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Francis Raven / Two Poems

A Drawing After the Auction

“After he formed a collection, he would sell it in order to begin another.”

The jug on offer
touches the hare's belly. We zoom in
on the surface
and have no idea
what is alive. The words were privately printed
on the edges of chipped bowls
that each person, each relative, thought they stole.
It's the thinking that is carried.
That's the disagreement.
Someone at the borders
urges us to believe that it is what carries, actively
shaping the water, the pasta salad, even the biscuits.
We are left waiting to leave
with that simple wish in the mouth
that each of them, each sturdy family member
would feel equally foreign and comfortable
in our new circle. We are, after all, what's on display
for the near future.

Kidnapping

The words are used incorrectly to spell

erroneous directions
for
inexplicable reasons.

The rusty salads were not enough
when company was involved.
Thus, we went searching for meat.

It wasn't easy since we kept using the wrong words for things.

They hit me, perhaps with the butt of a gun.
As I collapsed I dialed.
Partial license plate.

The phone is dropped, relieved.
Vision is doubled as it breaks on the ground.

The perfect string connecting sight + the seen,

signified + signifier

word + meaning

and ultimately truth

at the end of the taut wire

has been broken, snapped like a neck

defining squares
possibly leaped upon
in hot pursuit because there was too much time
to believe that the direct route had been used.

The body was apparently burned in the jeep.
It was also a twist of mind, coup de theatre:
the corpses were switched
for live cultures.

I looked away
but did not believe
(even after I was released
and was allowed to see the tape)
that I looked away.

With each moment
judgment is stepping forward.

We are trying to get it into step with
the experience of the men outside the window

who we do not know
but conversations with whom

we have decided will determine
the sociopath's violent plans. But each of us

stops to tie a shoe, to note a stupid bird:
each of us falls behind.

Suffice it to say that I didn't understand the meandering battle
descriptions and needed the intimate details to hold onto, such as

He leaves a replica
For grief

Has stricken

in the holder in the darkroom
without the use of the lamp
after it has been placed in the holder
halves develop and fix with equal
clearness the light may be considered
perfectly safe on development
and if that part of the plate
which has been exposed
shows fog
it is a sure indication that
the light is unsafe

not that they don't eschew the natural
but we all still die, don't we?
We need food
in however many prints can be offered, but

there are limits.
The waters will rise
and our bodies will overflow.

The waters at the edge
will be forced to go somewhere else.
There really is nowhere else.

A conservation takes hold.
What is here will be here.
Nothing will be lost on the sidelines.

We will see all.
We have video cameras everywhere.
People will watch them and they will be overcome with joy
and grief and pride and

past speech is a shortcut into a suspect's current motive:

an object flung over the wall
while ideas turn to the sky.
Every man is at the zenith and then falls
into a coma. There is a triumph
and then you are worse than the same.
You have coveted.
Your jealousy is as good as you could do.

The words always matched up at the end.
Someone had to get credit, had to be paid.

Francis Raven's books include the volumes of poetry, Architectonic Conjectures (Silenced Press, 2010), Provisions (Interbirth, 2009), Shifting the Question More Complicated (Otoliths, 2007) and Taste: Gastronomic Poems (Blazevox, 2005) as well as the novel, Inverted Curvatures (Spuyten Duyvil, 2005). His poems have been published in Bath House, Chain, Big Bridge, Bird Dog, Mudlark, Caffeine Destiny, and Spindrift among others. His critical work can be found in Jacket, Logos, Clamor, The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, The Electronic Book Review, The Emergency Almanac, The Morning News, The Brooklyn Rail, 5 Trope, In These Times, The Fulcrum Annual, Rain Taxi, and Flak.

Subimal Misra / Fiction

In a Deserted Spot Measuring a Foot and a Half

Alexander, conqueror of the world, arrived at the door of heaven ... the guardian of heaven gifted him a human skull ... Curious, Alexander had the female skull weighed against all the wealth in his store ... the skull was heavier than all the wealth in the royal treasury accumulated by him over his whole life ... After much thought and reflection, the female skull's nose, ears, eyes and mouth were all blocked with mud, the five sensory doors were shut ... It was then weighed once again ... They found that the weight of this skull of a female head, once sense-deprived, was entirely extinguished, it was lighter than even a fragment of an ordinary spider-web.

He lay there, a small blood stain on a white wall, four feet pointing in helpless abandonment towards the sky, tail limp, yellow innards spilling out from the stomach, blood, dried up and turned brown, tongue lolling out from one side. The town's road skirted the silent human dwellings and raced ahead, formaldehyde-like pungency in the water, like from a dissected corpse. One could see the bright red horse licking the muddy face, white foam had formed on the two edges of the mouth, a girl walked along beside a boy. Heaps of garbage and carcasses on the river-bank, the shrieks of some dogs and vultures fighting over a half-eaten buffalo ... he swam on the other bank, he, far away – very far away, the shore was hardly visible at all. A tree trunk-like square existence, right under the fiery sun a very ugly woman, her face daubed with colour, she who always left her hairy thighs exposed to the earth, the clamour of killings from all directions, the monstrous woman joyous. Surupa's physical presence could be clearly discerned through the ring-the-beer-bottle gamble, she walked along in the afternoon's desolation, concealed among the scrub and bushes, Surupa, and her fertility cult, imagining infant Jesus in Mother Mary's bosom. Near the green ornamented arch, green men find the much longed for red-coloured machine gun. Soil beneath soil, air beneath air, life within life. A gust of warm breeze floating down from the Bay of Bengal lapped their faces, it burned. Surupa walked towards the concealment of bushes, the red machine gun in a stranger's hands became an unfailing stalker, it spat fire again and again. This illogical body was all that remained, the old, lengthy runaway remained, water fell, drop by drop, snakes slithered all over the body, snakebites. Wild bushes covered the entire courtyard, the sound of water falling on leaves. Rain descended drenching the whole body, which was the arrogant rashness of youth, the killers returned time and again to the killing places, they sniffed the air for blood. Like a meat-cutting cleaver, which was the murderer, it came down again and again on Surupa's throat, her shoulders, back, face, between the two thighs, her body lay clinging to the luxuriant weeds. Before she could even scream she was pulled, seized and laid on the ground, all the invisible pores in every nerve tingled. Rammed down by rods, small pursuits full of high hopes and emotions, small sufferings, small eddies of joy, agitated man – all were murdered. Despite all the events, Surupa's unconventional existence was always present, with the rolled-up, youthful, pure wishes – you look wilted, I hope you are alright? They came after a while, men wearing black masks, we've come to take you, they cuffed her hands, she was made to walk all night long and

taken to the bank of an unseen river, where it was gods' twilight, furious hell, where the gods were killed, goddesses raped, and the entire universe became enveloped in blind darkness. Surupa's pet name is Rupa, did she still do lace-work - did she still love that? The car took off towards the yawning depths, a hand waved, a white kerchief fluttered. Was this a rubber ball flung towards splendour-less death, into nothingness? The table lay soiled after dinner, a male body like a crumpled grey sheet. The death-seed assumed labour pains, between heaven and hell, in a deserted spot measuring one and a half feet, a wooden chair was placed. How long before she touched the sky? A winged horse and a one-eyed demon sprang out from the darkness, tore away with ease her personal purity. Tore away the gold, zari-worked border from grandmother's wedding sari, a sheaf of old letters, silver coins bearing the red vermilion marks of divine offering. Tore away the pastelled kaash flowers, the flowing river. Tore away that pre-marital lover-boy- lover-girl feeling – sari anchal wound around fingers ... lips bitten by teeth ... standing, head lowered, in front of the door ... Now one could see, beside Tristan's dead body, curled up Isolde committing suicide, the climax of love, through the centre walks an arrogant ant, busy at work. A light burned at the paan-cigarette shop on the neighbourhood kerb, a lungi-clad man yawned as he chewed paan. A young adivasi woman with bright red flowers tucked in her hair sat on the bus seat, her young man beside her, both returning from the weekly market-fair, with whom she swayed her body and giggled every now and then, the shrieks of basket-fulls of chickens on the roof of the bus, far away, clouds atop the Massanjore hills. Now there were boys and girls in brightly coloured clothes, love, intimacy, luxurious pebbled paths, marble statues of fairy-like women, the golden dreams of Gariahat crossing. Now Surupa lay completely nude in the water-colour, dense forest behind her, scattered trees, the darkness of vines, tiny drops of purple-red sunset light breaking out above the forest, the dark forms of leaves and creepers in the forest green, and slipped into the middle of all that, spanning the area of vapid light, Surupa nude, Surupa's twenty years old. Nothing much remained now, everything was decided, everything, like an impenetrable lake. Now in the course of the unending journey along an unknown river's bank towards the source, experience, the crow seated on the sill, being depressed, the packet of cigarettes, a few books with torn pages, the suddenly opened door, everything, everything that was one's own, lay behind, flies buzzed around incessantly, almost-deserted, deserted, on and on towards the source. Now he, he alone, like the last runner in a race, who knows for sure that he will never win, but still runs, with his languid, helpless muscles, as a matter of habit. And then, like this, one dream kept knotting itself with another, whose subject matter was the same, Surupa's continuous walk towards the darkness and a red machine gun, the one which at the end of the dream he would pull out of some corner of his body and keep shooting at Surupa's entwined waist, and he would wake up to the sound of that gunfire, all by himself, without shame. It would seem all these were only dreams and in another dream he'd see the incident in exactly the same form, together with all its minute details, it's returned, and again, in yet another dream, he had to murder Surupa. On a melancholy evening in the month of July, he would be raped in front of an unknown, black-masked woman with that same red machine gun. And thereby the killers would be transformed into dreams, the way they had been many times before.

Glossary

zari: a type of thread made of fine gold or silver wire used in traditional garments.

anchal: the pleated border of a sari placed on one shoulder.

paan: betel leaf, chewed with areca nut and slaked lime paste.

lungi: a lower garment worn around the waist.

adivasi: indigenous people of India.

Gariahat crossing: an important intersection in south Calcutta, a Bengali middle-class locality.

This is a translation of the original Bengali story, “Fut dedek aek porityokto jaaygaay” by Subimal Misra (b. 1943), a Bengali writer in India. The story appears in Anti-Golpo Songroho (Anti-Stories Collection), Bitorko, Calcutta, 1999. Translated by V Ramaswamy. The translator gratefully acknowledges the Sangam House Writers’ Residency for enabling this translation.

Subimal Misra (b. 1943) is an anti-establishment and experimental writer in Bengali and lives in Kolkata. He has written exclusively in small, limited-circulation literary magazines (or little magazines) from the late sixties. Almost thirty volumes of his stories, novellas, novels, plays and essays have been published. The Golden Gandhi Statue from America, a volume of his early stories in English translation, was published in 2010.

V Ramaswamy lives in Kolkata. He has translated The Golden Gandhi Statue from America by Subimal Misra.

Merlie M. Alunan / Two Poems

Dancer

This too familiar territory—
tight fit of skin over flesh,
the bones' strict measure,
tendon and muscle harnessed
to lift, stretch, sway, bend
to a design—space, the finity
of her body, she makes
or unmakes with a gesture.

She flutters a hand and history
breathes—innocence returns,
sin ripens on the tree of knowledge,
death comes to be. She leaps,
the future gathers at the point
of her feet—memory resurrects
—wefts of our common hope.
Within the known ground
of her limbs flexing, shoulders
straining, breasts thrusting,
head upturned to the unseen stars,
the world in a second held captive
as water sleeps, tamed for the while,
in a vessel of fragile clay.

Oceans may crash in her veins,
in her blood unseen rivers roar
in flood, but what she knows
within her flesh we cannot see:
wind lingering over valleys
of her need, her hair a thicket
of dreams to snag the moon
in its tangles, in her womb
a well full of shadows.

What eternity of sky yearns,
empty behind her far gaze?
Beneath the tempo of her gait
the hidden idioms of her flesh.
We sit and watch, testing
our truths, tasting our passions
in her grace. Her body stays,
weighted to its changeless fate.

**On a Lost Ship to Erehwon,
Or the Poet's Fate**

“...lazy scoundrels, all, all,
not a one to scour the deck, pump bilge,
man the spars, stow coal. Won't fight,
I'd wager a keg, since none of the lot
can tell a sword's tip from its hilt,
certainly won't obey anyone's orders,
or if they would, whose, when, what—
aiiee, who's to say? For sure I know
they'd rather have the cat o' nine tails
on their backs than spit a secret
or rat on a mate, aye, till their flesh
becomes shredded meat. I've known one
to laugh, even sing, the bastard swine,
till I smashed with my boot heel
the insolent mouth—

And the woman, ah, the woman—
sullen bitch, with a tongue like razor.
Beautiful but dead fish cold, aye, despite
those eyes, those eyes, like burning coals.
Won't cook, sew, spin, won't even breed,
so what's a woman like that good for, eh?
Sooner scuttle the damn lot than waste
rations, and water, precious water, for them,
what with this sea so endless, the ship lost,
and the wind suddenly so unreadable.

“What they'd agree to do? Who knows?
The woman would sit for hours on the prow,
death-silent, staring at the sky as though
her eyes might bore holes there for some word
to get through, or whistle softly to cajole wind—
to yield what? A sign, a sign, they say...

“Ah, the sign, the sign—they talk about it
but no one could say what it is.
A cradle, a star, a cross, a grave?
A wrinkle in the wave, perhaps,
a sudden bird, yes, perhaps a bird,
or a voice, even a hand parting the clouds
to show some hidden shores they see

in their dreams, divine by faith, conjure
with words no one could understand—

“Hah! We cannot eat words, drink hope,
live by faith as they seem able to.
We don’t thrive on shadows.
Land, land’s what we need,
and bread for strength,
and cunning to plot the means,
might to cut the proper deed.
I’d die anytime for country and king,
or if not, for a day more to breathe,
for a thimble of whisky, for a quid—
all the same to me if that’s all that’s left.
Now then, tell me what these scoundrels
will die for.

So then, what’re we waiting for?
Lighten the ship, give the sharks a feast
they won’t long forget.
Throw the beggars overboard.”

So they did.
And promptly made it to Erehwon.

Merlie M. ALunan lives and works in the Visayas, in Tacloban City in the island of Leyte, the eastern seaboard of the Philippine Archipelago. She has four published collections of poetry: Hearthstone, Sacred Tree (1991), Amina Among the Angels (1997), Selected Poems, and the latest (2005), Tales of the Spiderwoman (2011). All of these poems have been recognized by the Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Poetry, an important literary contest in her country. She writes in English and in her mother tongue, Cebuano.

Sharanya / Two Poems

[Advertisement] This season, on sail

String instrument for sale
Timeless silk cold grey steel
untuned sound of leaves falling
Volumes of sheet music
accompanied by temperamental percussion
Will produce eulogies for black umbrellas
and exhaust fumes
and symphonies for the walking dead
Trees will sway
Birds will sing
Hold out your palms
and let the wet strings slice through them
there will be only skin
they are daggers of the sky
coloured by light.
Price on request.

Siddhartha; or A Love Song for B.I

Let us ride the chariot of our separation
Across the red-limbed sky of the future
Yes, let's.
Let us crush stalks of satisfaction from yesterday
Dead droppings of our ascetic flesh
Yes, let's.
Let us hold each other's
Morning breaths
And fondle each other's atman
Yes, let's.
Let us taunt those fading scriptures on our lips
From shared cigarettes and saliva
Yes, let's.
Let us throw the bones of our promises into the sea
And hope they will dissolve into someone else's
Yes, let's.
Let us pick scabs of old teachings off each other
Scabs from a renounced world
Where our fingers touched through glass
And our words became ash
And we held each other's memories
Like holy water on our palms
We are samanas of shared habits
Shared flesh, shared maya, shared lack
Of each other
Our begging bowls are nourished by fresh desire
And our samsara of little deaths and twined thighs
Has seen several ends.
This is the Truth
Isn't it?

Sharanya is 21, and is currently in a long-distance relationship with Bombay. She tries to write.

Matthew R. Loney / Fiction

The Vagrant Borders of Kashmir

DIESEL FUMES SPIN FROM EXHAUST PIPES, vaporous tails in the hot morning air. Autos weave past on the street below already lifting sharp odours of cabbage, market peels, baskets woven from wet grasses. Blistering sun pulls sweat to my forehead, that feeling of being lost I always tried for as a kid and only finally succeeded at. Veneer of sand blown from the beach spread over asphalt. Through the palm trees the ocean rolls, spraying salt into the whole nostril mix of things.

Panaji Hotel rooftop waiting for breakfast with Ari.

Goa.

Ari leans over the concrete railing, peers down at the growling traffic. Shoulders brown as the milk coffee at my lips, tan still glistening with edges of red from yesterday's hike to the hill temple. Climbed together in the heat of the day with one water bottle to share until the top, sweat that dripped from his upper lip onto the plastic opening, handing it to me. Now standing beside a nest of electrical wires pinned to the corner of the building, he says – An army truck down there's unloading bags of onions – turns to the table – What are your plans after this?

–Probably head to some smaller beaches for a while. Couple of months maybe. Then Mumbai, Jodhpur, Agra, Kathmandu. Tibet if money doesn't run out.

–And Alexis?

–Don't know. I'll stay with her most likely. At least until she's better. You really have to go? Bonderam festival starts in a week. Shame not to go all together, we'd have fun for sure...

–No, Cam. Can't do that. Manobhava is only initiating disciples for another three days. If I leave tonight, I can just make it to Jaipur in time. A train from here to Mumbai, Mumbai to Bhopal and should be a few hours to spare when I get to Jaipur.

–And if anything goes wrong?

–I've got to try, Cam. You know this is important to me.

Alexis' room smells rusty like sick. Daylight filters between cracks in the orange curtains, dusty air-con sitting broken on the window ledge, her in a dirty white tank-top sprawled on the mattress, breathing at least. Wooden door to the bathroom is open so walk across the cool tile, check if her water bucket is empty.

Whisper – I'm going to the end of the hall to fill your bucket. Do you want me to bring you anything? – thinking, *damn this bad timing* and her so afraid to drink the sadhu's water in the first place, believing it was full of parasites. Had said – This is a really shit idea, Cam. Look at the water. I

don't care if he's holy or not – then the sadhu dipping cup into basin, holding it out first to Ari, then me, then a family of Indians as we waited for Alexis to decide. The sadhu's dark eyes and beard, loin cloth, painted red forehead and Ari looking at him like he was really incarnate, with that full open stare like he wanted to put himself inside the sadhu's body to feel what it was like to actually live that other person, saying as he watched – What little we can get away with. A cup, a bowl, a stick of incense... *Namaste* – Always that rush inside making you wonder – *what if I just left it all?* – abandon, remove myself, join that bony sadhu on his mat and meditate until the monsoon, gather my things like a turtle and camp for ten years in solitude beneath the nearest sandalwood tree. Knowing that's the better choice, but that catch...a barb on a catheter.

Fill bucket from the faucet at end of the hallway, window open out onto the street with sacks of onions being unloaded. Tiny lizard – a soft translucent comma above the tap – then a Sikh man with blue turban stepping out of his room with his bucket. Smell of his oily beard in the heat, like wet coins, wet cardboard. Don't know if I could convince Ari to stay, with the time it takes to get to Jaipur and him feeling all fervently reborn since meeting one of Manobhava's disciples on Miramar beach, a French kid named Gilles whose eyes had said anything but trust me. Alexis and I swimming in the tumble-brown surf while the cattle chewed their cud under the palm trees, Ari standing waist-deep in the shallows with the French kid, saying – This is so interesting, because I've been hoping to find someone who knew a guru. Manobhava, you say, is a good teacher? I'm looking for someone with deep integrity, an open soul... – like a wound or a jar, I wondered. Open shifts into various forms.

Sikh man tilts his enormous beard at the tap, me walking back to Alexis' room with full, sloshing bucket. Don't know if I blame the sadhu entirely, Ari and I both fine after drinking his sanctified water. But the mind projects what we already believe. Then her telling that awful news about her failed attempt and Ari saying – Now, that's what I'd have done. Nothing like bumming through India to help you forget your own misery – And Alexis with that look of wanting to say, *shut up, you can't possibly know anything about it*, so I said – Just the next thing. After something like that, just have to do the next, normal thing – That was in Varca where we first met, Alexis' hair in tattered red dreads, pupils black and open and the sense that she had wandered away from something horrible and was trying her hardest not to remember where it was.

Ari puts on sunglasses – That French kid, Gilles. Such a young guy but he knew so much. It's amazing! He went to Manobhava's ashram in Jaipur at seventeen, left his whole life back in France and said he never looked back.

–Is that what he did.

–I'm serious, Cam. If he can do it, why shouldn't we? You and I both know this is how we should live. It's just a matter of finding the balls to take the first step.

Thinking, *that's fine for you to say*, then suddenly being hit with such a surge of jealousy that I look away because I know what this is all about, and then with the nerve to talk of finding the balls. *That's fine for you to say.*

Indian man, slim with black moustache brings breakfast plates and sets them on the table. Bead of sweat polishes his jaw on its way down from his brown temple; hesitant smile apologizes for bad English – Okay everything, Sir?

Then Ari says he wants another cup of coffee and the man backing away from the table like he's been told by his boss this is how you serve them, no matter what they ask for.

–See that? That's the problem right there! We've captured him. I'd get my own goddamn coffee but these structures are in place to prevent me from doing it. I'm talking about leaving all this behind. Manobhava's teachings will take us this direction. I want you to come, Cam. Why not come?

–What about Alexis?

–I don't know why you take such responsibility for her. Honestly, Cam, she'll be alright. India is full of sick people. Shitty thing, though I'd have run the same way if I was her. But this is about something bigger, Cam. It's a question of priorities.

Priorities. That widening tower built too fragile at the base, tapering outward into a precipice, vertigo, adrenaline of overhang, threatening crack.

–It's what you do when someone's sick, Ari. Would be the same for you. But I'm happy for you, I'm sure Manobhava's what you're looking for.

Man with moustache sets coffee on the table.

–Well, anyways – slips feet out of his sandals – There's no convincing me otherwise. I'm leaving for Jaipur tonight.

Our bare feet on the concrete nearly touching, rumble of army truck below on the street, that constant friction where our insides meet weather, senses, chances to abandon for good our lives boxed up in storage rooms, everything planned on going back to, vanished.

Not vanished. *Deserted.*

–How long are you planning to stay there?

–A year. Maybe two. I don't know. There's no point staying for less than that. Transforming yourself the way Manobhava teaches isn't some spectator sport. I know how much you like to dip your feet in to gauge the temperature.

–You can't blame me for being cautious.

–That's it! That's your weakness, you finally admit it. As much as I admire you for everything else, you're too damn cautious.

Precipice. Flailing hooves grasp for purchase on the crumbling rock edge, whole herds falling through mid-air. A shower of wool sprays over the cliff side.

Water bucket back to Alexis' room, her meagre body curled beneath the mosquito net, condensation slinking down the sides of a water bottle into rings. From the doorway, smell of sick,

stale heat of a dark room at noon, women from the market outside sold all the goods from their tables now load empty baskets onto carts attached to donkeys, morning earnings tucked away safely in the blouses of their saris. Over a billion scrounging daily while a humid breeze creeps along a dirty, paint-chipped window pane down to the sweat line where it releases its coolness.

–Cam? – Alexis’ dry-throated murmur – Can you get my sheet? It slipped off the end of the bed.

–Yeah. Filled your bucket too.

– I haven’t felt this horrible since I left to come here. It was a mistake to trust that sadhu.

–Ari and I are fine, though. It couldn’t have been him. Must have picked up something else.

–No. That’s not how these places are. He was there to steal our money and you and Ari walked me right into it. You’ve always kidded yourself that way. Especially with Ari. But that’s how we survive, I guess. That’s how we get away with standing in the middle of this huge pile of shit thinking we’re completely safe when we’re not. No one is and that’s the goddamned rule.

Sikh man passes the open door, glancing with turbaned head into the room. Pauses with bucket then continues down the hallway.

–Ask him if he has a cigarette.

–I’ll come back later to check on you.

–Ask him for a cigarette, Cam. I’ll share the smoke with you.

–Do you want food?

–Oh, just fuck off then.

Shutting the door, fresh breeze of the hallway. But her face, clamped teeth of devastation like a bear trap. Can’t say what I would do in similar circumstance, surviving your suicide and own father finding you in a bathtub of blood, but would certainly drop the floor out from under you – that damned eternal precipice, wide eyes, teeth tongue teeth, rabid frothing lips. Can’t say what I’d do or who I’d blame. Alexis telling Ari and I the whole story at the guesthouse in Varca, me thinking – *That’s fine, we all travel for different reasons* – Isn’t always with obvious purpose but everyone comes to India for one reason or another perspective. Maybe just to jump the fissure and for gods sakes, what’s wrong with fleeing if it saves you?

Ari glancing at the clock on the inside wall, says – The train doesn’t leave for another four hours. You could change your mind. I want to give you that option.

Say – That’s fine. But I don’t want to leave Alexis alone with all that to deal with.

–There you go being cautious again, Cam. I hate to think what’ll happen to you if you don’t start saying fuck it. The deep end is shallower than you think. But hey, that’s your decision to make.

Dark eyelashes, hint of Spaniard slouched in plastic chair looking over his bronzed shoulder toward the railing. That envious leanness to his movements, like a man being trained to fight or jump hurdles. Tough gristle of sinew snagged between dogs’ teeth, thigh bone clamped in salivating jaws.

In Varca: Alexis, Ari and I in the guesthouse restaurant overlooking the beach. Three beers sweat their rings onto the plastic table cloth, TV in the corner of the ceiling reporting a family of Christian missionaries burned alive in their car by Hindus in the eastern state of Orissa. Motive cited as forcefully trying to convert the poor. Quick smack over the thick sucking fuselage of a horse fly. Note: Desire to eradicate our annoyances, dreams of peace without the bother, cremation fires licking through the tough-skinned corpses of obstinacy. How a handkerchief over the nose easily blocks the acrid smoke of burning rubber.

Ari looks away – So simple just to demolish your misery, isn't it? Just put your neck through the noose and pull tight – Or crash the car, he means, swallow pills, aim the barrel, split the skin. Takes balls to let the fuckers live and suffer through.

Alexis wide-eyed says – I'd dare you to try. Takes more guts than you've got – then pulls up the sleeves of her cotton shirt revealing without warning the still-red intersections on her wrists, as if to say – Don't underestimate the balls it takes to end it.

Ari saying – Now, that's what I'd have done. Nothing like tramping through India to help you forget your own misery – But Alexis with that look of wanting to say *shut up, you can't possibly know anything about it* and Ari and I wondering why or how or if anyone knew she was here or if she ought to be. Said she left Toronto a day out of hospital, flew into Delhi, hitchhiked with two Australians to Agra, Kanpur, Varanasi, but said the food sat strangely in her stomach and besides, she didn't like the feeling north Indian men gave her. Dirty auburn hair matted back in salted dreads, angular face with sly nose, cigarette dangling from lips as she bends to rip loose the threads unraveling her skirt. Then wondering what torrent of desperation had carried her to the brink then pooled there waiting as she surveyed her dismal hellscape then swept her over from behind. And why, as she was falling, didn't her arms suddenly flail and grab hold of a tree root, crumbling overhang and wrists trailing blood down to her elbows, not pulling with last strength back over the ledge?

–I don't know what possessed her – Ari says as the rickshaw weaves through dusty traffic from Panaji out to Maruti temple, the driver chewing betel nut, red saliva filling the sacks of his cheeks then spouts from his mouth a thick splatter onto hot pavement – I'm sorry Cam, but I just don't understand it, what drives a person to that?

–Probably wanted to break free of her container – then thinking why all this to enclose in the first place? Why so many walls and edges, damned precipice you either fall over or turn back at?

Then him looking at me, long with deep sunned face, unshaven black scruff of the subcontinent traveler – Cam, I don't live by those rules. You see the way the men hold hands here? We'd think little or nothing about such preferences if our society simply ignored them. You're too damn careful. I hate to think where that prevents you from going.

Rickshaw halts by the base of the hill. Sun hits the dry stone in full glare and blaze, earth strewn with yellow boulders, mix of shrubs, clump grasses, heat and distant knock of cowbells. Two boys crouch in the ditch and catch crickets by hand, hold them up to their noses then release them

back into grass. Maruti temple perched high on the hilltop with a granite trail winding upwards and behind, a lone sadhu cross-legged beneath an overhang. Climbing in the noontime heat, wondering about Alexis and how many of us stare out over the rims of escarpments onto weaving river valleys below, haze of smoke, exhaust, precarious footholds, whatever it is that keeps us from vaulting over.

Ari stops beside a boulder, looks at me then drinks from the water bottle. Beads of sweat on his upper lip collide with the plastic opening, rhythmic gulps of his Adam's apple, glint of his saliva as he passes the bottle to me.

I say – I want to get to the top before long. Let's not lose momentum or there'll be no place to go when the sun goes down.

Late afternoon light filtered dark through closed curtains. Mosquito net pulled to one side of the bed, Alexis sprawled, bottom sheet tangled around her feet like a collapsed shadow, revealing the dirty mattress.

–Cam? – pale voice from the pillow – Cam, I feel so horrible. I shouldn't have come here. I brought all my miserable shit with me, just clung to everything, Christ. Did you bring a cigarette?

–No.

–Has Ari left?

–Not until evening. His train leaves at six, I could tell him to come say goodbye, he's only up on the roof.

–No. Don't do that – then the gentle hush of footsteps in the hallway, the Sikh on his way to the water tap – Has Ari said anything to you?

–About Manobhava? He's convinced it's what he's supposed to do. He's asked me to go with him but I didn't think you could manage...

–Not about that – Alexis pauses under the distant rumble of army truck, bringing hand to her forehead, wipes sweat, eyes half-hidden behind fissured wrists – I slept with him, Cam. I didn't know if I should tell you.

Crack.

Instant in mid-air when all four appendages thrash at sky, cantilevered cliff side pulls away, neck muscles taught with impending skull smash. Ten seconds of free-fall, that mountain range rising from haze, heat of the rain-starved plains and city exhaust smogging the distance all the way from Panaji to Pune, Mumbai, Silvassa, Ahmadabad, Jaipur, Delhi, then north to the foothills of the Himalaya, the vagrant borders of Kashmir.

–When – I ask.

–The night we all first met in Varca. I went to his room when you left and he told me to come in. He must've felt sorry for me, I don't know. I shouldn't have told you but I thought it's better you know. You don't hide that sort of thing from a friend.

Windowsill vibrates dead carriage of horse-fly, brittle paint chips, dust-drift, army truck emptied of onions pulls away vanishing into the swell of Panaji.

–You think you have a right to be upset, Cam?

–I'm not upset...

–Because it's times like this...– she says – when you're the loneliest, when you've exhausted all your other options...that nothing at all really feels like the better option. Goddamit, I shouldn't have come here. I know that now. There were a million things I could have done but I came thinking somehow the heat and the mess would distract me. And now being alone in this room for hours and hours...as bad as it was before, this is worse. I know he means something to you, Cam, but he felt sorry for me, I'm sure that's why he did it. It meant something to me too, just to have that body. And it means something that I can tell you...

–I'll come back to check on you. I'll tell Ari you're feeling better. He'd be happy to know that.

–Jesus, Cam. I just thought I should tell you before he left. Bring me some water when you come back. And for Christ's sake, find me a cigarette.

Condensation maps highways down the plastic bottle, Ari lifting his shirt, wiping forehead sweat. His taught abdomen, a line of black hair from his navel until waistband. Behind his head in a breezeless sky, two black pinpoints circling, their hawk-eyes spotting field mice. Ari says – We'll be back before it's dark. Not to worry – then put my lips to the mouth of the bottle, wet of his saliva, that constant sun and the feeling that sooner or later all of our subterrains eventually bubble to the surface and why not here in India where it's easy to get lost and change forms? Hand the bottle back and watch him drink a second time – *There*.

An hour of climbing later, arriving at Maruti temple with a view stretching out over the boiling plains, smudge of Panaji then the whole vast linear ocean in the distance, all those hidden troughs and ridges that tower beneath the water in submerged marine continents. Us on the stone railing that perimeters the temple, legs dangling down towards scrub weeds, a child tapping our shoulders holding out marigold garlands with one hand and the bells from the temple in the background. Priest wakes the monkey god Maruti from his sleep and gathers handfuls of herbs from the glacial streams that spill from inside icy Himalayan crests, faithful devotee of Rama, kind simian of loyalty and thunderbolt. Boy with marigolds lingers behind the shade line, shadow from the roof cutting across his bare feet, brilliant loops of tangerine over arms, then turning away, ducks inside the temple bordered by tall grass. Ari looks at me, smiles, moves his knee until it rests against mine.

Says – What little we need, don't you think, Cam? Isn't this what it all boils down to? Just two simple creatures, happy in their circumstances, contented apes with their arms around each other, surveying the jungle?

–How you put things – I say – makes me think there's something meaningful under all this mess. I'm glad you brought that water bottle. It's difficult to think ahead sometimes. I don't mean you can never...not plan for things. But during the day, with the heat...

–Come to Jaipur with me – then his quick kiss on my cheek, soft as bread mellowed in milk at the bottom of a bowl. Toes slip over the threshold, swift skid down the slope into scrubland, pebbles

ricochet off fibrous plant stems, avalanche of crumbling dirt, torn roots and foliage – Let's go to Manobhava, Cam. Vanish together.

Together. Like a split shadow retracting into a common core, snake tongue moist with information coiling back into scaly mouth, glazed eyeballs, dragging tail with rattle: A smooth, vulnerable belly.

Then leaving Alexis' room with the slick crash of everything finally shuddering into position, shards of venomous metal lodged in the pink esophageal tunnel, palm trunk rubbed raw scabbing over with thicker bark. That aching chain and leg-iron, motorcycle roar like suddenly flying over the handlebars into a wire fence strung with barbs. Peel away, quivering wedges of flesh left dangling. Short pause before blood, urge to vomit, then choke, then sob.

–You are taking such good care of your wife – Sikh man in the hallway, grey beard tumbling over his face like the waters of a river rapid. Eyes I'd normally avoid but now feel like a deep well, brimmed with salve and calm.

–No – and then – I don't even know her really. I filled her bucket, that's all. She can take care of herself. I'm leaving tonight...

–May I ask how you enjoyed Goa? Beach parties are so popular with the tourists. Did you come for beach parties?

–No.

–If you came to see a guru, you should really go to Jaipur. Jaipur is most famous for its gurus, you see.

–No. I didn't come for that either.

Smile curls beneath beard – Tourists only come to India for two things, either parties or gurus. Am I right? No? But then I am something of a tourist myself. I am from Kashmir, north of the Punjab. I've come to Goa on business as a seller of pharmaceuticals. Have you ever been to Kashmir? – Thick fingers comb, gather wisps at the base of his turban, twist and tuck back inside – It's the most volatile and beautiful place in the whole country. Our borders change constantly so the Punjab people are scattered everywhere throughout India. Such a phenomenon, don't you think? How people place themselves in this world?

–*Are placed* – think. Borders have a tendency to rake and gather.

Then that lizard on the wall behind his head poised with suction feet, droplets from the faucet down water bottle, upper lip, jaw line. The slow, tenacious force of liquid traversing surfaces, dangling from edges, held suspended by an eternal fidelity to identical molecules.

Then feel myself move closer to him, seeing the pores on his cheeks like divots in a full brown moon, ferocious grey beard and me not knowing anything except for a shattering loneliness that creeps up from my belly into the cave of my mouth, burns at my teeth and then suddenly pours out in a cascade of hot, violent sobs – a mustang leaping wild against his paddock. Then his arms gather around me, strong and muscular as I give in, laying against the warmth of his skin through cotton

shirt, smell of curry heated through sweat, faint cologne like wood-chips and mineral. My frantic breaths through scattered weeping, the Sikhs' hands on my back pulling me into his shoulder. From the inside of his chest, I hear him offer a deep bass of soothing, empathetic moans, that nook of his neck taking my tears as he rubs full-palmed against my skeleton of quivering weakness. Then, feeling like a thin fragile cloud just been spent of its thunder, he takes my shoulders and holds me away from him.

He says – I hope you manage to get to Kashmir someday. It is really the most beautiful of places on earth. I sincerely wish you that pleasure – then dropping his blue-turbaned head in deep conscious bow, turns, disappearing to his room.

Then down the hallway to mine where I gather belongings from a water-marked table, lighter rings where the varnish disintegrated. Passport, handkerchief, Aspirin, guidebook. Backpack with t-shirts, sandals, plaid longyi I huddled beneath in the rocking carriage of the night train from Bangalore weeks before. Dim mounded bodies three-tiered under cabin lights and ceiling fans, an Indian man reading his Bible by penlight curled on the middle bunk. Crossing the Western Ghats with the pole star glowing out the open window, humid night breeze wipes across foreheads, the passing lights of the countryside. Zip pockets, hoist bag on back, glance beneath the sagging bed frame for the plastic bottle cap I dropped last night but never found. Leaving Goa. Away from Alexis. From Ari. From that curse of water bottles, accidental knee-touch, hallucinated kiss on the cheek meant to capture me. Forget them. Thirteen hour night-bus north, to Varanasi instead where troops of monkeys perch on temple rooftops, the promise of sunrise over cleaner rivers. Flatter, more forthright ground. Dreams of peace without the bother. White mineral deposits, bubbling subterrains, a glistening wet trickle over snow-dusted rock face, storm-front cirrus, oxygen, the cobalt blue of sky over wild and treacherous borders.

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Conversation

The mad man is sitting on the high chest of drawers
pretending it is a throne.

He speaks of how once he saw
a sunbird at the ventilator
making a nest with sunlight for hay.

He speaks of how he felt this strange urge
to feel its heart beat between his thumb and his fingers
He tells me how, it wasn't the first time that he had felt this strange need
to intrude upon the sanctity of another life. He spoke of his

"afternoon of nothingness:"

"That day,"
he said looking both serious and callous, like a hooker reading *Freud* under
a lamp post, that he
picked *jamun* fruits in the garden,
drawing into sense every groove of seed and every absent texture.

Then with a lobotomized look that *sadhus* get after thirty years of routine *ganja* in the Himalayas,
he said,

"The carton of *jamun* fruits had become heavy
pregnant with pink seeds and purple flesh. All was a cryptic blackness-
substantial like milk."

Then he paused and trickled time through the hourglass,
reordered shells from no-man's land, laid it all out like a pack of cards
and looked for God's symmetry of existence - "It does not exist", he said looking momentarily
nihilistic.

His eyes and thoughts, angled back to his "afternoon of nothingness"
that was already full of things I'd do over a whole week. He continued,

"That was when, the bulbuls arrived-

flapping, red-fire streaks or blood masks, with their rituals
and rounded breasts; their crisscrossing
like a loom or the silhouette made by mating snakes.
Acting up, in the formal ways
of Russian mannequins. Fluttering past with gilded optimisms,
to their enviable families."

His eyes were intense now, I leaned in as he told me of all his murderous intentions:

*He climbed the wall to the parapet,
that housed the bulbul's nest
a delicate vine climbed alongside.
There were three eggs in the nest
and the parent-birds hovered like cupids
on a love patrol, only they were hostile.*

*When he was done with the eggs,
and then with the birds
he picked up these huge garden scissors,
the latent malice of which, diminished his
and let him feel like the Beauty of the Beauty and the Beast fame.
Then he headed to that damned rose garden with
"its venetian green walls, daguerreotype lighting,
and its pretentious English-hat flowers,
its slender silhouettes, thorns and
its cut propagation - unholy"*

In a positively murderous rage, the culmination of which
"you must not stop"

(His eyes gain focus like a Black mamba ready to strike.)

He headed to the ant hills with his oversized feet, lanky limbs and full bladder.

Then with nothing left to do, or to safely destroy without being hurt,
tired with the exploration of the violence of nature, the sanctity of death
which, "if you over do, your brain turns mucky,"
he headed to the mirror with a smaller pair of scissors
and gave himself a haircut.

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Holly Johnson / Prose

Lorca

I cannot claim that I do not desire recognition like that. I want understanding.

I want to experience that which I covet and to be lauded for that which I experience.

Interesting that my need for understanding can be so- seemingly- fulfilled by a need for physical contact. But would a physical contact in reality embody that which created the desire initially- a nonreality?

I watched his eyes dart with the intensity of the emotions he played. I felt his breath on my skin as her skin puckered from the actuality of his breath. He and she were investing their souls in every moment. The moment was their salvation, and in it, I was redeemed.

The art of passion can be two things: 1) a physical union of sexes and, 2) a non-physical union of souls. The non-physical is what I witnessed. The air between their bodies was vibrantly thin. The restrained power in each grasp sang volumes of intent. The push of pulses to beat in tandem enveloped the existence of the outside world. To leave this was to kill the creation of blissful sorrow.

I created with their moment. I inhaled the fervor of their sweat. I crept from seat to stage to soul only to perish as their lips parted. Bodily pleasures can know no depth such as this.

Call it a consummation of spirits; call it a welding of wounded beings. My love was born and was killed in that hour, and that hour will remain the most awful of my life.

Author's note: Lorca is something I wrote after watching Federico Garcia Lorca's Bodas de sangre, or Blood Wedding. The lead characters were so adept at conveying the passion and controversy of their connection – I felt like a fly on the wall of their hearts. I penned this bit of first-person creative nonfiction in response to the vicarious and breathtaking experience I underwent as an audience member. Never has a production so moved me.

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The Longthiest Scar

It was mostly in his clothes, inside the pockets of the ragged shirt, inside the folds of the *pajama* made stiffer by the harshness of the preceding days, and inside the *kashera* that had bound his loins that Dharam Singh brought the desert home. Thick golden sand -- that surviving skeleton of the soil -- loosened itself on the floor when he undressed, with a sound that reminded his wife, Sardaari, of the struggle of coins in a jute sack (the association stayed flimsy, not materializing into a specific memory despite the moments that she dedicated to its recollection). "A man never returns as he goes," she said afterwards.

Some of it also fell from his beard, a bush of abject black and white hair. Now, with the oncoming festival of *baisakhi*, the emergence of more white hair was imminent, for spring was the time when Dharam Singh's beard gained in cloudiness.

Naked except the turban and the *kara* on his wrist, he stood in the centre of a small circle of sand taking tired long breaths through his parched nose. His clothes, his *kirpaan* and his scant luggage lay in a heap on the floor. His eyes were abstracted, wanting to be moist, but the desert had left no tears in them. Stipples of dried saliva outlined the bristles of his moustache and his lower lip. Umpteen scars crisscrossed his torso -- straight lines that the Mughal swords had drawn on his body in the wars of his life, now slightly jagged owing to the sagging of his skin. Sardaari, after rubbing the beard clean with her long fingers, ran them softly over these lines. A look at the longest scar gave rise to a unique tenderness in her heart, which immediately became cumbersome and turned into a kind of fatigue that women knew better than men; because of its depth the mark of this wound was still straight and taut.

"Hh," she sighed and began untangling his turban, revolving around him languidly. After many circles, Dharam Singh's long hair fell carelessly around him. "There are miracles in the desert. Water now. No water now" he said, seeming to be listening to his own words, as if still in solitude. He walked towards the bed-spread in the corner of the decrepit hut, his cracked feet making weary sounds. Lying down, he took a turn on a side, with his knees bent one over the other, a posture which in its nakedness seemed childlike to Sardaari. She picked his clothes and possessions from the floor and put them on a chair, then swept the sand into a single pile; but she couldn't amass the energy to throw the small lump of desert outside. She felt difficult.

Laying down behind his back -- less scarred than the front -- she moved her right arm over his body, to his chest, and pressed closer. "There were more sons in us" she whispered inaudibly, and buried her nose in his hair, trying to remember something good in the hope that a memory could turn into a pleasant dream and prepare her better for the morning, the morning that never changed.

A while later snores started fluttering up to the roof -- a low thatch blackened with the soot from Sardaari's *chulha*. Sardaari's snores were light and broken, for they were laced with dreams. Her dreams, recollections of past mixed with absurdity, always began with a flash of lightning in the darkness of sleep and transported her to Dharam Singh's belligerent youth, when his beard was only incipient and his

wrist, still getting used to the weight of various weapons, had not yet gained enough in size to hold the *kara* that it was to wear later.

*

Dharam Singh fought his first war at the age of 16, displaying therein an admirable liking for noise and violence. The boom of cannons, the swoosh of arrows, the tinkling of swords, the thud of enemy limbs and heads to the ground, the cries of an onward cavalry march – all these created in him an amateurish excitement in which, even before understanding death, he rampaged through a battle scene killing dozens of Mughal soldiers, often looking in fascination at writhing bodies coming to terms with the last bits of life escaping them.

It was in the same year that, in a brief moratorium between two back-to-back battles, he married Sardaari Kaur, and that his beard and general bearing grew to their adult limits, as if the purpose of marriage was to aid the leap from boyhood to manhood. A year later, Sardaari, at the age of 15, gave birth to a son, an event which filled Dharam Singh with joy but did not seem to add to her happiness; inheriting the clairvoyance that was characteristic of women, she had foreseen cruelty in the life of her baby, and grown discomfited at that hazy vision.

Unnecessary wars and unstable reconciliations continued, each round adding fresh scars to Dharam Singh's body. Sardaari walked onerously in the hut with an incommunicable sadness that could be attributed to her premonitions, and also to Dharam Singh's frequent forays into a frontier which she always imagined to be in a desert. On one of Dharam Singh's rare stays at the hut, she blurted out some of this sadness. "Short lives and long deaths" she said imprudently, at which Dharam Singh, already exasperated by her frequent portents, got angry and beat her with a stick from the peach tree in front of their hut. "Look at your face. Why don't you poison us with poppies?" he cried, and then added, with a bit of an apologetic swagger: "We will beat the Mughals before his time. Why do you blacken your tongue with what you say then?" Sardaari, not deterred by the thrashing, replied with a stoicism that was to get etched in her temperament, "There are no winners and losers. Wars don't end anymore, you fool."

At that very moment Dharam Singh, made speechless partly by her insolence and partly by the suspicion of truth in what she had said, decided not to have any more children. Protecting Punjab and killing those who defied the claim of his Sikh gurus over it, would be all for him, he decided. And thus, even before he knew love, he dedicated himself to a life of doling out death, doing it now with a skilled hand, and the dangerous detachment of a man who has given up on other things in life.

*

The morning that never changed returned, and Sardaari found herself in a routine trance. Tardy in leaving the smells, sights and reminiscences of the previous nights, her mornings always trudged with a turpitude that greyed over her eyes like a dream about to begin. She blinked profusely to bring a semblance of truth to her vision, to get other colours in her eyes, but the blank, grey spectre always lingered longer than she wanted. With a heavy heart, with which she had accepted many other finalities of life, she had also understood the necessity of this toil; this resistance between deep reality and dreaminess had to be borne every time she woke up with a stale yesterday mouth.

Today, the bed-spread on which Dharam Singh had retired to last night, and on which she too had rested, was not there. In its place was a shimmering *chaarpaaee*, some strings of which were broken and hazily hanging below the interwoven mattress. She found herself staring at these now, not remembering

the moment of her waking up. The hanging jute strings, with blurry threads pleading forth from ends, were scary to her, and in her confusion she attached a higher meaning to these. She thought of them as remnants of an erstwhile rope, now broken because of the burden of memories, seeking nothing but a decaying death.

The *chaarpae*, stirring, now dissolving, now emerging, was the one which had years ago caught her by surprise.

*

Before being stricken by the plague of polio that would eventually engulf the whole of Punjab, their son, Rumaan Singh, was to be overcome, at the strange age of 8, by the passion of politics. "Aurangzeb is dead, and now history will fly" he sang sitting on a branch of the peach tree, munching on raw peaches in the season of spring, getting an itch all across his face. Dharam Singh, at home for the longest period since the first war, grew confused at this song and the strange warmth it evoked in the left part of his chest. He approached Sardaari with a puzzled pride: "He will be a great warrior, this son of mine" Sardaari, made increasingly haggard due the burden of her premonitions, could not reply.

Two days later, on the day of *baisakhi*, the war resumed in its greatest might and Dharam Singh was summoned to the frontiers. On the very day of his departure, Rumaan was stricken with a fever so strong that his eyes rolled in a delirium that seemed similar to the ones induced by opium.

Rumaan recovered from the fever, but with a leg shrunken to the point of almost withering away, and could not walk anymore without *baisakhis*. Pained immeasurably (while also accepting the happenings of what she had already foreseen, at least in idea), Sardaari was particularly disgusted at this coincidence – that the same word was used for the festival of spring and the crutches that her son, along with most children of his age in the village, was now tied to for the remainder of his short life.

Then on that rotten morning, when the birds had quite notably forgotten to chirp, the village was raided by a Mughal regiment. The soldiers, deviating from what was their wont, did not want to rape the women this time, but instead snatched the children away from each house. The mothers, who had initially responded to this raid with an aggression almost befitting their husbands, soon realized the futility of it; and when the motive of the raid was clear, when the children were being dragged away from their hands, supplicated the soldiers with heard-rending wails; few of them even bared their upper halves, inviting the soldiers to rape them instead of taking away the children. Mothers of those boys who had most recently been stricken by the plague also argued that the boys were useless -- they could never really become soldiers; they could never pose any threat to the Mughal empire – and should therefore be spared. But nothing could change the inevitable. And soon, even before the morning had had a decent chance to witness the high sun, the village was made bereft of all its crippled and healthy off-springs.

Sardaari, like most mothers, was left with bared breasts in the front of her house, below the peach tree, feeling, in addition to the grief arising from the certain death of her son, a strange terror that evokes itself when one's darkest premonitions manifest themselves.

For the next two days not a single sound emanated in the village, no cooking happened, birds avoided its many trees, and even the dogs ignored the ritual of barking. Then, another early morning, the mothers were still lolling between the grief-induced blurring of sleep and awakening, the Mughal regiment returned with jute sacks filled with chopped limbs. "Some parts are being returned" they announced.

The mothers spent the whole morning looking for the arm or leg that belonged to their child. Arms were the lesser problem, and even the healthy legs were sorted quickly and amicably. The confusion of the crippled legs took a violent turn, though, and sobs turned into resounding shrieks whenever two mothers laid their hands on a crippled leg that they both thought belonged to their child. Sardari was among the few mothers who did not have the gall to participate in this hunt.

At the frontiers, unaware of the secretive raid that the Mughal forces had crafted, Dharam Singh was chopping heads and limbs in frenzy. Never before had he felt such exaltation in the delights of violence. But his unprecedented delight also brought with it a recklessness, a foolhardiness that had never before been a part of his combat; and, thus, on the evening of the day when the limbs had been returned to the village, a sharp Mughal spear managed to pierce his belly, its blade lodging completely inside his body, fixed, the rest of it – the staff – sticking out. Unconscious, bandaged, tied to a *charpae*, injured beyond hope of survival, he was brought back from the frontiers to Sardari, who looked at the fellow Sikh soldiers with a morbid surprise on her face. The premonition of his death had never occurred to her.

*

The morning that never changed continued. It would continue for a little longer till the strength of sunlight wiped away all indecisiveness, and Sardari could move from the *charpae* on which she now found herself sitting on. Irritated by the disappearance of the bed-spread, which she thought to be her present, and the emergence of the *charpae*, a totem from her past, she looked around for Dharam Singh. He had left, like every morning, for bringing home a new miracle.

From the open door of the hut, the incongruous stub of the stem of the long-dead peach tree could be seen jutting out from the ground. Nearer, inside, the pile of sand still lay in a miraculous, neat, preserved pyramid.

Tanuj Solanki works in an insurance company in Bombay. He is 25. His worked has appeared in elimae; Short, Fast and Deadly; Boston Literary Magazine, and others. He just can't learn swimming, though he doesn't give up either.

Nithya Raghavan / One Poem

Out of Context

X falls in love
with Y, gets married,
runs away into a
space devoid of
cultural boundaries.

You stitch your
eyelashes to your
eyebrows as this
cuts across white
potholes in the
newspaper. The
cup is thrown
off balance, tilts on
the saucer, contents
spill out,

blackish grey cloud-
plaited smoke
rushes out from the
reactors, you fall to
greet tight-lipped
curtains and full-stop
ends, out of context
realities hold you in
their bowler hats...

Nithya Raghavan has completed her third year BBA at Heriot-Watt University, Dubai. Her poems can be found on poemhunter.com, fictionpress.com (pen name: Ghost of words), Muse India, Kritya, Asia Writes and Qarrtsiluni. She has also published articles for Nxxg, The Hindu, letters to the editor in Khaleej Times and Gulf News, and a column in Khaleej Times.