

Vivek Narayanan

**universal
beach**

new poetry

ingirumimusnocte
இங்கிருமிமுஸ்நாக்டே

UNIVERSAL BEACH

Universal Beach
Vivek Narayanan
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etconsumimuramni

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 Shreeza, 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 bougainvillaea 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 mange
 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 glossalalial 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 óur 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,

pinéd
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 politicos
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, unplashng, 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, repack 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 vespers, 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 Bharathiyan 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 neighbourhoods,
the mute succession

of unconnected events

punctuated into progression by the eye's sinusoidal
gallop, and a steady enjambing 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

shriveled 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.”

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