

Vivek Narayanan

**universal  
beach**

*new poetry*

**ingirumimusnocte**  
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**UNIVERSAL  
BEACH**

*Universal Beach*

Vivek Narayanan

ISBN 978-1-934639-10-8

First Edition, First Printing 2011

Printed in the USA

Published by ingirumimusnoctetconsumimurigni

Digital edition available at [www.ingirumbooks.com](http://www.ingirumbooks.com).

Distributed to the trade by

Small Press Distribution

1341 Seventh Street

Berkeley, CA 94710

[www.spdbooks.org](http://www.spdbooks.org)

Cataloging-in-publication data is available from the  
Library of Congress.

Book design: *wysiwyg*

Cover design: Bureau for Experimental Communism

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Vivek Narayanan

# **universal beach**

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*To the first fam:*

*Amma, Appa, Harini, Gautam, Alli*

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## UNFINISHED BUSINESS

To Bheki who was taken when the earth shook us out of the interior,  
To Shireeza, orchid among the graves,  
To Sweetboy who fell and disappeared,  
To Patrick, drunk saint in shrouds,  
To Daniel, who heard the first knock and  
To the shadow that fell on us,  
Here I shake your hands at my table.



**CAEIRO**



## THE SADNESS OF A DOG

Some now pesters the sadness of  
                  a dog—that ungiven guardedness  
                  at first report of day  
          in a slyly chosen alley;  
not the cat hidden in the bougainvillea blossom,  
not the bull barefaced into the lissome

highway, it's a madness  
                  less to do with mordant Englishness  
                  in a glum phototropic  
          teat, more a perky realpolitik  
in over-familiar mottled skin. That hoarse howl  
at the garden's shrub-ridden edge, that shawl

a woman knits, waiting for a man  
                  who's not her man—not a man at all—then  
                  crouching by the bedpost  
mewling.

\*

When to be tame is at most  
a disavowal in proxy to the master's unacknowledged  
fear: knowing fear as part of privilege,

knowing privilege a state  
                  infeasible, the amenable innate  
                  animal to whom  
          we assign the affectionate name  
—Banga, Napoleon, Spot—bounding resolutely  
into the black-red-greenness of the middle sea—

believes itself to be human  
    in dogly garb, a non-veg incarnation  
    of mortal virtue, no less  
    than a wife, child, comrade in armless  
charms. We nurture this notion, lure it to the rug.

\*

So even if it steal to the street trailing a fog-

-dust deliberate, choosing mangle  
    over matter to be free—deranged,  
    sheltering in a truck's  
    dappled shade, but dreading the hunger-dusk  
or charity at noon—if it claim its independence  
among curs, dodging some dog-chief, teeth clenched,

lurking in building societies—  
    it still will count the hand that carries  
    the house in a fist,  
or follow, for a glance, a humanist.

Paused between doorstep and forest, both gone;  
keeping equilibrium, the sadness of a dog.

## THE HORN

honk honk to your recreant ill-taken haranguing  
hark you horn hark to hysterically uninhabited

habitats horn-charming out of decapitated  
maw's length voice of territorialising  
empires blunt whenever to the point—

o horn animal language in us bellow-wail  
to our snort-grunt combustion our brake-wheel's whistle  
take charge before and after the Accident

. . . but give the little machines their bleat-vote-due  
in a fleet unity of sound: to the illiterate cud-  
chewing cows to the vesper-tringing innocence-

pleading bicycles to death-fishing motorbike lieutenants  
or killbilling walkers—for there's no word for I love you

or please in Horn, no use for it at all in mid-air or in the mud.

## THE BUS

The bus is the longest word in any clause,  
it longs and longs in roars to the soaring road  
of its ambition, squishing to a heart-stopping stop  
on our poker-curb street. The bus was bulk  
delivery for the Cause, but every plan it espoused  
just nowhered you back, loaded  
at the terminal. The bus was the superflop  
of the twentieth century, but persists, our hero, our own Hulk  
in four clangy dimensions, broken askew mirror,  
diesel-guise. Cornered, yes, trounced by new chrome  
warriors, wearing the weight of its passengers  
on straining sleeves, staggering, fury-horse, murder-drone—  
but at the empty hour we shall love you again,  
o free-reigning, greenery-blurring hope-engine!



## THE SIGNAL

In the city of the overblown nose,  
or the city of the spooling hustlers,  
in the village being readied for delivery,  
in the need of knowing when to stay or go,  
we call for the signal and it comes to know  
enough to be the analogue cadenza  
of our once-forbidden masters.

For in the satisfaction of its Janus-pose—  
each face in three hooded body-eyes—  
in its nearly glossalial colour-tongue,  
the signal means to be our friend and the friend  
of another order, in the court or government.

Unbearable inheritance. Choice of chaise-longue  
or freedom of intricate parks. Reason, reprise.

## ODE TO CEMENT

No more than aggregate of settled dirt at spawn,  
fearsome churning poison-river sludge in the boat  
of days. Provenance undeclared. The oath  
of public service, taken on the hill but drawn  
quickly into the meaningful landscape shown  
below—secret equalising flower, spout  
of the ordinary state. Cement is the realest moat  
to ring around the future. A castle to call my own.

We are rough; cement is rough. We carry what  
we know in it. That night we learned to respire despite  
the particulate air, you traced your long finger  
on an inlaid design, a circle inter-cut  
with lines: a mandala in a mandolin, an invite,  
watching it mould us in its slower, limestone cipher.

## THE GOVERNMENT OF THE DEAD

Chipped but multitudinous stones  
arranged in squares or scattered  
about the slopes near the shore,  
parked along the pathways or sequestered  
underground. The only thing we see of them, or  
their counterparts, are these stones.

But in the back behind the lights, in forest  
forts or translucent complexes,  
others decide. A man arrives with a briefcase,  
a new smell follows him from the kitchen:  
they're testing letter-bombs on the heads of chickens,  
in the garden among the hyacinths. Plans upon intricate

wondrous plans. No sacrament, nor celebration, nor regret.  
Only the shadow-hands, wringing the indifferent arrest.

## WIND

If there are others on this page with us, they are marked by a tapering mound of thatch, or the yellow shrapnel of a shrine.

Wind is the hint of what could happen.

## THE PIRATE

The pirate, necessary zero, in the fog  
that exudes from food, cash, drink,  
vaporous innuendoes. He reigns

under the soundless rose, more than human,  
less than cog, playing himself in the happy dark  
who dares to our above, where also

land must spill on land, beneath the black boot,  
in spite of measurements at hand;  
where the slick but shabby goods

put on their preening airs at the counter, on a Friday,  
in a room somewhere. The pirate is feared  
by the captains of industry; they ambush him

at dawn in the market square.  
Who will save us? The malls  
are closed. The sea is dust.

## PROMISE OF AN AIRPORT

Aeroplanes through the wide screen of the departure lounge  
loll like game on the tarmac, snouts improbably curved,  
nibs surprisingly sharp, wings like boats. I think of the word jumbo,  
how easy in the mouth of a child. Taillights flicker to the torso's lumber,  
the sky a river that means the other shore tangible. So clear, so featureless,  
so impossible to see concretely. It's a birdless sky, all surface, all shine.

A matter of waiting until afternoon no longer is. Families  
and businessmen coiled in. The Duty Free shop that needs  
to glitter to survive. Whisky, chocolates, cigarettes—their particular  
version of the universal; the cleaners in uniforms' camouflage, silhouetted  
in bathrooms. Unidentified smoke, spiralling distance. One plane  
climbs towards it with its wheels tucking in.

A child offers me a bitten cucumber sandwich as a joke, then skids away.  
Eternal day. I'm listening to Abdullah Ibrahim's African Space Program  
and on the cover of a snaking dirt road, receding black-grey landscape, single  
human figure. How terrible to think that the city of the future will never  
arrive. Further, past the floodlit horizon, the country swallows the airport,  
makes a village of its bareness: the missing letters of a welcome sign,  
its single citadel, its guardhouse and general store.

## NOTES ON CHRIS HANI'S FUNERAL

Hear It:

abrupt tear in the afternoon, CNN serving biscuits  
in famished living rooms. The bullet was not heard here—  
only your undead voice. Rises, catches, bush fire  
in the jointed bone-stem, in the cerebellum.

Megaphone hour. He feels the sun its sting  
and his arm it needs that motion familiar,  
hand holding brick, hand letting go:  
this is the tenses chasing each other,  
these are the bodies they left behind.

You sit

in the boat while Wordsworth rows in the sea of the skies;  
the republicans have brought revolution to the heavens!  
The world imagined, someone said, the ultimate good.  
Down here your absence wanders restless, things ricochet  
too rapidly, the grieving townships spiral  
into the gold-heart with the force of collapsing moons.  
Chris: the night comes to dissolve the dialectic,  
the morning sings of broken storefront glass.

## FERNANDO PESSOA IN DURBAN

Picture yourself, child, garred  
in a coign of the newborn city:

father and infant brother dead though life,  
that other half of nothing,

spills out the same from the hill  
into the harbour. You take your spyglass to the sea,

late in the afternoon when the big hulls loom  
against the pier, watch the ladies overdressed

on the embankment or the sailors  
tumbling from steamers into bars.

There is a tunnel below  
where the cargo trains go. Could it be

you found on foot  
without the tram for smoothness

west on West towards Victoria where  
in the salt stupor of the market a veiny hand

patted a fat amethyst eyeball in your palm?  
In the freshly planted suburbs, the smoke of wet dirt in gardens:

“Those who do not belong here wear a uniform—  
consider this when sleep falls on you.”



\*

The man who sleeps in your mother's bed  
drinks tea with the British ambassador so

the house is kosmos enough. In one room a calliope  
like an engine plays; in another, a stone horse smooth enough

to ride or a carved wooden mask with a nose-hole  
stinging skin. There's a monocle

and a pipe, a flyer for Ruth St. Denis, there's a feathery moth's wing and  
part of a chewed-up but bright pink Europe.

(You tick in sticky names the pages of your enemies—  
Plato, Ptolemy, Shakespeare, Dickens, Sir Conan Doyle

and the schoolboys who scrape you on the ground until your knees go red.  
You see a girl playing in the street and feel pity.)

\*

“The poet, a fake, lacks conviction:  
he's stuck with both absence and substance.

These are the laws of things,  
this is the index finger, pointing.”

Camoens who sailed in search of Portugal,  
Magellan who wrote his name in the sky elliptical—

that was the country dreamed by pilgrims  
whose tears flowed into our sea—

it was ways to make every estranged brook feel special,  
to hawk deeds of Europe to Asia and vice versa.

Now the cannonade drools and sputters to a stop,  
the ship pulls away from the cliff and wheels

toward a new mass.  
The vespertine light drains by degrees

into the night-time as if through bright  
perforations of stars. The lamps of the ports

dim in economic sequence.  
On the tip of the land's triangle

where you killed the Khoikhoi for their cattle,  
the Dutch are bastards

and those Brits to whom you owe,  
those bureaucrats and beautiful engineers,

are very polite but rather shy.  
They slaughter hearts too, scientifically.

But song remained at close of day. Song took root  
in the decaying estate: song in the house of faith,

alone in the end, after the machines,  
after the former masters,

after the fields, recaptured by trees,  
and the pedigreed dogs abandoned.

\*

Helpless, the love of precision for territory.  
Helpless, your green discoloured bust

on an island among commuters, on the corner  
of Commercial and Soldier's Way.

You are ever a stranger from Tongaat to Isipingo though  
the beaches have been seized and the cuter cottages

turned away from loamy burial ground  
to face a reopened sea.

But we carry Bambatha's name  
in our mouths and inherit your teeth;

the highway gutter-drawls into stacked flats  
or tin doors, curling dirt roads, satellite towns

on satellite maps, and the moon is still red  
and the ancestors reach down like willows.

You among them know well:  
smoking your cigarette, to spite the gods,

writing, "They must eat my little boy or die,"  
as another way of saying, "Let every tongue be foreign."

## FAR ON EARTH

Tittering children rephrased  
voice on voice recorders.  
The fat parents snored.

Through the portholes one peeked  
odourless, unmoveable  
inclusiveness.

Encolourised self-service screens  
digitised these forms,  
offered picturesque alternatives.

Many, many worlds and so much  
variation for our thought to enliven.  
No touch.

Wars, wars. Chewing-gum  
of the economy, some  
chieftain's name.

Oil, blue bananas,  
uranium,  
titanium ores;

residuum,  
plutonium,  
spirochete spores.

These imports in our hull  
underwrote  
our cost-claim.

We drank  
from face-refracting decanters  
in bars,

pined  
for mini-  
eons

far  
on  
Earth.



**2002**





# IN BARODA

## *1. A Boy*

He snaps a rope-whip on his brown torso  
and flays the skin, or so

we are led to belief. Tea, snacks, trinkets  
and us unticketed

appended watchers in a circle-and-tangent  
dance, flame-ish around

him: we blue his bruises by our looking.  
Who's the boy who's making

him do it, what was his name who took  
it away? What spirit yokes

them so? Is it his own body he beats  
or a discrete another? Will it hurt us as it hurts him

when prophecy  
and whim and sign conjoin

confoundingly near,  
here in a theatre of undeniably here?

## *2. Silence*

flown-in politicians  
clap clap clap

flown-in journos  
click click click

and

more can be said  
than ever before,

so

more has been said  
than ever before.

### *3. Hindus on the Moon: The Tale of Pandit the Pundit*

Pandit the pundit, hyper-managerial software king,  
opened an office on the Moon, another on a Saturnine ring.

Far from home he was, among the recognisable debris,  
far from home he was, from his own encrypted history—

it was natural that he find something lacking  
in his new digs: smooth, unplashing, desultory.

Plagued by half-memories revivable—one hope—through charity,  
he plunged his funds into development machines

blind to the warlords there mongering.  
Thus, he blew up his home planet, unaccountably.

#### *4. History*

History in its grand design  
alloys matter and spirit in time:  
Marx in the library,  
Gramsci in the infirmary.

History in its petulant detail  
prefers to sabotage retail:  
now the goondas use computers  
to distinguish their own from others.

When History Big and History Little  
meet at the colonnade,  
a terrible questioning quiet falls  
on the whole of what we've made.

*5. Laughter*

After a massacre  
a call to laughter:

a tinkling thin-brass bell  
buckled under heat, a spell

disjoining. Lapsible, crude  
and bitter hope of return.

But nothing will be the same.  
This house is not your house,

my wanderer. Please, nurse  
your wounds. Recopy your name

in this ledger here, begin.  
Find something to believe in.

## IN BROOKLYN

### *Day 1*

Bright red boots like daybreak, calves oddly firm  
and generous, she dallies in front of him  
like a twist of cursive neon, squirms  
politely while he looks on. It's a lazy  
adventure on these liberated streets:  
many walk with condoms in case  
of surreptitious grace. By subway cafés  
on the quirk of windy March, people meet  
as if by design, then flared flesh  
begs to be pitied, roundly amplified.

Ancient recursion, telltale animalia.  
Even those who are timid and witless,  
ugly, poor or coolly mystified—  
we get our distant kicks too, *inter alia*.

*Day 2*

Getting our distant kicks, *inter alia*—  
globular, limp from long hibernation,  
slouching on curbs with fists in our eyes,  
hair turned to gold, miserably stationed  
pilgrims circumambulating thin air,  
taken to makeup; skinny for fat and rope  
for merely sacred skin. Neither brothel  
nor Orphic charnel house: those selves—self-aware—  
peopled for us like glued mannequins—know  
well we are happy votive morsels  
in their flame (for those same bodies so  
perfect in our viewers’

haze, shiver, once home, in hand-held mirrors,  
repeating their glances at us for hope).

*Day 3*

Repeating *y*'s glance at *x* for hope,  
blinded by the season's unexpected face,  
newly fragrant, sprightly, scrubbed with soap,  
sexy without need for calico or lace,  
summarily sexy before true summer's sloth,  
the body that could be, the body that is,  
homespun how's square-cut cloth.

Fecundity of the dung heap, bright mist  
of mornings, libidinal yaps and growls;  
immediate tingling skin's what's selfish  
in this psycho-physical land, this stark  
sudden effulgence of piercing erect  
colour, grim horizontal need—not sheepish  
genetics, perpetuity's spiralling vowel.



*Day 4*

Dismal genetics, perpetuity's spiralling scowl,  
ghoul of grand regurgitation, seed  
of any idea, your taut-beating tail  
is driven to non-specific need—

as for the rest, only firing neurons,  
activating axons, to blame.  
Big-boobed Venus plastered fain  
on a wall or measured by a column;  
bulging, droopy Adonis too large  
to be true: nature doesn't supply our most-  
current gods, instead the inner draftsman  
models perversely in form's garage—

but no gym or jabbering parlour host  
could concoct my universal human.

*Day 5*

To concoct the universal human

keep in mind deception, pepper with need,  
muddy want with anything you can eat.

Cauterize the telescopic whistle-moan  
with suboptic subtopic fixes

arguing tomorrow's transformation  
into some more tenable connection—

and when tomorrow fails, repackage your tricks,  
renew, let the future be displaced

into its own future's future. Please let it go on.  
Don't shut the highway out, keep it, it's yours,

build bigger things, populate them, and trace  
their whoops and sacrilegiously sinuous whorls

into artless screens: make a plan.

*Day 6*

And make a plan artless when you can,  
for a future so bounded by seasons,  
or the antinomy of man  
and woman, pushes forward like treason  
at the cost of the past, robot undertow.

Too quick the beat of copulation  
fizzles to vaporous exclamation

and the phone calls to friends begin, dowdy diadem  
of hermeneutics, the myth of the bed  
at home, dead, homely death in our world.  
Thus speech takes root among the mammals,  
where previously tainted silence prevailed,

and tempestuous chatter folds in to hold  
the court to order, prefiguring fall.

*Day 7*

The court in session at the hint of fall.  
Eleven days to forget yourself  
in light of the underpinning grid.  
It's a sticky skin, this gulf  
of a newer darkness in between:  
to be single is to be ashamed,  
to cower when the hurting spirit calls  
for body, syllable, blade—but wait!

It's the goddess of mourning desire, who mothered  
that roiling river for a coal-black lake  
in me, it's the goddess of grass and loam, the mistress  
of spherical skies, of undue process!

—And in her eyes clouds can be seen,  
and on her bright boot, daybreak.

**AUTO  
POETRY**



## LEARNING TO DROWN

Before

His older sister let my father sneak out of the house  
so he learned to swim in the Kaveri, splashing wild, staying afloat:

Imagine the strokes into survival, he teaches his son unwittingly,  
not technique, but an instinct for what more there is to water than physics:

*The stone they used to build the square is water,  
which is water before the stone.* Standing after land  
had already spoken in this way to telegraphic water,

I heard his voice. The ice cracked into a hand-drawn map  
of the first, the final continent. A fissure, which is genealogy,  
and this was no different that night on the banks of the Racquette nearly  
unknown to man, footnote to the St. Lawrence, fugue  
of forgotten America—but writ was my name and the names of  
others who had dropped; writ was the name *Racquette*,  
a truce between tongues after slaughter.

Beneath the bridge bending to join the shores,  
taking a looming, unpossessed church for totem,  
I begged my promise, offered myself in heavy boots  
and for a moment misunderstood gravity. I made a drama,  
doubled as witness and mistress. I kindly stopped for time  
because by then he could not stop for me;

and with the darkly dreaming town colluding  
I iced my post-adolescent angst in a heartbeat.

And

A simple plunge will plummet you through the black sky.  
Once, Pamela's palm kept me floating:

in the moment before        of the moment after  
crystallised in between,        Florentine, who can't swim  
stands and watches.        And the houses  
and the bars and        Mary and Jimmy's remorse

and Scooby's and Thatha's commingling,  
and the twenty-year-old who wrote this,  
and the thirty-two years he revised,  
and Jan whose book *The River Why* made him live it,  
and the fifteen-year-old who told himself the tale,

and of the now in which it is alien,  
in the now which was the moment of,  
what can be said, except that the universe stayed mostly empty  
despite the lively plots we farmed. And this  
another fraction of that irrelevance,  
made homely by microscopy.

It was night, but no one heard me.



After

I'm gonna be fished out and slid ashore by three large amphibian policemen  
into an ambulance of quite-serious nurses. To them  
I'll say I love you I love you and mean it  
and though behind the Lynchian curtains of that charming town  
gruesomer tales did exist, for a week I was

the prince of Botswana  
who'd not known ice. The river, perpetual, drawled ferocious  
through property. Dogs barked. I'd bloated my feet  
in these damp very woods. My future flashed past me  
not my past.

“What happened here?” they asked.

“Looking for bodies,” joked Hugh.

(The camera on the graphic of the rescue van;  
later, the bearded radio man.) My newly-fashioned self  
reproduced so—in mouths intent on parable  
or in short-lived digital slivers,  
in the cops who saved my life  
or the frat boys who saved my life by calling them,

in my help-cries that echo and expand  
to burst against the clapboard facades,  
in my legs and torso drawn  
into the maw below  
the dissembling ice floes, air viscous  
as water, the senses slowed and cancelled,  
the image persisting, raveled.

## THE DUMP

The dump is the very sprawl it once preceded,  
distilling our dreams to grit. Mouth at every door,  
abandoned to kitchens, it trailed the radial roads  
and signed the city's nascent borders with its seed.

Half animal, half machine, half sapient, the dump  
is a drowsy interlocutor: itchy newsprint, smeared fat, pitch smoke,  
carburetors, potash alum, fruit husks: submerged in the incessant fill, all  
eat the earth and are mourned.

Your cheap locket, *semblable*, adorns another's neck,  
that of an iron bar. Crows scuff your skin flakes, make strings there of your  
elastic flesh, a patient work.  
The dump will crush your angel on a pin.

## MY FATHER'S WOUND

Avocado trees on the moon. *Aichigum*,  
*mullukumb*, *Billy Blue Gum*. This is not exactly  
a confessional. My father's wound  
was also my wound, dirt outside  
Vedanta Hall, blood in the dirt  
below the gutter pipe, blood like washing  
undone in my banian fold. I am not saying  
that blood was the thing. My father  
was singing. From the tall narrow barred window,  
the gravel driveway, in the heat, my father's wound  
is jelly to the touch. I touch it now.

\*

A broken tree on the floor. Tarzan says,  
"Tarzan save Vivek father wound." "The shadow  
before State House, he will ride his bike no more."  
Once, I looked up from paper and saw the clouds  
move. It was terrible, that clouds  
could move. The clouds moving reminded me  
of my father's wound. I don't care if you like this,

\*

I am going to take my time. My father came back  
from a hernia operation, there had been a mistake,  
the stitches had to be removed. Every day  
I had seen him shaving  
in the bathroom, whistling Balamurali's songs.

\*

“If you’re going  
to write a poem about me,” my father says,  
“don’t forget to mention my daily yoga.”

\*

There is a large glass door looking onto the pool.  
My father cleared that place up. Surrealism only matters  
if it’s real. I listen to Michael,  
Mr. Mister, Genesis. On Kyrie, I saw  
a massive bird block the sky while I blasted  
the song from the car stereo to the playground  
and the driver sat quietly. Did I mention  
we had a driver? He drove me around  
when my father had his wound  
and could not move.

\*

I betrayed that wound. I see it half-formed, my mother  
washing him, his long painful yelps. This was scary,  
to hear those animal sounds. My mother went in there  
instead of me. Splashing. A red oval among the ripples.

## THREE ELEGIES FOR SILK SMITHA

She's the slut  
among white hippies on the beach,  
around the campfire, hot pants  
and an upright ponytail  
for style; she's the dancer  
in metallic feathers  
and red plastic shoes. Foil  
to the gangster's drink,  
blackmailer's bait, the woman  
you never brought home  
to mother, she is  
and is not  
the salt of what she is.

\*

At eleven I didn't know a woman's body  
could be different. I didn't know  
what my body could do. I watched  
terrified, tranquilised. It was early  
for irony. Later without yet a jot  
of post-colonial theory I knew  
that this was kitsch. I was leery of her  
and of the Dancing Queens on TVZ  
who wore tennis shoes below their skirts,  
but I remembered enough to know she had it,  
a shimmer, a hand clap, a match's flame.

\*

My last of her is borrowed too. She hangs  
from the fan of a bright North Madras apartment  
a thin white cotton sari wrapped  
around a blouse equally white; invisible  
by implication, as always was  
her way. A note in Telugu says, “I  
was an uneducated woman. No one  
loves me.” Woman  
of the famous breasts and thighs and  
the only seductive eyes, you were  
the secret darling of Censor Board  
auditoriums—capacious  
and full of faces turned  
from the projection’s  
breaching beamlight.

## NOSTALGIA FOR ELSEWHERE

Not a place itself but figment of place:  
    red guava split on gravel,  
    blackened tongue—its flesh spell  
holds the botched front yard. Neuronal trace.  
But why does it conspire to resurface,  
this *n* years later, this host, this thought-shell—

not the beat but waiting for the beat  
    when space needs time to be space?  
    A tear in the curtain's lace  
my child's fingers found; or, hanging in heat,  
a crow's black graffiti; the flame-red seat  
of my tricycle in Rhodes Park; displace—

each of them—those stories I could also tell—  
    a snake's staggered half-circle  
    in water, that sun-deep hill  
in vesper, or the picture-book's gazelle,  
all once real, now like sonar from a well,  
calling back to where I am, unreachable.

## ORIGINS

I was smooth and spiralled inward. Suspended there  
long after my mother's heaves had run their course,  
after the doctors and midwives had given up. This  
is true: my mother remembers it. Outside the sun  
rained on the hill, leaves dropped  
their shadows, those doctors spoke of lunch. She fought  
through her anaesthetic and begged them not to go—  
I have since learned to leave a place more easily.

\*

Another noon, years apart.  
My grandparents' house  
in Nammalwar's Vinnakar  
is a broad, flat mushroom  
of erupting dirt. They've broken apart  
even the foundation, and in it:  
a blackened lingam. *Who knows  
how old it could be, we'll give it  
to the proper authorities.* With  
the stem of my eye I notice  
our ancestors in the smoke.  
In the meantime, my limbs  
stiffen and a patina forms on my skin.



## IN CHURCH

In a few minutes this empty classroom will take  
the form of a house of worship. I am to play the stranger  
drawn from below an imagined equator  
into the hot flush of a host's handshake.

Who are these people I assume to be the families of farmers  
from their clipped-syllable speech? They sit in rows  
of unfolded metal chairs and sing. I suppose  
they've turned to that crossing spoken by their pastor

and I suppose they want me there with them.  
I, instead, am trying to make this poem  
work its own, different—something. The room, soaked

in luxurious, borrowed light. I follow  
it to the window, in which a single oak  
tree shows through the fresh snow.

## DEATHWISH

I want to be sweet and clear and free, as half a line  
of Auden, or an episode of the Powerpuff Girls;  
I want to be dew, and honest with mine,  
like Bob Marley, or Boesman the Boer.  
I want to swing and get it right  
at the speed of Pollock's light,  
I want to be deep like Zulu,  
tight like Tamil,  
and trust my sense of Sanskrit true  
with little shame for its will.  
I want to dabble in the fields  
ignorant of what I was doing,  
rub myself on the ruins  
with a self-induced disease  
and gleefully lapse  
the hope to be heard. I want to fax  
my favourite English words  
into the forty-fifth century—  
haw, for instance, or luminary—  
hiding them in a snatch of prose. . .  
passed over in silence  
like Wittgenstein, no evidence  
for myself or Laura Riding,  
like Bharathiyar going mad composing,  
I want to dissolve into our language  
printing too little for my age;  
I want to be obscure but not leaden,  
flippant if I feel like it, then  
I don't mind being called poetically shitty  
in a note from Manohar Shetty,  
writing into the time we've borrowed,  
singing from our utter boredom;

I want to hold in me the heat of my combustion  
and leave this sweat-smear as a resurrection:  
I want to be sweet and clear and free,  
insouciant, insufferable, just like me.

## HYMN

My Lord, we will meet only after you have forgotten all about—even you,  
this aging Earth and the rest of us will—me.

We'll meet in this very kitchen. We'll examine each other's faces by the  
microwave light, clear our throats and read from speeches.

I'll remind you to close the door when you leave and when you've left, I'll  
stand in the dark trying to forget what I look like.

## PRIMITIVE LAMENT (MONEY)

Secret handshake by the bough,  
cursive concordat aflame. Motor  
of meaning in matter; eye that is  
not least a sword, sword that is  
not least a gait, gait that is  
almost a dance, dance that is  
—at least—something of an advance—  
spirit that flashes in the palm  
and absconds. Golden mean,  
crepuscular thumb-driven machine:  
where tell me where have you gone,  
money who belonged before to being?

## THE CITY

The city was the facsimile that man built  
in order for a somewhere to suffer inside.  
Its alleyways snarl to help us hide:  
it is a geometry that can eat and wilt

and eat, as we do—in the rooftop restaurants  
with ice clinking in each shivering yellow glass—  
the podgy meal of ourselves, tonight, at last,  
almost. O laughter is the coin this unease grants,

near drear, when cars knead their beat and pretty boys  
and girls emerge shining in rayons or nylons,  
Nikes or boots, and sodium makes a springtime

of one a.m. By the sour-milk death-smell, they pair.  
A woman puts her hand on my shoulder from behind:  
—I wonder if I should turn to greet her.

## TRANSLATION

The black circle of a well viewed from far above. The oblong cut of a shadow on the ground when we walk in it. The heat that flows from colour. Neurosis of the news. A fine day

for a world war; the satellites predict end of rain. "And yet," he says, frowning through the thick knotty paste of his brows, "I miss something."

*I want to make a tree that is so wholly of this world  
it does not resemble what has been seen or touched before.*

*Firelight. "I barely make sense to myself," he says. White man  
cross fjord on horseback with BBC crew. White man wear*

*djellaba. Water leaves circles on paper. Some things expand outward.  
Translation: the act of a stranger reading. What do you hear here?  
Programmed cell death. A rat with a primate ear.*

## ODESSA, TEXAS

One summer, I was hitching through upstate New York and found myself, on the way to Ithaca, outside a roadside bar on the edge of an unknown town. I'd been waiting there

for half the day. Now it was dusk, the mosquito hour, and no one was stopping—unsure, maybe, of whether I was a murderer or not. The bar's neon tubes

came on, and I wondered, would I end up spending the night outdoors again, with a cop's flashlight at 3 a.m.?

A car stopped. It was a nice middle-class car,

a Honda or a Nissan, and in the driver's seat was a fat-faced man with glasses and a moustache. He was grinning. I put my pack in the back seat, part of which was full of some odd

contraption. I got into the front, and we were off.

"Whew," he said, "I'm bushed. Just got done with a good few hours of my weekly tennis." I nodded

in lieu of an answer. Then: "Where're you from. . .," etc.

"I used to be a bit crazy in my younger days," he said, "sort of like you. Lived around, moved all over, worked

different jobs. Some crazy places. Like Odessa, Texas.

Ever heard of Odessa, Texas? Digging for oil. Back then it was amazing money. But dangerous, very dangerous. I mean,

it was nothing for a guy to go off to work in the morning, come back in the evening missing an arm or a leg or part of a limb."

"Really?" "Really."



He was talking, and I was getting drowsy  
from all those fast and sharp curves he was taking.  
I wondered why it was that people told unpleasant stories

driving through the postcard woods in their nice cars, back  
from tennis at the club. I wondered why he was telling me  
the story at all, out of nowhere, what his designs were,

what he wanted. I wanted to look at the trees:  
through the side windows, the trees were dark striations;  
in front, white smoke in white light.

“Odessa, Texas.” The name sounded invented.  
He was still talking when we were into Ithaca, but I  
had lost the thread. He took me to the cheapest motel.

I asked him, “Wanna come in for a minute?”  
“Uh, no, do you mind if I don’t? I have to get back  
and, you know, the wheelchair

it’s just such a pain to get it out.” Puzzled, I looked  
into the car again: the form of his thighs dissolved,  
imperceptibly, dark below the steering.

## VIEW

Spoke once: this railway track like a burnished seam  
sunk into urban smarm, next to highway roar:  
an engine cargoless in midnight's  
smoke; but swank floodlights belittle it now,

shrapnel elision, irresolute, zone-dark.  
No longer could it cleave haves from nots—  
or—carry coal from Canada! Fact:  
all's been done for and said or so they say,

and now it begs me cold on a minor bridge,  
halfway between home and a bright fast dream,  
a last arrival, twinkling in  
a star's auto-retina and not seen.

**PLURIVERSAL  
BEACH**



## BORROWED MYTHOLOGY

A train station in the ancient city,  
scene of a hundred suicides.  
The shunted iron tracks stop just

a little beyond the set  
in ochre surroundings.

Easy contest: the train

in and out of the station,  
heaving pistons, undressing  
in smoke, blunt dance

of dirt-nosed kids, high avuncular  
clock and conductor in shiny uniform,  
matching timetable in hand. And frequently,

the universal moment of the engine  
in a godlike whistle, the lunge back  
before forward, cut to the face

on the platform, cut to the face  
in the window.

The sum of the scene,  
a twinning with the opposite carriage  
that everyone knows.

And then no more  
but the sound of a sudden shower  
on the roof and on the parapet, carried

to the platform part tin part  
thunder, played out as a flood  
on the tracks with dissolving paper

or watery plastic. The heat-stench  
surprised in columns of air.

(Waiting for the square  
of the train in the distance, there's

nothing else, when you're sealed like this  
in rainlight.)

And the parting shot

not the passenger comfortably

heading to end  
of tracks unseen,  
but something taken

outdoors, against a pasture  
or hills: an overhead, why not,  
with the smoke billowing like a dark grey

stain on the scape.

Or the wheels  
dragged past agriculture, camera  
doglike among the crops

so the last not human

but scarecrow fallen,  
a pitchfork stuck in its face.

# HOMELESS MAN WASHING HIS FOOT IN THE BATHROOM OF A BUS STATION

*(Charleston, South Carolina)*

How I trail in,  
desperate to decode or divine the record  
that would open and end  
this ancient ablution under cold fire  
of fluorescent light. How I try  
and do not matter. How I'm left to depend  
on the irregularly regressing detail: his flared  
boots worn thin,

and their flaps, twisted,  
stiff at oblique angles; his jeans darkened  
below the knees and corroded  
in streaks; or his yellow cap  
which still bore, monogrammed  
in green, the cheerful hieroglyph of a former  
employer. And his foot, under the tap,  
unmoving, blistered,

a fat brown eel  
against the porcelain; and the purple  
wash of blood returning,  
veins aligning in branches under  
the chipped-bark skin  
of the image of the foot of this man, who  
with tap water and coarse hands was trying  
to make his body feel.

## MGR MEETS GOD IN PERSON

MGR stands with his cap tugged firmly down his bald head. His jointed cardboard wings blow gently in the breeze. He wonders about what altitude, exactly, he is at. God reclines. "In Brooklyn, a man's body takes orders from a machine."

MGR flexes his muscles a little, throws them into sharp relief against the clouds. God, reclining, flexes back. "In Tamilnadu, an actress eats several thousand meals a day." "They are simple meals."

MGR cracks a nervous smile. Reclining God has been smiling for centuries. "In Tamilnadu, an actress has been reincarnated as the Cutout Virgin Goddess." Men and women reach for fire, for poison, for acid. Funeral pyres perform their duties, bored as bureaucrats: perform, perform, perform.

Somebody, either standing MGR or reclining God, says a word. Maybe two. We cannot be certain. There is no second camera. Men comb their hair briskly to the side, fight like movie stars, drink. Boys fight like movie stars.

MGR, standing, keeps his dark glasses on. Reclining God's eyes are bright but lifeless. Horoscopes predict horoscopes; women marry actors they have never seen. People wait years for the hero to arrive.

MGR stands: cap firmly on, cardboard wings, chappals. God reclines. They have nothing to say to each other. They have nothing to say to each other. They have nothing to say



# THIEF

You, whose story  
the windows tell: you're stealing  
through the spider blinds unruffled. Come,

break for me the silence of these—  
this room, fridge, and store-bought butter,  
and the TV too, though it be lost  
in electric sleep; and these cupboards  
with their syntax of glass.

When you're done, come upstairs, and find,  
on this desk, its solemn arrangement  
of papers. Disturb them.

In the morning you have paid  
a zigzag twine through the gaping front door.

I know you are there. I don't know your name.  
If you come again, I will kill you.

## TRAIN SONG

All the way

from Mankhurd to V.T., the lurching metal herd  
of train compartments follow from  
one another, weary

with obedience. Witness

the crumbled embers of daylight. And witness,  
if you will, the jagged edges of neighbour-  
hoods, the mute succession

of unconnected events

punctuated into progression by the eye's sinusoidal  
gallop, and a steady enjambling traffic  
of lights. Three stations later

an entire row of men

have had time to forget their names. Behind them  
a mother totes a baby in one arm, grabs  
the vertical bar

with the other hand while

a modest planet of paan is born  
from her lips. The train comes  
to come embalmed

by dark. We yawn

around Chembur's clefted shoulder into the city's strangled  
neck, and somewhere in the corrupted distance  
a building falls

abruptly to sleep. Dadar is past and more  
and more fall away—soon the cabin's  
an empty dictatorship of chairs. A man—with no legs  
beautiful voice coarser

than sandpaper molten eyes  
the colour of copper—floats in and out  
of the aisles, sings, “This is the hour  
of changelings,

when cowbells take filmsongs  
into the alleged horizon,  
when the slumlords of the imagination  
come to collect their dues. . .” I

turn. My sixth grade sweetheart  
sits behind me, smoothing out her pink  
multilayered dress. At one station a few stub-toed  
bullies get on; at another,

teachers. Shabani  
(who taught me my forgotten Swahili) taps my shoulder, and I wink  
back at him. Outside, skyscrapers jostling against  
an apportioned platinum sky

shrivel back  
into a wound groin of coconut trees. The train  
stops. Railway tracks  
dissociate their parallel logic,

gnarl themselves  
into the soil, learn to speak the meta-language  
of roots and weeds. Aungier's lined notebooks wait  
patiently in the wings

to give birth

to a city. The legless beggar and I  
decide to sing a duet—

Legless Beggar (*cooly*): Rain in the a-air. . .

Vivek: Where from, my love, where from?

L.B.: Grass on the grou-und. . .

Vivek: How come, my love, how come?

—before the whip of history snaps back to divide

and return: names

from their objects, the train from the tracks, the lathi  
to the rioter's back, me to my seat and the beggar

to his floor. Outside

they're quenching linoleum thirsts

with matches and petrol; the sound

of human ailing grows loud and in the background

the grinding tarmac teeth

of the city. Brakes

harmonise against the surrounding chords

of Victoria's terminus and her impatient commuting broods

that now diminish

in the dim, halted

carriage home. Night ushers us further toward

its collapsing centre, dark matter, in which it is said

the entire pluriverse

will one day reappear.

## PLURIVERSAL BEACH

This night is the oldest catastrophe,  
a writ-large and recyclable entropy,  
and when the sea, loud, labial,  
breaks against the vendor's clang  
by paraffin light, when the ashes sing  
their very odour to the stars, faintly, filial,  
and the plough, the catamaran, the digger,  
the carpenter, listen, when the palms in unrepentant  
yawn begin to deceive, we hear the stars' reply  
through years of curving sky:

“What time has touched cannot be lost to time, or speech.  
Good night, the floodlights on pluriversal beach.”



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Versions of some of these poems first appeared in *Graham House Review*, *Poesis*, *New Quest*, *The Little Magazine*, *Reasons For Belonging: Fourteen Contemporary Indian Poets* (New Delhi: Viking Penguin, 2002), *Franks Casket*, *Fulcrum*, *Harvard Review*, *Rattapallax*, *N<sup>TH</sup> Position*, *Indian Literature*, *Agni*, and the “Talking Poetry” section of *Open Space India*.

This book and the poems therein were published, in differing versions, by Harbour Line Books in Mumbai, 2006. Thanks to Anand Thakore for his heroism as a poet and as a publisher. And to Sarai, for time and space.

