Begum, you can put some here." "Not too much," she'd add pleadingly. For ritual had it that the more she demurred, the more she expected her plate to be piled with an amplitude her own politeness would never allow³¹

Readerji, where am I? You see, the *Dam-wallah* interrupts our text constantly, compelling me to digress. Not digress in a movement sense but in a red light sense. Stop! Explain! So, I write and explain first for the *Dam-wallah's* benefit, why my crops blooms in absence of water. Sadly, I implement what Audre Lorde warned me of: "This is an old and primary tool [unpacking/explaining everything the Centre's way] of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns."³²

Let me experiment without interruption:

That poetics, or call it writing, is *au natural*, moving with invisible connection, even no connection, tripping, falling, leaving, merging, doubling, forgetting. Readerji, watch me trip. Look no hands!

(Warning: I do not know where I will land -- an experiment):

My teacher Fywed sends me a burp across the page/table. Poet Roberta (I call Robbie) is one-and-a-half years old. Her neighbour Fywed lets her pee in her pants, right on the street. No slotting/scolding. Both Fyweds give. "AND / here / and here / and here . . ."³³ *Aspro dawa ya kweli!* Aspro the honest medicine! Whenever Robbie and I become too excited, we get a headache.

Robbie: "I think it is coming. Yours?"

Me: "Another half an hour."

³¹Sara Suleri, *Meatless Days* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago P., 1989) 3.

³²Audre Lorde, as quoted in Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman Native Other*, 85.

³³Phyllis Webb, "Naked Poems," *The Vision Tree: Selected Poems* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1982) 66.

But with Mister Dam, it is a teeth-pulling headache.

Warning Readerji--paradox advancing: with Dam-wallah, it is both a teeth-pulling headache and a love headache for I cannot abandon him. Because he brought me here, to big rich country. Maybe you can "heat" this question, yourself. Right now, I am busy with two crazies: *Masta-Dam-wallah* who organises even the rice in my mouth, "Eat with fork not with hand," and the loony-bin *chakor* eating fiery coal. Both, full moon crazy. One day, I read that words are cow dung, anyway. (*End of experiment*).

But Readerji,

How far am I allowed to slip and slide?

The Dam-wallah has paid my bride price.

I am still under the Dam-wallah's colonial rule. I, the Other, cannot stain my poetics raw. Like perspire and sweat (am not allowed to sweat), my poetics are hued, never stained. The Dam-wallah loathes bad smell. Remember, I am the Dam-wallah's condiment/exotic. Ours is a scrizo relationship: sometimes I am his coolie /

sometimes I am his condiment.

From my margin homeland, a wise mother points her finger at me: *mama* bell accuses me of "passive acceptance of commodification."³⁴ as set out by the Dam-wallah, my cultural overseer. That I aid his sell: I, his coolie / I, his condiment. Then baba (*mama* hooks' grandmother) says, "play with a puppy he'll lick you in the mouth," which means not allowing Dam-wallah folk get too close, then they want to take over. But I also practice my Grandmother's saying: "Kill a snake in such a way that the snake dies and stick remains unbroken." I am married to the Dam-wallah. He has paid my bride price. A blue passport. At red stops, I forward explanations; a colonized wife's duty. Outward, I practice *aruba*, Imam Ghazali sermon. Doesn't matter if the sermon is out of eleventh century. That a woman's wifely duty is to feel like making love with her husband because she loves him. (Very complicated to

³⁴bell hooks, "Liberation Scenes: Speak This Yearning," *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Vancouver: Between the Lines, 1990) 4.

unpack, maybe sly Imam knows it is hard for a woman to love (I)Patriarch-Husband). But my condiment tongue which is the only language my Dam-wallah hears, is also rife with paradox. It allows me to heat the heart of the matter and to waffle with cunning. (Readerji, there is no sin being open minded and cunning at the same time.) This way, I resist slotting/slaughter in my marriage. My content is so transparent that it moves unhindered. Let me explain.

Resisting slotting/slaughter:

In "Lakshmi" an East Indian woman celebrates *Diwali* (Festival of Lights) at Mrs. Gola's, a woman she meets for the first time in New Delhi. Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth and indulgence. She is especially worshipped on *Diwali*. Rest of the year, she is worshipped as Lord Vishnu's consort. Behind him. At the bottom of the Ocean, she is by Vishnu's feet, pressing his legs. Males like their women to model Lakshmi *ma*. She is a paragon of womanly virtues and giddy-lotto wealth. The worshippers lust after her and Lakshmi always gives and gives and gives.

Lakshmi sits on a lotus. Plentiful, ample. Forever, turns a blind eye. Never mind. She is like *barwa-raga*. *Raga* which soothes both bird and serpent. She is feathery kind. She will say never mind. bp Nichol kind. And like bp, her back burns. The worshippers are eating her up. Her worshippers do not know that Lakshmi is sick. That they have polluted her back with greed. Now Lakshmi has an ozone back.

Mrs. Gola's plight is the same. Another Lakshmi giver. Since the day she becomes a bride, she is effaced with a barrage of honour. She is slandered with honour. Slotted. Paradigm of a good woman in Lord Vishnu and Buddha's society.

When a bride enters the door's entrance. Halt. That arch in her limbs is loosened, removed. Now henna and sandalwood paste are wanton heat. One day, she hands over her black thing (magazine desires, scent). Her lap now piled with keys, rice, money and turbans. Only she can fill turbans with honour. The turbans, stretched out like alm bowls. The colours of the alm bowls make her giddy. Yellow,

pink, red, mustard. Her *Padshah*-Poseidon-*Pathi*-Husband and tall Bhima-sons' worshipping saliva, acidic. Makes holes in her meat. The woman-traveller is wary to label her "mother." She practices refrainment by calling her *Didi*, mother's sister, never mother.

"Why not?" (*Readerji-Dam-wallah* duet).

If she does this, she refines *Didi's* complexity. Your frown clears, your duet too. Instant satisfaction, digestion, "Sure I can relate to this, I have a mother!" This is why she thicks her tongue careful, heaves it with cunning, removing mother, inserting mother's sister. This way, the *Dam-wallah*-Reader is compelled to stop (for a change), and meditate about daughter and *Didi's* relationship, as several kinds exist.

I am sharp on paper but not in action, "Gently-gently, Husband-mine," I say to *Dam-wallah*. Core rule: never defy my husband but *my content is so transparent, it moves unhindered:*

Mrs. Gola has tall Bhima-sons. She lacks nothing. Honour, wealth and men. How can she ask for a daughter? Mrs. Gola finds a way.

. . . *Didi's* still wish. So still, it is stolen. Still-stolen. Stealthily, she gives her birth. Still and alive. Out of the reach of Buddha or Shiva or Vishnu, any sneerer who questions, "How can she want Eve?"

In the fleshy recess of her zenana sex, an obvious place (is it?) a dull protein glints . . . *Didi's* content so transparent it moves unhindered in the bazaar republic. Buddha does not know. Shiv does not know. That *Didi's* daughter grows in her womb for thirty-five years. Now daughter lights the lamps, one by one, behind Gola Market. Lakshmi rests.

Like Buddha and Shiva in the story, the *Dam-wallah's* control over me is pseudo, a mirage. My thick layered speech, where I waffle with cunning is a communication, *Dam-wallah* cannot usurp--he is innocent of such speech. Like my Grandmother says, "Allah, your husband's palm so vacant, unlined as a baby's bum!"

When I occupy the "hibiscus weather," my husband gets mad! He can't stand my meandering and leaving things until tomorrow. But I have never grasped linearity. Even as I do the dishes, I let the dishes soak, sweep the kitchen, phone

Warning to Readerji and Dam-wallah:

And, don't ask me, "but like Robbie is white, eh?"

Samaam-luggage of
of a bride
of a *Mujahideen* of a

nomad

"If there is no vacancy, how can I be emotional?"

Yellow thermos on wall. Is it a wall? Yes. Solid. Three saris hang from a rope in a four by six camp space, also sleep and kitchen. Salt in Fairex tin. Fairex picture of flee tubby baby. Ropes above to hang saris. Can't walk erect, ropes in the way. In-between story, woman keeps to herself. In-between story, Sushma keeps to herself. On skin surface, talk of bread and eggs, how are you? "If there is no vacancy, how can I be emotional?" asks Sushma. She wears black *dupatta*, not out of mourning ("If there is no vacancy, how can I be emotional?"). Sushma, twenty-six. We talk in four by six camp. Cramp.

Sushma's home is Anantnag in Kashmir. Fled to Delhi in a *phiran*. Sushma, Kashmiri Pundit. Only a transit camp, been here two years up. This camp really a wedding hall. She and I cramp on a ramp. Sushma, brother and *Bhabhi* with two children live on the stage. High up here, bride and groom sat on red satin chairs with museum heavy gold arm handles.

This story not about Article 370 preserves rights of Kashmiris within Indian Union. Distinct society. Only Kashmiris can buy property in Kashmir status. Article 370 big papa guardian. This is sideline story. About woman and war. About Kashmiris. Now in Delhi. Flee Kashmir. So many ways to say Delhi: "Dilhi," like I say it on Janpath. Or show off at a Calgary Reading, "Not Delhi, say Dilhi, all in the mouth. A French kiss." Kashmiris stress "h," *Deh*-li. Insignificant detail, this waffling. One Kashmiri to me, "You know, we are fighting a war?" No trivia. Kashmiri Muslims, Kashmiri Pundits (call them Pundits, not Hindus) escape, leave behind property, home, dreams. Grave of brother, mother, unmarried sister, husband, crusty without water, attention. Leave. Talk of incense and flowers aside, many don't wait until

forty days to moisten grave, period of mourning complete, free grief, adieu departed soul, Allah be with you. Pundit not fulfilled *sraddha* of rice and fruit (rotting in room) to parted relative, flee now! Jammu or Delhi. Now! Truck at three in the morning.

Pundit woman parts with heirloom gold, in her keep these years, pass on to daughter, daughter-in-law. Pay driver in gold. Rupees, fit to wipe ass. Toilet paper money. Woman first parts with her *dejihoru*, symbol of marriage. Severs herself:

tulsi/*kumkum*/ *mangalsutra*/wedding ring/*kum*-cherish-*kum*

then lineage of family gold. Most unselfish in war, most insignificant in war, woman. Naturally driver demands enormous fee (rupees, fit to wipe ass) for gamble. Here driver, my *dejihoru* first.

"When there is no vacancy, how can I get emotional?"

I stay with Syed, Kashmiri Muslim, on hand knotted carpet covered with white sheet (no talking). No chair or separate room to eat. Cramp. On *Idd*, we eat on the bed, picnic, but (no talking). If you talk and eat, show no respect for food. "It is *risak*, you know?" Am told. At Sushma's, on wall beside yellow thermos, hangs a rice *shup* to clean uncooked rice. *Shup*! I recognize. Not just straw like other baskets, but tightened with bamboo. Delhi-government-Centre not this hostess friendly, "We spread our eyes for refugees. Here is even *shup* for your rice-*bhat*." *Samaan*-luggage puzzle, this *shup* in Delhi.

Cooked rice silver oval tray. Reverent pat / touch, Kashmiris pat stemming mound on plate (no talking). One mouthful, two mouthfuls. Add mutton curry, leafy *chak* (like spinach) on side (no talking), but mutton curry so good! (no talking). Foot-ruler backs, head bent. Sunflower with bent head. Fold *bhat* with fingers and thumb. Ball of rice like *tres* french bun, lift to mouth. Chic morsel. *Shup* is as Kashmiri as charcoal *kangri*-basket under *phiran*-dress in winter. Sushma laughs, "I tucked our *shup* under my *phiran* before I got on the truck."

Governor of Kashmir from Delhi-Centre with his hands-on opinion that tent like Kashmiri *phiran* accommodates weapons with ease.

As if people do not flee in *phirans*. Sushma flees to Delhi in her *phiran*, blanket warm and loose. Any sensible traveller utilizes baggy power.

No talk. Not extend leg. Perfunctory rituals as marigolds in temple. Ritual only: no talk; not extend leg. Catch *risak* essence-*chi* in bowed head and spine and rice navel centre (*Kalashnikov, hand grenade, rubber slippers, woman's drawstrings jerked*). In presence of this *risak* of rice, I un-read Lal Ded. Kashmir's Granny Lal. Not apple cheeks like pound cake love, jam with checked-red scarf. Mystic Lal roamed naked but first endured (severe/*dejihoru*) mother-in-law gave Lal streaming *bhat* mounded over stone, a plateful of rice. Hungry Lal, no utter. Till now I eat white rice only when unwell, wobbly stomach or summer cold. But now, head bent, now one mouthful, two mouthfuls, *bismillah risak* tender white, read rice, white flower. (*Indian Forces cordon-off women. Into field, interrogation. Unknot drawstrings. Now!*)

Legs crossed, neck, no talking.

Sushma tells me Children song:

*loaves of tsot for picnic or ill
my belly sleeps on mound of bhat.*

Eat Stones

And smell of roses. At first, Gawhur does not tell. Photograph of large man with singed beard. Sweater gray and beige. Bits of cheek like animal hide, leathery. Nothing by side but arm plonked on invisible pillow. His face asleep but features in motion of lift up, eyelids, tip of ears, nostrils, forehead vapour. Something above, pulling up. *Mujahideen*, Q-tip quiet. Gawhur smiles. He is Gawhur's heart, *jaani/yaar/pal*. Indian soldiers kill *mujahideen*, burn parts of him. Such strong smell of roses from *mujahideen's* body, cannot keep from spreading. Kashmiris in gullys and *mohalla* watch . . . as soon as the Indian dogs leave. The soldiers split in speed (expect rubbery flesh not roses) lets get out of here, entire *mohalla* comes out, "Roses in winter?" "Where?" "Where?" "Roses in winter?" "Like *janat*, this smell," Gawhur says, smells fingers again. Roses sink in his sweater, fingers. For Gawhur, his *mujahideen-jaani* in *janat*-heaven. *Jaani / janat*. Rose splashes. Sweater (his) luggage, fleeing with Gawhur, Srinagar-Delhi, Delhi-Srinagar. Will wear sweater only when Kashmir, *azaad*-free. Rose splashes. Won't leave it in Srinagar. What if his house cordoned-off by Indian forces?

Phone up woman in Delhi (from a Bangalore contact). Phone her (I am told), works with women all over. In touch with women. But woman in Delhi advises that Kashmiri woman not right one to speak to, not really *the* person, only follow brother, husband, father to Delhi. Woman in Delhi not a clue, not a clue of woman invaded, of her in-between story she keeps to herself, or roping up her paining breasts. Driver, take my *dejihoru*, get us out quick, *baas*, my family safe. Woman no history in war.

"When there is no vacancy, how can I be emotional?"

How to make Sunil leave? Says, "How can government protect her suitcase," (like Sushma not here) "When her body-soul, government doesn't protect, lady body, lady mother." (Sushma just looking down.) This "lady" "lady" and knows Sushma's *samaan* more than her, spirit of man/authority uncle. So I touch her earring-*balis* and cordon-off woman space. "Not *balis*," Sushma says, "*balis*, so old-old, we say, circles." Put my satchel between Sunil and us, in girl-talk space, our rooftop. Sunil's face not happy, he looks at his watch, no time to waste (us earring yakkers *ghup-shuping* when war is on). In Calgary, when I drive nervous because of impatient car behind me, overheated rouge in my car, but this time, (first time), don't change lane. Sit cool on a woman ramp/rooftop. Sunil tailgates narrow, then takes off, "Give me a break, lady!"

Under, under question, hardly planned, just blurt, "How are you, Sushma?" Sushma catches/connects, not egg and bread stuff, but catches under, under. She and me on rooftop, woman place. How are you in a transit camp (*In Anantnag, I have television and tape-recorder in my room, fling coat on a chair*) unmarried at twenty-six, this is not Canada (*pinches me. Anantnag, we have land, my dowry in land, but here . . . pinches me, people ask. Can't they see?*) You scream in four by six suitcase?

"If there is no vacancy, how can I be emotional?"

Sushma wears black *dupatta*. Today off-duty from work and to dust and *jarru* four by six space. Go out with friends? Guards reputation with hard eyes.

"At the washing site, I talk to others but short, what you cook today or what we have cooked."

Sushma tells me every man in camp, her brother. Smiles in uniform attire of office receptionist. Sunil got her job. When Sunil meets Syed, they drink *kehwa*, comes home. Next day phones Syed, donate small black and white TV to the camp. Tells him, "Good for your reputation in a Pundit hide-out, *yaar*."

At the camp Sunil calls me Madam Ladha. Yasmin name easy give away, "If they know you are Muslim, matter finished, *khalas*, they clam up." And Sushma, when she comes to know? Will she pull a *kambal* over her and go to sleep?

"If there is no vacancy, how can I be emotional?"

Tells me she is very frank. Means more than just straight forward. Means not give wrong impression to boys. And brave. "Even when I was five, did not like *Kaka* to take me school. " Means sturdy, "Whenever I have tension, I cover myself with *kambal* and go off to sleep."

Oranges and walnuts, only ask *Kaka*. In Delhi, one egg two rupees, bread ten rupees, government gives five hundred per month to Pundit refugee family. Fruits and nuts brought to her room. Flung coat on chair. Smiles, "I tell my brother, if we live in Delhi, give full-time to children. I have lived for twenty-six years in my own home, *aram sai*." (*Pinches me when they ask . . .*) But magical Sunil. Fixer. Crude saying in Hindi: goods here, put there
 goods there, put here

works!

Sunil, always on the look out: job for refugee youth, search for Sushma's groom, on look out for TV donation, sacks of rice. Camp gets noisy when he arrives. Bussle, bazaar, life. Sunil, my hero in war.

Fehmida *Didi*.

Not aunty! Won't call her that! Someone older then call her aunty in metropolis Delhi, Bombay, Bangalore. Modern. But easier, much easier to call her husband, Mr. Hafiz. Call her aunty then also the headache to call him uncle, and he takes over. Big Man authority and I outside polite revert to "May I buy this, do this?" permission, and his uncle power on steady rise, "Don't go to temple, whatever for?" or too much Koran--Allah, this and this on women--the Holy Prophet (peace upon him), this and this on women, blah, blah, blah. I call women older to me, *Didi*, mother's sister. This way, I don't have to go through male to seek woman connection.

Fehmida *Didi*:

"In our marriages, bride and groom come later. First a treasured *manzimyore*, this go-between so skilful, light as air yet fibre hardy in pul-pulling detail bits (*mega-bytes*). Otherwise it is his neck. In Kashmir, we admire the dexterity of a *manzimyore*. Even at home, not yet gone over to the other party, *manzimyore* as discriminatory, "'Sire,' he will address Mr. Hafiz, 'a bulbul has lighted on the stem of this flower,' meaning, 'Sire, there is a speck of *bhat* on your beard.'"

Each day, wedding coming close and close, bride massaged with *chamaili* flower oil and bath (Camomile?). Now only two days, dressed in yellow, hair braided tiny, tiny plaits, shiny colour bead and butterfly picked and braided along. Giggles in flushed room. Friends around her, *samaan* of bride, nail varnish, comb, power, musk, kohl,

rubber bands (they don't say elastics) ribbons and lipstick. Fehmida *Didi* says,
 "Small, small things." Luggage of adornment.

"Then one by one, each braid opened by friend, with suggestive song."

"What sort of song, *Didi*?"

"Suggestive, like young emotional . . ."

"Do you remember a song?"

"Allah, this is young people business!"

A Mujahideen's *samaan*:

AK-47, Kalashnikov, Koran, wireless set, coffin, petals

Song:

"*Cheen Ke Lenge Azaadi*"

"Snatch we will our Freedom"

A bride in yellow listens to songs, shiny head down. Butterflies. *Kehwa* of *bambay chai*, sugar, cardamon and slivers of almond, blanched (nothing rough). Bride listens to suggestive song. Palms, rhythm. Song, songs. Toes cold but pleasure.

Friend of hand is weapon

Hand is *Haat*

Friend is *Yaar*

Hatyaaar is weapon

Bride wears silver filigreed shoes. Only seen photographs, heels like Dorothy's red magical shoes. Filigreed.

(*Pinches me . . .*)

Beauty means *sushma*. Most beautiful thing Sushma says, "If there is no vacancy, how can I be emotional?" Pain of women all over:

A woman's intestines rope her own breasts

translated:

"If there is no vacancy, how can I be emotional?"

Fehmida *Didi*:

"Our third son is married in Delhi. No, she is not Kashmiri. We are marrying outside now. Everyone, scattered. Then also, don't want my son to die. Better to get out. But it isn't the same, like we had to bring the proposal ourselves. At home, *samaan* of gifts carried to other house by the *manzimyore*. From family, elder brother or uncle accompanies the *manzimyore*. Mr. Hafiz does not go, *nai*, not the father. Here in Delhi, things distributed naked, in congregation, for everyone to see, as if gifts of union, one big *tamasha*. Such is Delhi way.

Suitcase to travel. Suitcase to dream. (*Sun glasses-beach, Sun-glass, rifle.*)

Is my nomadicism in excess? In Srinagar, Indian forces finish use of building. Base, hated object of Kashmiri Muslims, burn the place! evil base to loot from, harass, kill (fresh graves ready at Idgah) and women right in front of children, father's eyes. *Mujahideens* burn building. Point of no-return. One way travel. Indian soldiers forever from building. Victory. We will snatch our freedom! *Azaadi, Azaadi*. If you

want to stay in Kashmir, then Kalashnikov in hand and heart in Allah. Loudspeakers blare out of mosque.

Is my nomadicism excess? Perhaps Kashmiris brand me stupid Ratun. Whenever things done in excess, stupid, stupid servant, Ratun. Kashmiris say.

One day, Ratun's master, collector, stops and asks chief farmer for *dal*. Farmer, anxious-anxious in collector's good books, gives brother Ratun, one hundred and ninety-two pounds of *dal*. Stupid Ratun cooks all *dal*. Mighty feast, steaming *dal* in thirty earthen pots.

You know, we are fighting a war? Talk of earrings and irresponsible travel. Stupid Ratun writer.

When I nomad, have all the "vacancy" in the world. Drop something, pick something, this way impregnate myself, no outside sperm (or uncle) just hydra out of my body. When mad, then just turn my tent East, close flap. (No talking.)

Isn't lingam like upturned breast? Even mountain, like upturned breast? Once upon a time, saint promises to worship Shiv, three hours up and worship, three hours up and worship. Falls in love (not with Shiv) with dancing girl (Cinderellas-princes, Indian saints-temptresses). Anyway time of prayer all of sudden, saint unprepared. But look-looking at his lover's upturned breast, reminded of Shiv's lingam. On warm woman lingam, applies *kumkum* and sandalwood paste. Story dwindles when story-writer (stupid Ratun) rushes to catch Shiv and lingam, fix them together, like dancing girl's breast, three holes (which saint doesn't see before) match fit-o-fit Shiv's three eyes . . . tedious, *da da dum, da da dum, da da dum . . .dum*.

Wherever to rest, I plant temporary post. No gully been soulless to me, like Delhi to Sushma, "With gun, what guarantee maybe militants rise again. But if I can't go back, I won't settle in Jammu, Dogras are hostile. If we have to live in Delhi, I tell brother, concentrate on kids. At least I have lived twenty-six years in my own home, *aram sai*."

Or veiled woman in Berlin. Speaks German, French, English, Japanese and Arabic. Even dress by Chanel. But no job. It's her *chadar*-veil. You have no space here. English women wear them, not veils, "clouds." Vogue.

Syed's Mama scolds me. "Why don't you wear *balis* in your ears?" But I am hip like Sushma, "Circles Mama," I say.

Khaliq works and work and works. He too out of Kashmir. During day, works in Syed's rug store. At night, cooks for us. His spinach not Indian spicy. Surprised. Tells me *chak* and spinach not cooked spicy in Kashmir, only potatoes.

"Why potatoes?"

"Because I don't know."

Has a thicket of freckles on his nose.

I don't have a hat box (Hat lady in Banker's Hall said, "buy a box," "buy a box", polka hat-box) so I leave my hat at the foot of bed (big bed). Whenever Syed not around, Khaliq in leisure smoke. Comes in room, dons on my straw hat (blue ribbons), sun glasses from window sill. His body twitches in position. Ready. Slump-an-jerk with scccoop-up shrug

"*Hai, kahan hai Michael Jackson ki atman?*"

"*Hai*, where is Michael Jackson's soul?"

On Zee TV, we see Michael hitting his crotch. Politely Khaliq and I not look at each other.

I am also go-between. *Manzimyore*, between Kashmiri Pundit, Kashmiri Muslim. Carry the *samaan* of dialogue between them.

Gifts of marriage.

Sunil: No faith between us. When my mother can go buy vegetables with faith at the Habba Khadal bridge, then I will believe. That I will return to Srinagar.

Fehmida *Didi*: Without Pundits, I feel like orphan, like, there is only half a pot of *bhat*.

Sunil: Our birth-rate is decreasing. Our death-rate is increasing. We have our own Ganga and Kashi in Kashmir, our own *vedas*, *shastras*. Kashmir, my home.

Mr. Hafiz: Delhi government, that fucking salt-snatcher says this is cultural exchange. Our papier mache, now in Agra. Houseboats, Kashmir-*ki*-houseboats, you read in today's paper? will be built and encouraged in Simla. The government robbing us of *bhat*, moving tourists there. Saffron, best saffron is from our Valley, now being grown in Himachal Pradesh. Carpets in Jaipur. The fucking salt-snatcher will drive us out of our graves in Idgah. Indian dogs!

Probe, June, '93.³⁵ "Tellingly, the "martyrs' cemetery" at Idgah in Srinagar even has graves of a two-and-a-half year child and a 105-year-old man. But the majority of those buried there were in the age group of 18-30 years."

Sushma: What's to celebrate? No we don't celebrate Diwali. At home, we celebrated birthdays. Wore new clothes. Cooked good food.

Yasmin: Today, *Idd*. After *namaaz*, Syed's Mama wears *kameez-salwar*, surprise gift from me. Does not even think of disappointing me but spreads her eyes for guest. No one else new clothes. All day, sit on bed. Lots of phone calls but no visitors. Syed tells me in Kashmir, *Idd* not stop for days, so many people to visit, return home first thing, puts his feet in warm water. On bed, there is lot of food in new utensils: *rogan josh*, seasoned *bhat*, plain *bhat*, kebabs, spinach, *kehwa*, chicken, *tandoori* chicken, *nan*, butter milk, pastries, salted cookies, yogurt, mangoes, grapes, water melons, and *mithai* from the Bengal Sweet Shop (eat everything with silver under-foil.)

Pundit professor: Article 370 must go. India is father. He has spoilt son, who cries and weeps. More he cries, more he gets. Tell me, if Mohammed Bashir can buy property in Delhi, why can't Ram Prasad buy property in Kashmir? It is this Article causing so much problem of separatism. You get me, sister?

³⁵Shahid A Chaudhary, "Kashmir: Are We Losing The Fight," *Probe* XV.4 (New Delhi, June 1993): 9.

Yasmin

(sipping Limca): "Sunil, want to hear standard joke, Mira Nair tells? Does she live in Kampala, Los Angeles, Delhi, London?" She says, "On Air India."

World is very big, when you start discussing, world is very small.

(Sunil)

I find out Sunil's sister only three hours away in Edmonton.

"You have some *samaan* I can take for her?"

Syed tells me bed time-story:

Baba Dawood, Kashmiri suffi saint. Wets his forefinger with his *lavb* and heals. Sometimes, recites *ayat* from *Koran* and blows on patient's forehead. Every day, so many visitors, invitations upon invitations for meals, *Baba, Baba, Baba*. More and more *dawaats* and more and more his health goes finished. One day, power *khalas*. *Baba* asks farmer, "Brother, anything wrong with the land?"

"Where have you been eating, *Baba*?"

Farmer gets answer he expects, "Then *Baba* has been eating *haraam*." Each places *Baba* Dawood visits, unknowing eats under the table earnings, body pollute. *Baba* lost in thought goes higher up into mountains, realizes he is very hungry. Just as he approaches a weaver's hut, he sees they are ready to eat their meal of soupy rice. Weaver asks his wife to bring third bowl.

First spoon that *Baba* eats brings back his powers.

Baba says, "The rest, *maarifat*." (Magnificent?)

In one act of aggression, the collective spirit of women and of the nation is broken, leaving a reminder long after the troops depart. And if she survives the assault, what does the victim of wartime rape become to her people.³⁶

Fehmida *Didi* phones that Kashmiri Muslim woman raped doesn't want to talk, "Tell her, I am nothing now but an open coffin." Much later I dare. Dare to ask question. I know answer, already. Fehmida *Didi* shakes her head, "No, no one will marry her." "But in Islam, even our divorcees and widows marry, I mean only modern thing in our religion, *Didi*, so why . . ."

"They say one who is raped been well chewed on, like a bone."

"If there is no vacancy, how can I . . .?"

Fehmida *Didi* has an unmarried son in America. Maybe her son and this woman...
(*Back off, Yasmin.*)

(*Pinches me . . .*)

³⁶Susan Brownmiller, "Making Female Bodies the Battlefield," *Newsweek* (January 4, 1993) 37.

Gully
(for Fred Wah)

"To live in your gully, To die in your gully" (from an old film song)

(i)

In an old Delhi gully
 where two other gods live
 I see Shiv
 Shiv-Shiva-Shiv
 dancing on white tile.
 Banyan limbs
 out of beauty tiles
 in a Delhi gully.

That Shiv
 even then
 nuclear stalwart
 Shiv drank
 dark ocean dry
 his throat
 blue poison.

Red powder on banyan branches
 pestle / eye-dish
 cow waddles past
 yellow sandalwood flanks
 smudged red between eyes
 (eyes lifted slow-high [as if] by a toffee eye-pencil)

Shiv-Shiva-Shiv
 square chested
 lifts anklet foot

(slow motion leg bent to bow-leg lifted)

Wow!

Wow! says the 4th year law chap
doing India
in *chappal*-slippers.

Slits in his heels so deep
thin stones may be packed inside

(a song "To live in your gully, To die in your gully")

The chap
wobbles about
at Janpath Post Office
falls in love
with snake charmer's turban
voluptuous as puffed-up blood

(I ask, "Is this Ghalib's *kuchah*-gully? Is this the poet's knotted
gully?" Giggles)

cobra's eyes
red yolks
eggs gone bad--
such pleasure of unedited India

(an Indian housewife has heel-slits
indifferent as brown thread.)

The lawyer-chap's "Wow"
womanly/easily pleased:
nose-ring pleasure, bangle pleasure
his shy purchase
tangerines
outside Post Office.

(Male pleasure

an unfettered burp
 good scratch on the crotch;
 at the Janpath phone booths
 a lot of scratching)

(Calgary's C-Train, East-West. 7th Avenue forever)

Janpath, a commerce road. Janpath, a silent lover

(long secret hair, just now I witnessed her stretch,) disappears in a gully
 an anguished heart-beat:

"To live in your gully, To die in your gully"

Tourism India on Rajput turban
 white teeth salaams
 cross-legged tourist
 peck-pecking excursion.

("Ghalib, I too have a thousand wishes. I have come to break
 my heart.")

Elsewhere, elsewhere
 gully's voluptuous sides:

book marts, sweet vendors, *hakims*, dyers

(saffron, indigo

but seasoned tourist, his *jati*-caste, TOURIST

"*mais oui, c'est* India."

Then the sulky dyer

splices green so sharp

a sword swirls in my eye)

ooze

of shrill incense

(out of TV, trail of cinnamon
 gingerbread man laughs

with three generations of women
 My brother lifts Robin Hood Flour
 out of car)

milkman's watery milk
 urine salt on walls
 this, the beat of gully
 this, the clutching promise of a beloved

"To live in your gully, To die in your gully"

Legs of girl
 hop scotch
 right
 hope left
 the gully packs her legs

(Ghalib: heart is only a valentine. My liver too hot to be
 ribboned. What do you know of burning? Touch me now!)

(ii)

Two other gods
 live beside Shiv
 The priest fans
 The Granth
 silk broom fan
 swish
 oasis
 "Wahi Guru"
 priest's chant
 over Book
 marble cool

wise beards
priest and broom
swish / oasis / sweet
only handle
American pink
frivolity of bazaar.

Our car outside Muslim door
blue door painted over and over
shiny plastic
pock-marked steps
the gutter chugs
overtaking ritual of wash
up to elbows, feet and neck

(absence of water wash with wholesome sand)

I cover my head
also my breast
on pock-marked steps
though
there is
no Saudi dome
or *mullah's* nasal azan
but
well taught
my half-witness status:

woman space behind man
hide your chaos content;
equal to man
only in prayer
distrustful of God

in solidarity with male
 I *pardah* my woman breasts
 swallow my body
 tender
 mine, oh mine.

At Sikh temple, women's backs slack. On coffee break from house.

"What you cook today?"

On bride search:

"Your son needs a planter. Firm ground under this girl's feet. No way dilly-dally time."

Van noise, pm excursion: temple women turn / deft veil slide, lecherous as balcony tourists. The chap's *kurta*, garish pink. My mirror skirt, bargain-bargain, outside Janpath Oil. Like cheap perfume, it won't quieten.

(Ghalib: my shame smells/unwashed tourist woman.

Yours is beautiful: *baiaabaruu* -- disrepute covered in muslin Urdu.)

Temple women measure movement. Sly veil-lift / back to priest. Prayer briefly forgotten/constant like needly food in molar.

Rickshaw lurches out

I swear there was no corner

cow (sways) munching tangerine peel (hey tourist camera!)

highway lights out of shackle stores

(minus 20 in Calgary

don't want mummy to shovel snow)

hissing pan

ballooning *puri*-bread

young men in hero pants

women tamper
 on the way
 to the temple
 most beautiful look down (part of poetics)
 party time in gully
 (Mummy hawks news: CNN, CBC. Daughter in India
 She and I always forget bathroom lights)

Then I turn, just do
 sure as an elephant
 the gully to climb my legs
 "To live in your gully, To die in your gully"
 (We show different teeth, we chew with different teeth, a snap Gujarati
 advises)

Just do!

Dua-da / dha-dhin

hop-aa scotch-aa

dhinaka-dhin

(my brother bought me Grant's in a wet, pottery bottle.

"Salut Ghalib!")

righta-lefta

any way

just do-do

dhin dhin

Now Turn!

("Ooi Ghalib, What do you know of a thousand wishes? Or ash?")

prayer-women jeer

the

lawyer chap and I

sing our love song

in their gully

never

ours.

Lakshmi

*Largen me not with child or sober jewel
Nor husband, grace his turban, turn and touch
let me
slide between breasts my own
and
love
in leisure unrelated*

Lakshmi's husband gives her two coins for hair flowers. He likes to see her pretty but he also likes to make her happy. The coins lend to her wealth. When her husband goes to work, she has her business too.

Lakshmi sits in front of her mirror, the size of a photo frame. The mirror leans on a slanted plank of wood. Behind the plank is her *kumkum* in a yellow clay pot. In the middle of where her plait begins, she tucks a string of *asminis*. Then she unknots her blouse. They become full and pointed again. Lakshmi dips her fingers inside the yellow pot. In the middle of her hair parting she spills red *kumkum*. The second time, she filches the red powder and applies it between her breasts. In hair, *kumkum* is auspicious, guarding a husband's welfare. But the latter ritual is of Lakshmi's making. Now her husband will remain doubly protected. For the fires she wears will protect him.

I am a nomad-woman who shuttles between continents. There is no gun behind my back nor have I climbed a peril wall. But I am a modern immigrant who needfully retrieves in more than one continent. I nomad on land, in books and woman rooftops.

In *Sons and Lovers*, the wives rise early to kiss their husbands goodbye. In case they never return from the mines that day. The wives' *kumkum* kiss. When I read this, I, nomad-woman, nail a temporary post. In the presence of any Lakshmi, I nail a temporary post. Then the lotus goddess comes to me accompanied by her two snow elephants (they have turquoise lashes) who lift me to a rooftop. Here,

goddess Lakshmi opens my shoulder pad and refills it with chants, stories and woman brouhaha.

For one coin, Lakshmi buys *asminis*. How does the song go? That song on the eve of a bride's henna. (Wet henna on her palms, feet and fingernails.)

beloved mine
if ever without you

then someone remove that dent
on our merry pillow
where beloved's head rests

now-on
I have already forgotten
asmini, rose, dancing slipper

With the other coin, Lakshmi buys bananas for her father and makes a trip to her maiden home. Every day. As soon as she steps inside the courtyard, her father says, "Lakshmi has come home."

When a daughter is born, the house members say that Lakshmi has come home. And before a bride enters her new home, her mother-in-law bids her kick the pot of rice by the doorway. The bride walks on spilled rice. Her first steps are bounteous Lakshmi's.

Goddess Lakshmi sits on a lotus. Plentiful, ample. She is the Goddess of wealth. She surrenders to grabby devotees. Forever turns a blind eye, "Never mind," she says, even pats their cheeks with her lotus hands.

I call Mrs. Gola, *Didi*. Mother's sister. On *Diwali*, I light the lamps, one by one, behind Gola Market. Her sons, Bhima-tall, watch, shifting weight into feet and across the chest. How to behave toward a sudden woman? This stranger who does not address their mother respectfully as *mata-ma*-mother. Doesn't she know that paradise is at a mother's feet?

Grandmother would sway in company of such sons: "Such a *jum* display of males!" she would say, stretching her hand, way above her head. My Grandmother

of drama would unlock her fist in the air and spread out her fingers, an instant star. "Height, you ask? A baobab tree! These glorious pillars," then furling her hand, "unbudded, steady as death."

Grandmother's faith in the Aryan specimen who stormed into India is untarnished. Broad shouldered *jum* warriors with their swastikas and fire. Her faith in such male properties more instinctive than her faith in the Koran. To translate Grandmother's language, a *jum* man is unshook: like death, he does not retract. When he throws a stone decision, one hears it whiz across the sky. For her, like Lakshmi's father, such maleness protects a tribe and provides endless bread on the table. Lakshmi's father knows that his daughter is under a thick jute shelter, forever.

Mother widows at thirty-four. Father, a Bhima centrefold. What happened? Though her daughter is widowed, Grandmother does not cry, she says, "Call it lump disease or shrinking disease, but when his time is up, even a dog will piss in the mosque." But Grandmother stops wearing lipstick. Now when my tall brother snatches her and lifts her in the sky, Grandmother grabs his cheeks, "*Munna-laddie*, on your wedding, I will drape on Southern silk and rouge my mouth."

On one of my nomadic journeys home after Grandfather dies, I ask Grandmother about my unspoken Aunt of many, many years ago. This is the first time she steps out of her prescribed circle by weeping openly, "A man knows nine months only but when a mother conceives, her child pricks and pricks right under her heart, damn pricking never goes out again." Now I tell her of a dream I made up when I was little. That my kind Bhima-father marries my Aunt though she isn't dead like him but good as dead, I knew even then. He carries my unspoken Aunt on a white elephant to his new home in heaven. Grandmother touches my cheek with a wane palm, "Even a girl-Lakshmi gives like a flood."

I remember my small Grandmother and huge father making *rotis*. Father's *rotis* aren't circles. They have chins drooping out of them. Grandmother sides her face and roars. She reaches below his shoulder. She reveals details like how his left pupil is slightly off centre, his eyelids turning mauve in sleep, how he forces her to

eat his droopy chin *rotis*, all this, she tells in the present. Always. And when she talks about his cheeks, the side of her mouth rises Clinton soft, "Allah, the opulence on this city-lad's cheeks! From breakfast red merriment to mysterious dark like a dusky-*magrib* evening. Not even the beckoning *azan* from the minaret holds such lure."

Father tells her of Elvis who swaggers his hips like a *ngoma* dancer. Father is from Dar es Salaam. City-lad. Grandmother from Mombasa, an international port. She loves him from the start.

"She has picked it from your Father," Mother tells me when Grandmother talks from the side of her mouth, especially when she is excited. Zarin *Didi* says the same thing. Zarin *Didi* is Mother's real sister. (My Mrs. Gola is sister-across to all women I know. I call her *Didi*.) Father dies in 1964. It is a thin grave, huddled.

When I stand at her doorstep, first thing *Didi* tells me is, "I know who you are." I know her too because Asoka Travels has arranged this for me. When I tell her that I am grateful to her for allowing me to celebrate Lakshmi *Pooja* with her, *Didi* looks at me sadly, "Daughter, you have not recognized me."

Didi fumbles with the *gajra* of *asminis* in her hands. Shy to touch my hair because I am so wretchedly new, she ties the thicket on my wrist. I know she had favoured me with an indulgence customarily bestowed on men.

After the last of the lush mangoes, the gentlemen would dip their fingers in crystal bowls circled by the white garlands. Slipping them casually around their wrists they would walk away carrying the fragrance of an enclosed garden.³⁷

Didi insists on washing my plate before I leave her threshold, "Daughter, if I wash your plate, keep it ready and waiting, maybe you will never want to leave. Lakshmi at my door, finally! I have waited so long."

³⁷Anees Jung, *Unveiling India: A Woman's Journey* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1987) 13.

Since Father's death, I am unstinting on sisterly superstition: never to wash my hair on Wednesdays because this day hangs heavy on brothers. On onerous Wednesdays, I am *kumkum* alert.

Whenever mother moves us to a new house, she prepares a silver tray which has some wick, oil and rice. First I get out of the car with the silver tray and place it in the spooky doorway, then walk inside. I feel the house's ghosts fading away. Then my brother and mother follow. A daughter enters with Lakshmi steps. She drives away spirits, changes a house into a home.

During *Diwali*, everyone leaves doors, shutters and windows wide open because on this auspicious night, goddess Lakshmi visits homes. My tourist brochure translates *Diwali* as the Festival of Lights. But *Didi* tells me the story of how Ram defeated the many headed Ravan of Lanka. Ram would slash one head and another would suck out in its place. But good always overcomes evil. Ram rescues his wife Sita abducted by the mighty Ravan when she unwittingly steps out of the protection circle drawn around her by Ram and his faithful brother. There is never any question of who will win, "After all, Ram is Vishnu and Sita is Lakshmi," *Didi* says. Upon the royal pair's triumphant return to Ayodhya, the Ayodhyans light the way with *diyas*.

Only on Lakshmi *Pooja*, the watchman does not beat the walls with his *danda*-stick. On this night, *Lakshmi Mata* protects anyone, even thieves. Normally, before falling into a red vault sleep, the watchman prepares a grand show of beating his *danda* on the walls of the house, "Whack! Mistress of the Household, I am awake!" As a finale, the watchman's stick becomes thunderous, as if to say, "Beware Mistress, I am alert as a cheetah so let me be spared of abuse from your unwashed mouth!"

Many times the mistress catches him dead to the world and her anger is so noisy that the watchman runs out of the gate.

Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune and abundance sits on a lotus. Plentiful, ample. Forever, turns a blind eye. Never mind. She is *barwa-rag*. The *raga* which soothes the bird and the serpent. Feathery kind. She always says, "Never mind." *bp Nichol* kind. But no one knows that her back burns because it is being eaten

away by so much giving. There is a spread of ash on her cheeks. The worshippers leave her festive red saris, puff powder. They also leave cunning rice before her with imprints of rice steps leading up to her, but no steps leading away. This way they lock in Lakshmi.

Didi tells me, "I cannot ask the goddess for anything more. I, nestled among such *jum* men, am already so wealthy, how can I?" (A bride carries a pot of honey and milk. As she bends, the groom covers her like the spine of a sickle. Her head is tucked in his chest, forever protected. He tilts her hand. Together they pour *ghee* into the sacred fire. *Didi* has an army of such protectors.)

But *Didi* has a wish. She has kept it still, out of the reach of Buddha or Shiv or any other sneerer of her wish. In the fleshy recess of her zenana sex, an obvious place (is it?), her dull protein wish glints. But in the *bazaari* republic, she moves about transparently; a mother who slid out splendid *jum* sons from her buttery thighs. Then unexpectedly this *Diwali* her fugitive desire granted. Her bottom lip slips, "My Lakshmi has finally come home," this time *Didi* touches my hair.

"How could I burden Lakshmi? Say to her, I want a daughter, then give me talk of sons." Like me, the goddess has never shaken her head. Both of us have given first to Shiva-Rabba-Buddha, that Power in the sky.

On the rooftop, I pile on *Didi's* cot. We drink *chai* out of steel tumblers. In this woman place, *Didi* tells me about the woman who gives her all to that Mighty Power in the sky. When the *zamindaar* on whose land this woman works rapes her, her husband leaves because the son she is heavy with isn't his. This woman, a Sita sufferer and Lakshmi giver, raises her son alone. Twenty years later, the husband returns. The woman (she has gone very thin) only blinks and calls out to her son. She clasps his hand. In the other, her husband's, and lifts these hands to her breasts. Only asks the mighty Rabba in the sky:

In my one hand, my son
In my other, my husband
O *Rabba*
If I forfeit You today
will you forgive me, just this day?

When a bride enters a door's entrance, she is schooled to become like *Didi*, forced to lick the power of *Rabba* in the sky. First she is halted in the doorway where she raises her arms and her youth is pulled out of her body. (Lakshmi who buys her father bananas is lucky, no one has taken away the musk from her breasts.) Beside the rice ceremony, the arch in a bride's limbs is slackened. Now henna and sandalwood paste are wanton heat, unsuited to her motherhood. One day, the throbbing bride hands over her magazine desires and black silk to her approving mother-in-law who piles her with keys, rice, money and turbans. Only Lakshmi/*Didi* can fill the tribe's turbans, stretched out like alm bowls. She properly fills them with honour. No one knows that the *poto*-clan's worshipping saliva turns acidic on her back. Makes holes in her meat. All the clan sees is gourd-like Lakshmi with puff power cheeks. That she has an ozone back, only another Lakshmi knows. This is why I call Mrs. Gola, *Didi*. If I call her mother, I refine her complexity. Everyone has a mother, instant satisfaction. But mother's sister allows "who are you, may I get to know you?" time to a woman. Now Lakshmi is no longer that transparent. No Lakshmi is.

I am also Lakshmi who wears *kumkum* for her brother, who would rather tell the story of her brave *Zarin Didi* and not of the unspoken Aunt (we never utter her name. In our tribe she is *haraam*-forbidden by Grandfather. On this matter he ropes Grandmother's milkless breasts. She never complains she is in pain.) My Aunt who gets pregnant by a married man. When my breasts begin to grow, Grandmother wallops my shoulder, "You become like her and we will throw you in the well." Beside utter fear of shame history repetition, this is the only way Grandmother can remember her daughter out loud in Grandfather's prescribed circle. I like to think if Father were alive, my unspoken Aunt would not have been banished. That his prankish nature would not have allowed it. Once Father sends *Zarin Didi* a large parcel. She opens the parcel and finds an empty box but there is another gift-wrapped box underneath. Empty. Boxes within boxes, like *Draupadi's* never ending sari. Finally, in a velvet ring case lies a single Benson's almond toffee. *Zarin Didi's* favourite.

Zarin *Didi* is beautiful like Sophia Loren. Sometimes she looks so beautiful that Grandfather gives her money not to go to mosque. What if someone looks at her witchcraft eyes. He wants to protect her like *kumkum* between the breasts. She marries a doctor. But an evil eye must have sucked on her. One night, thieves break in. She pushes her two daughters inside a room. When one of the thieves moves toward her husband, she stops him by jumping on his back. But the other thief pops out her eye.

Until today, the larger gods did not know. Buddha did not know, neither Vishnu nor Shiv, of *Didi's* dull glint of protein life. That *Didi's* daughter has grown in her womb for thirty-five years. This Lakshmi *pooja*, the daughter lights the lamps, one by one, behind Gola Market. Lakshmi is resting.

Reader*ji* Love Poems

Roberta, Roberta

روبرتا روبرتا

Rowbowta

down Ken gully

down ginseng tea

(Roberta deodorant, cinnamon-soda)

one day, I pack her cinnamon loaf

"Oh no," Roberta, says.

Bowta Berta Beata Ba Ba Ba

Dear Readerji, won't you read

Roberta

Urdu route, left to right?

Beata is a well, orbs out of lippy sides

(tender buttons, Readerji, orbs)

but populace flaps mouth, flap-flap non-stop

over her hermit head

Beata

of tiny frame wee

of immense yin juice

"Berta? That you, Berta?" whispers Mikaila on the phone.

Berta's niece three years old but first whispers,

"You, Berta, you?"

(Now Berta wants a baby.)

Mikaila stands on dining room chair

let goes of nutsy foot, "One Two, Rock & Roll!"

wild as nutsy Shiv

(Now Berta wants a baby.)

One day, Berta buys crayons. Mikaila knows new crayons stay at Berta's. After supper, Mikaila ready to go home. In a lunch-bag, she stuffs organized. First, crayons, then kitchen cloth, top a teaspoon. Scotch-tapes bag. Mikaila, not of Rock & Roll, this time, hush into car.

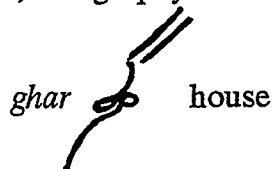
"Won't you open your bag?"

"No." (Aha, old Mikaila)

empties contents on floor. To the fridge. Chooses cheese, a large cheese, pressed to chest, off to car.

My Rowbowta has a bow stringing name

In Urdu, calligraphy of house has a bow.



(Readerji, home is picture-written. Even in slaughter.)

Father's last gift to me is a European *ghar* with blonde thatched roof and chubby chimney and green mossy grass. Even hedges of yellows flowers just like picture book. I am seven. Father spoils me with imported gifts.

(Readerji, imported gifts and triangle cheese wrapped in dot cows. Orange Squash treat from Piccadilly Provision Store.)

Pickled pumpkin in curd

chokecherries

(how many berries do I know? Straw, saskatoon, ras, goose, bumbleberry pie. Brambleberry correct in dictionary.)

walnut shortbread

dark molasses spread on bread, pioneer dessert

(tasty as Enid Blyton's lemonade and cream-filled biscuits)

butter drizzled on mushed *ghur*

such *ghur*-in-mouth possible by two mistresses:

a beloved musky fingers

a grandmother's mukluk heat

dhokra steamed in spice root

comes out yellow as corn bread

down Ken gully

down ginseng tea

Robbie and I

Our first supper at Brentwood Gingerbeef, I ask

"What did you eat in Bellevue, Crowsnest Pass?"

like she is the immigrant

- do you have lions in your backyard?

- how come you speak English so well?

Even in Delhi, a white woman stops me, a round-table of them at Dumpok,
Sheraton:

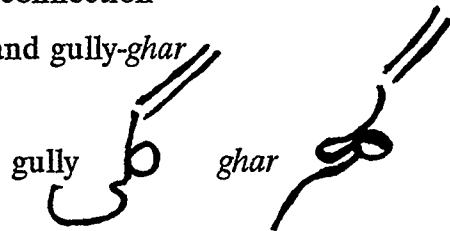
"Where are you from?"

"Fuck-off!"

Robbie and I, siamese

trunk connection

food and gully-*ghar*



Robbie says, "Hulupcha, Putahe, Pyrogies, you name it, if there were South Indians
in Bellevue, wouldn't have waited for *dossas* first time, university."

(Roberta's father spiking sausage

Roberta's father, dying.)

Her Crowsnest gully, Robbie calls coulee,

writes

"coal in hem

limestone

folds

mine

dark

pit

creeks (two)

asphalt road

chokecherry bushes" (strawberries, raspberries, bumbleberries,
saskatoonberries, gooseberries [gooseberry sauce
with duck I savour in recipe])

My gully has hakim (advances tobacco-coloured medicine to jell my stomach), dyer
spits tart silk, urine salt on walls, marigolds, Babri Masjid pillage--seven hundred
killed, bookmarts, martinis (I swear), poets (a thicket) swagger pop-Ghalib, like
"Babby, babby" in English.

(Readerji, at seven, revolted! The English song dirty to babies.)

but

young men in hero pants

gully women temper on way to temple

most beautiful look down, part of poetics.

(Readerji, home is picture-written. Even in slaughter.)

December 1992, gully snaps.

Vishnu, where are you? Not as Rama! Ayodhya will scorch you. Fetch the Mighty
Boar. In calamity, Boar-out-of-Vishnu ups Maa-earth, his Rocky Mountain
shoulders. Maa-earth hoisted out of Serpent Crusher.

(Readerji, between you and me

enemies are mild then)

Now, February 1993,
count risen two thousand
Boar-mine of Ba Ba Ba
Rama's *ghar* red drown, sodden bow
gully poet spreads sand on his hair
 (dies a poet's way)
Ba Ba Ba Boar (still Bosnia)
heft Muslim over your *Om*-shoulder
Babri congealed on walls
incense disgorges purple exodus
I crave Smucker's jam.

I do not advance to Baituallah
Allah's house in Mecca

not a matter of distance undefeated
only my schedule, awry
geography awry
awry, awry, axis gone slump

drift-a-lift, my comely spine
today I am *fragata*, ribbony-bows for sails
a tipsy-nomad tosses me canopy of red tulips

there is a *sarai*-keeper
guards his *sarai* duties fierce
offers choicest water (still blue) from mountains

in front of this *sarai*-keeper
I Muslim woman, walk in a straight line

if you know how to carouse
come to my drinking cabin
on the way to Canmore

in a woman's *sarai* nobody walks in a line, Mecca
came and left

like perfunctory pilgrim, marigold
without yin juice

throw me fierce red tulips

Walk-about

- find a *dhobi*, Post Office and *roti* place
(some places the *dhobi* irons pillow cases into triangle serviettes)

- a sly purchase: pick up one-tusked Ganesh, dicker over price of Lord always delicate, then, "is a *dhobi-wallah* far from here?" His *chai*-boy accompanies me to the *dhobi* district behind Janpath. Dodged the man hollering from Reliable Emporium, "Miss, Miss, but where you from? I tell your palms." Don't respond. He hollers louder, "Want it? Miss *must* want it. Free Miss and Biggest!" *Chai*-boy turtles his head inside neck but shoulders hiccup speed.

I miss driving to Banff with Sadru
"Weh Yasmin, your head full of coconut water!"
His Jangbari, *maane* Zanzibari
Oof! MEANING ZANZIBAR, Readerji!
lingo
or say
etymology
good & serious
fizzes his prairies.

Mummy and I cry when the sculptor in swirl oranges, butterfly swirls, dying of cancer. Her six year old daughter breaks our hearts. On a cold fall evening, she sits on top of a tree, catch something tough as her mom and die together. Mummy and I, dam of tears on TV stuff (Steele romances and wringing deaths, especially Sunday, hate Monday). Hair unwashed and very cold outside, or scream days before period, custard doughnuts and Mezzetta peppers finished in an hour. We draw the curtains, not bother with kitchen drawers left open. Leave grapefruit peel by the lamp. Only I don't leave shoe upside down, what if mummy dies? Not finished still, double order of olives and mushrooms (Pizza-Hut has us on computer) and cry hard. The sculptor's best friend to take daughter when The Time. She is city-lights, executive pencil black skirt, "I need a free spirit around me," tangles herself in helpless flowy arms. Mummy and I cry harder. All of a sudden (this no writerly device Reader*ji*. Are your nostrils on fire? "Seen their medicine cabinet and heart-attack suppers, not gauche writing now, no way!") but it is true Reader*ji*, all of a sudden, Mummy remembers when she has her appendix out, an old woman shares her hospital room, cataract eyes (in our language, pearls of milky glaze). When the doctor undoes the bandages, asks what she sees. "White flowers," she whispers, loose milk eyes on his pale hand. White flowers.

Dodoma Hospital. British Doctor. Gold knuckle hair in butter commercials. Yusuf *Bha* puts me in his Volkswagen. Mummy opens front door. 4 am. A circle of pyjamas on the porch.

laah laah laah: a puffy raga

la la: part of Allah under my tongue

lala: sleep-lala-sleep my lad, we are off to Dar es Salaam

My Hydrabadi earrings are girth umbrellas

Readerji,

their weight of silver has lispy bells (elephant gait has lispy bells)
girth and a quickstep

left my earring / search for my earring
on the prairie / the prairie
goes like *pyarie, pyarie*
lovely, lovely

Readerji, I nomad from Plaza to Allah,

back out of Allah

into Crowsnest, maybe Sunday

this constant of exits, my permanent address

will you move me a love note?

Too shy to ask for plump earring

tinkles on the prairie (native rice-grass like Dilhi filigree)

Don't say Delhi, say Dilhi

is a French kiss

or

(did) I leave my earring there *pyarie*, plum?

C o n s t a n t , m y c o n s t a n t :

Permanent / organic

steady / bunchy

ooze out of navel (nomad exit not sharp)

I chant bunchy exits

like Somalis sing-over ancestors thirty generations back

Readerji, will you call me love?

or footloose eater,

mungarly-taker.

I saw a Pronghorn
in a Moghul dome
now show me
a blue sunflower

سای

(How to translate *Sain*, Master/Husband/Lord?
when shape of *Sain* is circle not hard rule. Let
me cup your ear. Sa-yi-n--surge with "Sa,"
Reader-mine. Drink in "yi" and "n" so sweet,
you don't say it aloud. *Sain Sain*, dulcet honey.
I could rip my thumb.)

Sain

Why are you not Vishnu
in three steps here?

(Readerji, hauling me your way! Don't you know
Lord Vishnu can cross universe in three steps,
not even aerobic strides.)

Sain

your letters
are mine!
even before embryo
even before blank page

(I am his moon forever.)

Bringer, yes you, *Sain*
why are you cooling my page in Delhi?

Sain

سای

I rock my body back and forth
thin sleep will soon return

Grand*maji*, take me to the *sonaara*. Ask him set my earring in gold and silver, good omen metals. Would awkward bead and leather so better I stay outside Plains Indians, and bead and leather fab on Kensington.

Jaani jewel--midnight pleasure

that scream of earring, even crunch of bangle on Bombay screen, *masala-garam-hot!* Giggles out of audience, girth knocked out of flop bangle and bed all circqued up but

jewel like Jade
sh sh sh for nerve, back off (not at all rude)
wear jewel to go (y)in, within
shaant-aa-hush

But *Maji* tell the *sonaara* on the prairie anything over hundred feet, monumental. Hello grain elevator. "Brown Eyed-Sue," I roll off slowly, lot-ta-words but timbre ziggy in throat, come on, over! Faint smell of breakfast egg in kitchen sunlight, only open *bala* Krishna's mouth for blast of Calgary sunlight. I tell teacher a Calgary architect uses Brown Eyed-Sue to design prairie fanlight, yes *Maji*, that teacher with jewel in her eye, half-brown half-green, you say should be taken to the *sonaara* for lesson in stone-set beauty. My teacher whose eye turns murky brown in pleasure, "You mean Brown Eyed-Susan?" *Maji*, like you say, a story is not stingy tight bark around a tree but chubby collarbones. My teacher's *ghup-shup* getting chub--Brown Eyed-Susan and Buffalo Bean, *oof* really Buffalo Bean *is* flower *Maji*! Don't say this *buufellow* no whiff of *gulab*-rose, name more like stud-jumper in heat. Whoeee, spring! when Susan and Bean stick out of a murky ditch, teacher says. When little, she sucks honey from stems of Buffalo-Beans, *Maji*, you heard of such a thing? Not even poisonous! Take me to the *sonaara Maji*, tell him I want earrings with Indian-Dog tooth, motif of omen progress, let me show you, like this, chain of triangles on side of earring, auspicious. Plains Indians *Om*.

Triangle teeth, chip chip-away to a point, beauty mark, tribal teeth. In our *shamba*, wild flowers leak sticky milk. *Maji*, a wild designer, wilder.

"My teacherji, guruji"

My teacherji, guruji

no less than Guru Drona

warrior-Arjun's teacher in the Mahabharata

"Arjun, what do you see?"

"Guruji, not flower, not sky, even a feather,

Only bird's eye: target."

Arjun's singular concentration, singular as prairie

turns Guru Drona's eyes

murky brown / wine pleasure

he promises Arjun you will be Best Archer

in the kingdom.

(Guru's promise magic *safara* potent)

Readerji, don't want to be Arjun

but low caste Ekalavya

as good as Arjun

but refused teaching

by Great Guru

teaches only warrior-king caste

Ekalavya from Bhil hills

built Drona from stone

practised and practised

under his master's

stone

eye.

In forest one day,
Arjun witnessed Ekalavya
bound arrows across
in a barking dog's mouth
ungrazed (but shut-up)
dog returns to Arjun's camp.
Ekalavya good as Arjun (*better*)
but Guru Drona's promise ...
Arjun confronts, "Guruji, your *vachaan*-promise."
(Readerji, doesn't "*vachaan*" dread like "wrench")
Drona demands Ekalavya's right thumb
as Guru *dakshina*, guru's right from pupil
Ekalavya commits highest sacrifice
his right hand thumb is saucer palms.
Readerji, how to footnote *dakshina*
just
just
guru fee?

There is even *machismo*-strut in the pyre-ready pupil for whom the flame not blue enough and splice from a sword, a drifting harp. Who-whom to explain that in *dakshina* she-woman pupil and Ekalavya reel higher than bells?

"The Dancer"
(for Dina Nath Nadim, Kashmiri Poet)

Dal Lake swaggers.
Under his cotton tunic
shikara boy
pivots in
designer jeans.
Gift from Bud
of the USA.
His houseboat
Taj Mahal
now *Lady Di*
has travelled
Monte Carlo
on the Dal

I want to see *her* Dal.
Nadim says
she will cry
hay valay! hey come!
coax-aa
buy her red marsh turnip
and brinjals like
pitchers of wine.

Yellow temple paste
cracks dry on my forehead
(raise my forehead and crack)
Inside boat
woman with long nose
combs her hair *(peeps me, I peep her)*
Kadri *sahib* buys me cherries
sip a holiday

Then I see them
An ancient poet
cried in their presence.
Hymn books claim
they are sisters.
They float
portly sprawl
like Ganeshji
at ease.
In a prairie auditorium
the dancer shakes her head
wringes her hands
sinks heavy
her fingers blow open
"lotus" she whispers

close your eyes.

I search for crocuses (April duty)
 and fingers won't mush
 in newness of
 marjoram.thyme.rosemary.
(are they mixed masala throw in everything?)
Shikara boy steers boat
 edge of patch.
 Kadri *sahib* bends
 picks up hymn book sister

Nadim's *dal hazan*
 likens her little one's nose
 to a lotus seed.
 Like my nose
 rims of the petals
 gold dusted.
 My bone kicks ouch!
 more comfortable snuggle.
 Yes, I know this gold.

Fingers burst saffron
 yin yellow
kumkum yellow
 portly lotuses
full-fullai in out in out in out
 on Kadri Sahib's stomach.

Thick across the Dal
hay valay, hay valay.

*"Jaani is heart"**Jaani is heart**Jaani is centre**Jaani* [don't hear as Johnny]

though here too

a letter broken

Jaani means sweetheartbut Grandmaji's *Jaani* is Son

(Grandmaji adds an "h" before "a" in "Alberta." Her tongue spools berta to *baita*. *Hal baita*, let's go son, in our *Katchi* tongue. Mailperson, go figure *Halbaita* in Alberta boundary.)

Jaani is sufaid posh

means white flower

means tip-top

in Kashmiri.

Jaani

Your Alberta.

Take back your Rockies

(In Delhi I strut them personally as breasts)

Krishna's mother prys open his prank mouth

"today I won't leave you!" Furious with her *lal**Bala* Krishna tlee tubby

(just two front teeth)

"Maa, see no hands!"

"Bad, bad Kanai, open your mouth!"

Maa beholds universe inside her *lal's* mouth

Baa-Baa-Baa Krishna

buttery winsome

inch-aa-inch toward churned pot

neighbour woman:

"Oof! Kanai's mother, I only turned my back!"

Krishna laughs butter

sweet with steal and women miff.f.

Jaani-Boundary, or I call you *aai* my love?

Calgary isn't Vancouver ashen

lights first thing in the morning

open *bala* Krishna's mouth

for blast of Calgary sunlight

I am shape-changer:

May I

May I enter?

or: brandish sword
dance on one leg pitch
shake-up landscape
shake baby shake!

Take back your saskatoon berries.

Jaani, berry (your) boundary.

I even henna my palm, vermilion my parting, ink my love
 out of saskatoon berries: amour / *rasa* / toilette.
Jaani, our pillows mate south end of bed
 but today,
 today
 I position my pillow widow-north

Talk back, mouth-back
 first-time

(Grandmaji says, *ooi*, why not tell
 everyone you intend to serve dal in shoes!
 Carry on with up-side-down head like
 stubborn Gullick nomad!)

Maji, I will sing
 high-pitched free song
 like Gullick-nomad of Tibet
 China can't conquer (can't even
 dream to conquer)
Maji, so call me nomad freak
 from Tibet to Turner Valley!

So *Jaani*, Alberta my love, what's the scoop
 am I in or out of your boundary?

Yasmin to Yasmin:
 ignore *Maji*
 but start auspicious, always.

(Oh, but I am no mad!)

Jaani my heart:
Moi, always been fab at the airport

third world disembarker
 suitcases tied with silly ropes

Now

Airport window display
 Welcome to Wildrose International:
 Tanzanian, Chinese, Trinidadian, Lebanese
 Catch our *masala* in Hard Cover Cowboy.

Must start auspicious:

drive on highway #1 first-time
 buy a smoke shop first-time
 East-Indian writer talks back first-time

Begin: *Bismillah hirrahman-irrahim*

In the name of Allah, most beneficent
 most merciful

Bonanza

on Channel 29 (don't
 miss a single afternoon--
 3 sharp.) Coffee
 (tin) cups and grit as
 if all grit tough in
 Saudi only. When
 cowboy boots spur,
 my feet sore from looking.

In May I walk
 into backyard barefoot
 to test spring. Dump
 garbage over fence,
 Barefoot. They burn cold.
 Whooeee!

Ashok: "Aruna's, 8 pm." (Ashok, testy first thing, morning.)

Past midnight after meeting: Suzette, Hiromi, Ayumi, Cheryl, Teacher Wah. Sadru to give me ride home (I still don't drive) but left his headlights on. "Sadru, *Bismillah*, forget anxious-*banxious*, first time for Hiromi and me, too. You got AMA card? Then what's to sweat? You have card, AMA belongs to your father!" Maybe that is why we came to Canada, eh? Fast *chap-chapa* service. No grease money under the table, come tomorrow, tomorrow headache. Style of service back home: "Leave your headlights on, stupid? Now hire a twenty-four hour mechanic." (Only in Canada, learn not to laugh if someone slips on a banana. And what good has Alberta-*Jaani* picked from me?) Style of service back home: "You want petrol? Carry it." ("Put a Tiger in your Tank," commercial from heaven!) .

"Sadru, look, only three stars."

"*Weh* Yasmin, you know this song?

Your ma sing it to you?

count, you cannot count them
gather, you cannot gather them
they won't be contained
in my *chabri*-basket
such thicket of stars"

Then his body drops into kid steps

(when adults ache bad, they play:)

"my feet *nana nana*-small
walk hush *chana-mana*
what magic!"

He stares up, again, "damn!"

Jaani, Bas! Enough!

Take back

all your three stars.

Anita thinks she is about to be chicagoed on the bus. Reading The Book intent like it is a mail order wishbook. This man explodes dark *gungraila* curls catches her with Rushdie *babu* as if she is onto *giji giji* with P. Mohammed. When she wants to switch off and she wants speedo off-duty from this Kaaba-banger, she flashes her ivory. Then people speak loud English to her: their exotic angel or swamp angel (depends on mood) but Anita grins right-on steady. She is only hanging around Canada (flashes abundant ivory). *Maha* Canada, Saturday Night Main Street third world beggar dies to cruise. So at the Consulate in Dar es Salaam, Harbour of Peace, Mucky-muck asks East Indian who has no qualification (they vary with season like this time, window cleaners and fish farmers) no job in Canada, how he intends to survive? Always extra points for a lined up job, line up as cook, unspecialized nurse (special demand), chant *Mowla Mowla* on rosary, just you flow with season. How to explain to Mucky-muck that mysterious Allah is Provider? Only this enthusiast juts forward, "Brother, God has given me teeth, I know I will chew!"

"This ant whose cock goes flop if he does not listen to BBC thinks every Cockasian his brother!"

famous joke among us, waiting in pew to come to Canada, Saturday Night. The Kaaba-banger walks out of Anita's glaze. *Ei-Maa* now she gropes fear. Usually you don't have to pull this sort soldier off his mother. *Ei-Maa!* What if he had *kaathiled* her on the spot with a *khanjar*! Not even giving her time for a breezy *fatwah*. Of course *fatwah* is breezy compared to *Bismillah* on the spot, *ici*. In the name

of Allah and the *khanjar* blade inside her stomach on #20 Arctic! Anita's husband mad, "Never listening, like an independent hog on ice. You think the man is Mr. Christie, you plastering white-icing grins!" "And you are my chewty cherry," she thinks, watches red-rag distress in his mouth. That frother of curls, that baldy religious pullet squeezer gotten her into trouble with her cherry.

"*Yaar*, these days, what-la?"

"*Alma-Yaar*, my husband pricklier than a Mysore Thorn."

Sarai


Sarai is a rest-dwelling for weary traveller. Travail traveller. Write postcards, taste ketchup again. In the *sarai*-hamam, a lye of lemon and melon fruits used to bathe a caravanner/traveller and the *dhobi*-washer irons pillow cases a special way, into triangle serviettes.

Hem crunched dry
from trekking across
traveller friendless as an immigrant
apart, apogee, a port
even kisses not tasty of porch and cranberry
but in this senseless expanse
ear, *here*
tongue sediments potent

this time, in this wayward straggle, to the right or to the left, the traveller no where, now everywhere, this time, when the traveller unstiffens out of a northern summit tongue, out of Britain, out of North American porch-English-I. Here, in this senseless field (even senseless to the frontier-wallah), here, where axis gone slump (grammar's hair loose, out of rubber band constriction / office practice), what tarts in the traveller's mouth (tart, trill, nifty pitch) is reefing to the edge, only plunge isn't crash but nifty squeezes of delicious sex. This plunge is a nomad-squeeze because traveller tightens essentials like a nomad-packer, tossing the rest for someone's use, not out of conservation, but the unblinking constant that nothing belongs entire-virgin to frontier, self. It is in nifty packing the traveller's potent tongue ferments into Elvis hips. When the nomad/traveller halts English the northern way, even bans it to that stiff-lipped guardian or the frontier-wallah (only temporarily--nothing belongs entire to oneself),

"It ain't your English only, Frontier-wallah or ye Brit, now git!"

then trekking across the senseless field is *ma'abar* (seduce Arabic in English, we are all adults) and traveller no longer *Eddie Bauer* though I, nomad-woman, am partial

to a Swiss army knife (no longer solely Swiss, get it?) except for its typos  cross. I carry red my Swiss (grammar's hair loose) in a Kashmiri *phiran*. My lovely knife at home with sprawls of almonds on chest and sleeves of my Kashmiri dress. (Oh yes, today, I am Kashmiri.) A mellow traveller slips shapes like a hydra, now a coastal *mwasafiri* from Bagamoyo (I imagine a kaftaned Bagamoyan), a Kiswahili shape. A word is never final:

This is a coffee-stir stick, don't call it a pipe.

(but it looks like a pipe), don't call it a pipe!

(but...), DON'T call it a pipe!

A word's protein (life) is her changing shape. Traveller even known by that antediluvian mantle of "pilgrim" (dinosaur in computer pop) whose cactus palms succulent within: one Allah's *maajuur*. There are many names for snow, there are many names for a traveller: *maajuur*, *mwasafiri*, now nomad-women, but not on camel. They travel woman-way:

drift-a-life, my comely spine
today I am *fragata*, ribbony-bows for sail

This woman-writer has a penchant for floating on rooftops. Another woman likes to splish-splash like a seal, says, "Any male god or route, flint stranger to me."

Dearest Traveller (this note under your pillow serviette),

Remove Allah and insert Yours, if you wish. My friend Roberta likes to hum, "*Sa Hum, Sa Hum*, I am Earth-She, *ma mere...mmmmmmmmmmmmmm*." (In front of Allah, I always walk in a straight line.) Is Yours, like a continued Arctic on-and-on, a blubber-sun bask? I know prayer is corny but I can't let go of prayer like I can't let go of winter boots, not in May, even June. Or is Yours fuzzy as a teddy bear?

Post card and ketchup kisses from a
woman-nomad

Pilgrim, caravanner, my Good Night friend, let go of tattered-brocade history-- I Sovereign Ship, hoarding I-language. My Grandmaji says, only toe nails grow in a grave. Come to my drinking cabin on the way to Canmore, for a ruddy chant, a

two-liner, like a *Kudoki* ballad or *thumri* (in my woman's *sarai*, nobody walks in a straight line.)

When geography lapses and English awry
tongue slices wild,

slices air
like that *ngoma* dancer, Elvis.

Don't say Delhi, say Dilhi,
is a French kiss.

Last year, Roberta and I *sarai* at the Round Table Bar in a Dilhi gully, way, way past comfortable Janpath, breasty tourist landmark. We fall out of Jumbo Fax and The Hotel Imperial. We know Janpath is a commerce road but we also know Janpath is a silent beloved. She has long secret hair. Just now we witnessed her stretch, disappears in a gully.

In a maze-gully, Roberta and I try Liberty Wine first, but the chief won't let us inside his cabin. He shakes his head and points us in the direction of Mira Belle Beauty Parlour. At the Round Table Bar, we drink King Fisher beer and try on earrings from a man who also sells sugar cane juice. Move over Arthur of Round. Nothing belongs to one tribe only. I know one day I will find Japanese in Dogri.

There is a famous *sarai*-keeper, Allah, who guards his keeper duty fierce, offers the choicest water, still pale blue from the mountains. (In front of this *sarai*-keeper, I walk in a straight line.) He exempts his *maajuur*-traveller from ritual of wash when there is no water and time of prayer dawned. Bids His *maajuur* wash with wholesome sand instead, ready for prayer. Of course, I, woman, am also Allah's *maajuur*, equal to male follower in prayer. But, I, woman, don't travel, cross deserts and oceans like male. (Even given up camel). Though the *sarai*-keeper gets up for

me (at once) when I enter, I texture this lofty space reserved for male. Many get up for me (at once), Allah, the Prophet, and Syed my beloved (he is the mounds on my palm). I-woman (like a good woman) spread a baroque feast for my beloved's Boss. He lavishes all praise on his *maajuur*. I edge toward their party only my solidarity with Allah, inexpert, because He instructs my body tiny and hidden black, out of public space. Coming out into lofty space makes me tinier for black is slendering.

A woman's *sarai* is not construction-architecture but love slides--motions into moan, rising *maa*, marjoram, mamma, hmmmmmmmmmm, inside me, thickening breast and marrow. My movements flux into a love slide (like bangles nudging a cool patch of skin) when Derrick, seven, waits up for his parents, past midnight, to understand how Lasmil's book flew tonight? Was a rocket attached to it? I know he must have called me Yasmin, he is not four now, but I slide, meander, mmmmmmmmmmm around Lasmil. Tenderly I return my first book to me--don't know how to touch it now declared in lofty public space. But after Derrick, or should I write, Derrick who gives me a rocket launch? (don't want any tender nuance [tender button] to disappear, lost inside a bottom drawer). "Derrick, it is balmy in the sky, tonight."

My *sarai* is thickly namey (Roberta, Syed, Derrick, Teacher). They have never been foreign like rice at six a.m. / how to walk through back door ice (Roberta can even smell back door ice) / or Turtle Mountain's ceaseless stare on Bellevue minetown / nor red bite of strawberry skin coarse as an elephant's.

Once upon a time, under a Banyan tree, a pupil crams her ear into her Teacher's mouth. No one else but Teacher, she insists. She is heady as the archer Ekalavya who chops off his thumb at the request of his guru, Drona. Drona demands Ekalavya's right hand archer thumb, as *dakshina*, guru-fee. (Drona's eyebrow must have arched, his mouth not Clinton soft but sideways challenge, Ekalavya to the test.)

Service at the feet of a guru is nursery school stuff. One day the guru may ask for his fee. It does not happen everyday / it happened to Ekalavya. But she--woman pupil and Ekalavya, foremost archer, are ready to deliver because they are a blue flame, not a flaccid orange yell. She and Ekalavya offer their thumb on a saucer (you never give a glass of water to an elder without a saucer underneath.) Who-whom to explain that *dakshina* is not guru commerce-fee but a pupil's vertigo devotion?

From a guru's navel, "P" mantra: pupa-pupil-push
(even Drona's, only his mantra for another)

But on a pupil's henna-palms, quivering typos:

"i am Yours, Guruji"

There is even *machismo*-strut in the pyre-ready pupil for whom the flame is not blue enough and the splice from the sword, a drifting harp. Who-whom to explain that in *dakshina*, she-woman pupil and Ekalavya reel higher than bells?

But her teacher is not Drona or classical Lear, dig-digging give me your thumb, how much do you love me? Her teacher who does not bother to staple pages and undutiful to word on page. "I can't read," he says, only hears language in a wolf's ear: hungry, taut. Now, leaps! To the other shore. In class, he performs magic:


"Spit! Ratt-ttt-le. S-s-s-k-k-iiii-d!

Now, back off like Buddha,

pupil,

this is syntax."

Shore in English

Shor  in Urdu is noise

Her teacher's writing has sorcery of shore and *shor*.

But this is not enough for she-pupil. Quivering typos on her henna-palms, unasked by Teacher. He has not even heard of the rough old gods whose zeal for authentic endurance tests--excruciating. Her Teacher, a Black(berry) Mountain poet. Reminds she-pupil of a dark fruit cake mountain with story-book icing.

But like Ekalavya and Cordelia, she-pupil understands hacking in love. She, from the school of the rough old gods. When she clutches her Teacher's language not as brooch or perfunctory marigolds offered to priest as temple office practice, but bodice/skin, you can slit my throat permission, he retreats into Chinese opaque.

She does not know apple for Teacher
Only warm ash out of scooped hem
(You never give a glass of water to an elder
without a saucer underneath)

Now she moviestars in windows of Logos and Canterbury, announced in a chalet-*sarai* on polished wooden floor and red *salut*, as is ritual of book press/deceleration, permission granted to enter their lofty space. She flushes, a little sick, for this mode of I-rest, alien to her, even loud, like "give me a cigar" drama. (Her Malek *Didi* and Grandmaji give her a moonstone choker from Grandmaji's maroon bread-shaped purse, "auspicious for you, Daughter, auspicious," and blow round prayer in her right ear, then her left. Today, Syed keeps fast because it is his *jaani's* first step in a new world. "Allah, tend to her, *Bismillah*" and breaks his fast on an international phone call from Delhi. She changes her ear as per his instruction, first her right, then her left. (Don't say Delhi / say Dilhi / is a French kiss.) In the chalet, Teacher pours her orange juice, blows a couplet on her hot forehead:

From your glow what the lofty big-fish desire to read
that this unwell's health gotten better

"*Salut*," and raises his glass.

In our *sarai*, outside Higher Ground on Kensington (a woman's *sarai* is never too far away, close to the bus stop, market, bank, because she has to be everywhere),

Roberta hums. There is a hammock in our *sarai*, mmmmmmmmmmmmmmm mandolin, madeira, meander, *mehendi*, mirrh, massage. Roberta tells me if I massage the tips of my fingers, I can jog memory. Typos is the imprint of my own hand wherever I go. Elephant Ganeshji's palms are orange, even red, plastered on outside walls of dwellings because he is indulgent and sugary and womby. When I ask Roberta what is her imprint, she starts to splash (she is gamey at splashing and humming and rocking all at the same time) "I am she, part of Mother goddess. Watch me seal in and out of her womb." Then she says, "I must be, who else is there? Any male God is a flint stranger to me."

I-Indian woman am afraid when I deify Teacher, Syed and Allah. It is true, I don't deify mother. When I hurt, I push my legs in mother's stomach, or Malek *Didi's*, or Grandmaji who is eighty. Grandmaji's specific instruction when she dies, that her maroon-bread purse be handed over to another woman in the family. Woman to woman is brouhaha, yak yak, heating the heart of the matter, then come to concern, by this time, allowing strangeness to disappear and tea ready, slurp! out of saucer (wriggle toe in pleasure). My body is not linear, slurp! There are several navels on my woman body. Oops! here is another (tender button). Now I am Malek *Didi*, now *Maji*, now Roberta, moving in and out, a hummer, rocker (shall we dance?), splasher. And when a woman is lost, another woman will not allow her to shut herself in her a nuclear bedroom, disappear bottom-drawer, but lead her to their zenana courtyard on which women pile on the famous cot to *ghup-shup* and heat the heart of the matter. Here, wise friend holds up mirror to her lost friend's face, "Roberta, meet Roberta, your valentine." (Can be Roberta or Yasmin or Malek *Didi*. Valentine your valentine.)

I, Indian-woman am lost. When I love a man, I deify him. Pyre-piety and ash come easy to me.

She does not know apple for Teacher

Only warm ash out of her scooped hem

In an Indian film, a young nawab shuns his bride. He buys her jewels and she can circumambulate the Tulsi plant in her courtyard to her heart's content. He needs her strong haunches for sons and comes to her chamber on fertile nights. Otherwise he whiles away hours with his mistress in his saki chamber. On the bride's first night, the nawab's mistress sings this ghazal which pierces through the *haveli*.

Sire, I submit a grievous injustice

You went to the bazaar to purchase my dangling *jhumkas*.

But brought home my second

The bride sobs and sobs and one day she challenges her husband, "I too can pleasure *Vous*, just gamble a chance my way." For the first time the nawab is intrigued by his wife and favours her a chance. The first night, she offers him saki and *paan* with a bare hand, then as if she cannot help herself, she cups her other hand underneath into a saucer. On the second night, she sings of her red silk petticoat but in the middle of the song, when some jasmines from her plait fall at her husband's feet, she picks one of the white flowers and presses it to her right eye, then her left. At once the nawab's interest turns cold. I, like the nawab's wife, know to French kiss this way only. The nawab's wife and my landscapes are lored with stories of *dakshina*, devotee, *Dada*-divine, and a good bride's empty hem. *La Balance* in an Indian woman's landscape is when

Groom opens his bride's palms

(they are vacant with dreams)

and circumscribes them with

sons, hygiene and a white bowl.

When the bride raises her wedding mirror

to see God and husband-groom

side by side in pink jubilee turbans

she recites, aloud, for the first time

her privileged mantra

"God my Husbandji, Husbandji my God."

"But Robbie, when a woman is devoted to man, is she actually saying, 'I am an empty hem for thee?'"

There is a sly Indian-woman who moves about transparently on the surface (it is his world), falling incessantly at her husband's lotus feet and bearing *dukha*-pain with pale smiles, but underneath, she has really thrown the house keys behind (only the *bazaari* republic does not recognize it), so that she can woman-feast endlessly. Famine-linear not native to her mass.

I, woman, like the breath of a male
 behind my ear, on my navel, place of many threads.
 But I write my own language
 hum my woman religion, *Sa Hum*
 full of chatter of wine fingers
 of perfume gone sour after exhilaration.

Only once she is heady in front of the fierce *sarai*-keeper, unbothered to walk a straight line.

Allah, You demand petty devotion
 so easy to sweep Mecca with my hair.

If

I

tear
 through Your rooftop
 with the weight of my delivery,
 Syed of Islam
 What would You do?

My Allah, woman does not pay homage from afar. She loves shamelessly close. And nothing she gives, puny. When she gives, she tears down rooftops. The weight of her heart.

In their love affair, Syed wears a haughty pashmena shawl. He and she should have stopped at the heart. In a dream, she sits her mother on the toilet. Her mother is crying. She has no arms or legs. In her dream, the daughter promises to leave Syed forever. In reality

Her ill body rocks back and forth
the thin sleep will soon return

When she says "Syed," her teacher clutches his heart with a child's faith (even his fingers go chubby). Sometimes her teacher, goofy simple, in face-pressed-against-the-window wonder.

Teacher soused with prayer
dances on tip of an incense stick
then asks

"What is a ghat? What is a ghat?"

Banaras comes with her wash-bag,
"Come here, Teacher of she-pupil,
clean my water, guileless as you."

His faith like that of the Egyptian man on CNN who says that Egypt and her people are bound to be saved even when the earth quake passes red on the Richter Scale because Moses, Jesus and Mohammed have been here, in Egypt.

Gauche love-slides disappear bottom-drawer in an architecture-construction because such slides are not properly arrested. A woman knows any love slide easily gotten like ginger but so precious only don't arrest, *sarai*...savour. When her lover stirs his coffee, he calls it a pipe, not a stir stick, she manifests in the whirl of his language, outside Northern English's arrested physique. What does anyone know that this whirl, excruciating as heart or tooth, but in the nib of her pen, swells into an inverted skyrocket, thrusting words out of Kundulini loins. This is how this woman makes language in her *sarai*.

One day her teacher gives her Urdu. She writes Ghalib in Urdu for his pleasure. But for her own pleasure, she writes *sabut*-unbroken.

Yeh roti sabut hai.

یہ روٹی طابت ہے
This *roti* is unbroken

A woman can never be broken ("you can step on my nails, I am tamed" is male fable) because she is connection (so many navels, tender buttons), "*Sa Hum*," "I am She," round as *roti*, round as a courtyard where all rooms converge.

This time, when I, woman-writer let go of male instrument language, as if language is mathematical thought (and I never communicate but *ghup-shup*, brouhaha,) caustic lye looses its corrosive temper (mellow melons in a *sarai*) when I fatten (l)ye out of linear with *la la la, la*. "'L,' won't you circle-dance with me?" Lye dances into *lahn*--a melody. Lye-*lahn* aqueous in my mouth. I do nothing (except an occasional splash and soppy melons), just listen to words as they hydra new shapes, the secret (whisper, whisper), they are only *camping* a shape. Meaning is not sufficient for then it is dead (only nails grown in a grave).

This is a porch.

This is a coffee stir stick, forever.

Exotic English only in Britain and North America.

London-Returned accent, Best.

Joke from the colony:

Karume of Zanzibar goes to London after Independence. Reporter asks him, what impressed him most in London? Karume's eyes become huge saucers (no harem beauty can compete to grow such full eyes).

"Do you know," Leader Karume responds, "My friend, leave your words! Even the smallest *mtoto*, not even two, speaks English so very *propa*!"

In this woman's *sarai*, English is not *ways-a-ways* in exotic North but forming out of a mother tongue where food is eaten with fingers and shoes removed outside the kitchen and mosque, where word is open-ended (open-hearted) for shape slides, and meaning must enchant her like a coffee stir stick *is* a pipe. Meaning must make her fall in love. This is why she cannot pay homage from afar. This is why this woman's solidarity with Allah inexperienced because He instructs body tiny and hidden black, out of public space. She must fall in love in order to connect. Her biotic soul bunchy with navels.

Come into my woman's
if you know how to carouse

Amidst the brouhaha in the bunchy courtyard, there is cadence. Lye to *la la la lahn*, a light palm-beat. Here a Teacher cools his pupil's sticky forehead, and a mother's palm like a puffy raga on a child's buttock, "Won't you go to sleep, Derrick?" (Remember Derrick who couldn't go to sleep?)

la la la - puffy raga

la la - part of Allah under my tongue

lala - sleep-lala-sleep child, we are off to Dar es Salaam

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