

One Word Quotation

Out of context
the word *damnation*
or *weeping*

or
or.

The word carrying
scare quotes
on its head
like horns

or
blinkers

like this:

“[your name here]”

Reciprocity Failure

Haggle like this.
Surrender light for sharpness
immobility for depth.
Go lower
 still lower
exchange speed
for whatever you can get.

You could have ghosts
for the asking
shadows that will not move
but can follow you
even if you never say the word
 sleep
in their hearing.

Don't talk about colours
if you have more than a second
to spare. Dark rooms, red lights
they never – sometimes –
come out right.

**Sridala Swami's poetry and fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in various journals including Wasafiri, Asian Cha, Desilit, Drunken Boat and InterLitQ. Her work also features in The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets (ed. Jeet Thayil, UK: Bloodaxe, 2008); in Not A Muse Anthology (ed. Katie Rogers and Viki Holmes, Hong Kong: Haven Books, 2009) and in First Proof: 4 (India: Penguin Books, 2009).*

Swami's first collection of poems, A Reluctant Survivor (India: Sahitya Akademi, 2007, rp 2008). She lives in Hyderabad, India and blogs at [The Spaniard In The Works](#).

Unfinished Business of Life

Oviya, their only child, all of five, died a very painful, prolonged *pulmonary* death. Her vital organs perished, one after another, before the last gasp that raged, snailishly ebbed and flew away. The bereavement did not end their year-long ordeal; savagery of it almost killed them. With the very meaning of their lives consigned to flames, there was nothing left to live for. The very last pant haunted and, despite pill-popping, insomnia devoured their sleep. Eternity of Oviya's absence sunk in by degrees and, as finality dawned, it rendered them useless to one another. They even contrived not to bump into each other and others. Nothing deserved to be spoken or heard about. Existence was empty, faceless. Breathing became a heavy, futile drill. Impermanence was starker than ever before.

Their firms were to be wound down, industrial and other domains were on the block and the proceeds, worth millions, were destined for medical foundations that backed pneumonic research. But all that had to be expeditiously effected since they were certain that if heartbreaks failed to synchronize their deaths, odds-on, they would honour their suicide pact before Oviya's eleventh day ceremony. "The soul that goes without observances; remains suspended between earth and heaven," the priest prolonged their lives by a fortnight. The moment rituals ended, just to ensure that the auctioneers returned better yields, they gave themselves a month more. Unable to digest the fact that their prized assets were being haggled for pennies, à la Dutch auctions, and resolute enough to bequeath substantially, they then gave themselves an additional dose of three months. Succumbing to demandant professional valuers, at long last, they agreed to live on for a further course of five. Stretching the spell beyond six months proved utterly impractical; she conceived just ahead of end of the sixth. The purpose to live for had arrived; again.

The heavenly news, pregnant with bundle of hopes, merited nothing but the best of *A2B* confectionery in town. While he helped Chitra bite into her favoured *Mysore pak*, she forced a greasy *Jangiri* into his salivating mouth; winking an eye, she gave his hand a squeeze. Their domestic servants, having never chewed even half a peppermint-drop for years of drudgery, received a rotund shock of their lives; a whole cricket-ball sized *laddoo* sweetmeat each. Half an hour into gobbling, even while licking fingers, every one of the dozen helpers pinched their forearms to be persuaded of the sweetest reality to have hit them.

Now businesses had to go at full throttle. The new scion or heiress, following such grief and gloom, was worthy of richer inheritance; capacity additions, mergers and acquisitions were only ways forward. Until weeks ago, the empire was up for grabs; hence, to keep it from poaching, corporate defences were fortified further, made virtually impregnable. The latest *Apollo* medical machinery revealed healthy growth, by the week, inside Chitra's womb. Outside of it, Balu was going gung-ho about his *Ambani-style* expansions, *IPOs* and go-getting targets that were unheard of in Madras and on bourses across the country. The intent was to double the bottom line not by end of fiscal but prior to onset of uterine contractions.

The turns, tosses and the much coveted 'kicks' brought back bonbon memories of first pregnancy and, indubitably, it was Oviya's rebirth, they reassured themselves. Of course, this child would be as adorable, chubby and gifted deserving the very same name, they concurred. "What if Oviya reincarnates as a boy?" Chitra asked. "Would be called Oviyan," he cheerily

returned. Boy or girl, the newborn was astrally ordained to be amply resemblant, both surmised; besides, given their own constitution and comely looks, offspring can inherit nothing but bonny, beauteous characteristics.

But genetics had wreaked havoc already and, this time around, chance deserved no mercy. Not entirely trusting gene therapy, portrait-painters were commissioned to reproduce life-sized paintings of Oviya that were mounted on walls of bedroom, her grand washroom, living and hallway so that the unborn shaped not even a wee bit different. Chitra had to glance at the portraits over and over until childbirth; “You’ll beget what you see,” a midwife had counselled. A servant had to shoulder Oviya’s portrait even as she ambled along the evening sea, every evening.

Eight months later, after millions of glances, miles of walking and gallons of sea breeze, Oviyan it was, delivered the way Julius Caesar was.

Oviyan’s squint-eyed *strabismus* looks were not just different as chalk and cheese but, to say the least, very ordinary. “He is a bud, will bloom with every passing month. In fact, squinted babies are born under a lucky star,” his sanguinity elicited a hopeful nod out of her. Their optimism was not wholly belied; Oviyan grew cute and plump reviving blissful times and visions of salubrity for almost three years until he turned three. But the hopes, which fuelled ambition and zeal for life, appallingly turned into pious ones.

Weeks into fourth year on earth, the boy, all at once, turned too anaemic, skinny with amnesic symptoms. So stutteringly taxing and deranged was he that visitors were tactfully kept from spotting him. Visits to *Sankara Netralaya* and specialists in phthisis, ophthalmology, and speech pathology led to marked deterioration of what was left of his health by then. Oviyan’s every move, hiss and cry was compared, argued and moaned; they repeated it over and over for three years. In the process, Chitra acquired weird illnesses that required visits to diverse speciality hospitals, quacks of renown and a concise medical dictionary at arm’s length.

The inexplicable malady was equally perplexing to visiting American physicians, eminent Sri Lankan charlatans. The whole medical fraternity in Madras conceded that the boy was on the knees of the gods. Given Oviyan’s inanimation, tending was proving impossible for Chitra. With the prospect of infection looming, they retained a nurse to deal with the doubly incontinent seven-year-old. To their chagrin, now it was the turn of apathetic, helpless medics to give Oviyan, ‘Gosh...just a year...at the most...two.’ But proving their entire prognosis utterly flawed, the boy lived on for years, albeit in a vegetable state.

Just as sheer impossibility of grappling with the vegetal reality unfolded, as stars would have it, an acclaimed quack from *Yaazhpaanam* Jaffna arrived in Madras, first city of Tamil state that boasted rationality as cornerstone of its cultural, political disposition. “Our Swami has cured many a deaf and dumb, mentally retarded, hopelessly infirm children, men and women,” one of his senior disciples notified the town. Claims that his Guru had revived many a ‘completely’ dead, drowned and charred children were supported by framed snapshots hung all around the domed, air-cooled tent. They pictorially established that

children were in a dying state 'before' the quack's benediction and alive and kicking 'after'. "Our Guru can heal impossible syndromes before a day," professed the disciple.

Charmed by the 'proven' miracles, they entreated the Swami to subject their son to such divine thaumaturgy. "I have healed such and more complex syndromes, he will be abundantly rehabilitated in three months," said the quack. They instantly lied prone at his feet and cried their gratitude in advance. Impatient for a swift miracle cure, the very next day, they donated millions to salvage Oviyan. The loquacious, herbaceous therapy began right away. Thrice a week, all that the mountebank, surrounded by exotica, did, chanting incoherent mantras, was to fleetingly sway his right palm over the boy's head. And, as brawny disciples reined restive Oviyan, decant ladles of customized potion down the gullet.

Two months of tantric blessings, concoctions transformed Oviyan's physical and mental shape so tangibly that, having gained much weight, he almost resembled Oviya. And, to their utter bewilderment, he turned more adorable. Gaze was much straighter and, still or smiling, eyes looked far prettier; eyelashes sprouted back, tint of eyes turned Irish green. In place of amnesia, supplementary doses of herbal quintessence yielded couple of unanticipated miracles. Oviyan exhibited the two winsome virtues that his deceased sister had possessed; incredible powers of recall and voracious enthusiasm.

At the end of three flourishing summer months in Madras, the Swami had to move on to alleviate the wider world. "Your son does not need my avail anymore...he is perfectly doctored...he has a hundred years ahead of him," said the mountebank, unveiling the tell-tale sign of quackery; gumption. Man and wife prostrated before him and, following a few quiet, poignant moments, presented a million more rupees. "As for Oviyan's squint...here is a jar-full of exotic brew to be given once a day by supper. By autumn, his gaze would be the straightest one that any pair of eyes can possess on earth...he would live life to the full," the quack blessed and walked west, four disciples in orange robes behind, into the sunset. Chitra and Balu perceived a halo around the mountebank's shady silhouette that their dozen retainers, chauffeurs and kitchenmaids could not. But, eventually, they had to pretend to have; capitulation is hallmark of domesticated servility.

That was the first occasion in January when ten-year-old Oviyan's schooling was earnestly deliberated. Senior managers were dispatched to Ooty, Bangalore and Dehradun to establish means of getting Oviyan admitted directly into fifth or, preferably, sixth grade; amount of hush money not a constraint. By April, even before his executives touched down, core of Balu's inner circle, few legal luminaries, who relentlessly pulled-off adjournments, guaranteed admission into an international boarding school in Bangalore. In May, what's more, every manager jubilantly returned with admission slips; in the sub-continent, cash and clout could acquire a seat even for a jackass if it had a name. Flying in the face of invincibility of money and muscle, nature brutally trivialized life-forms by revealing their perfect frailty. On the verge of admittance, in June, the boy developed a bizarre symptom group the like of which had emerged before the quack's verbal, herbal boons.

On a July morning, seven months into dispensation of pills and potions, Oviyan abruptly slid into coma and then, as rains lashed on, within days, coma vigil. Irishy eyes turned so crimson, lumpy and intimidating that they hunted the nurse out of her retainership. Pus oozed from the drooping tonguelet, nostrils and drip-dropped to suppurate under the cot; even Chitra could not stand the nauseating looks, putrid smells. And then, as if it had a crucial deadline to meet, whole body distended and, without delay, monstrously bloated resembling a minuscule blimp. Emanating stench entirely engulfed the mansion and, at last, the unthinkable ensued; it seeped into the impermeable grand bedroom.

The breathing, dilated body was shifted to the decrepit outhouse, beyond row-houses that quartered servants, past common lavatories. Notwithstanding isolation, mortal cries were piercing enough to pervade the grand bedroom. The rising decibel levels of gruffly bawl and the unmistakable cadence beckoned someone, perhaps a housemaid. Perhaps. No one, including them, had the nerve to approach the corpse in death throes; relative death evoked more dread than absolute one. No one fed it, no one cleaned it, no one shooed the flies away.

The moment Oviyan's shrill whoops, throes died down, the corpse appeared stiff enough. An elderly chauffeur charily neared it, felt it and, wringing fingers as if stung by scorpion, dashed towards Balu pronouncing Oviyan dead.

She swayed, groped and dropped unconscious. Shoving everyone aside, Balu carried her into grand bedroom. An hour after the check-up, even before Oviyan's funeral preparations began, the obstetrician confirmed that Chitra was in the family way; a good two months into it.

****Ram Govardhan has a post-graduate degree in sociology and works with Hansa Research Group, Madras, India. His first novel Rough with the Smooth was longlisted for the 2009 Man Asian Literary Prize. His short stories have appeared in Asia Writes, Quarterly Literary Review Singapore, Indian Ruminations, Saraba etc. He is currently scripting his second novel and a bunch of short stories. Email: ram.govardhan@ymail.com***

Untitled

Look

there in that lake,

they've built their little Atlantis

the clock tower looms over the slate houses

with the little fish circling around its spire

like children running around a tree

the barren top of the tree rests

on the still blue surface

like a giant lotus stripped to the bone

there, on that rock is the *raja's* palace

looking like the excavated ruins

of an ancient and forgotten hovel

maybe they'll let a submarine in one day

and we can watch the fish around the spire

and the sunken trees, the roads curling

around the slate houses, running

up and down the mountains

maybe one day the sun will rise

and burn it all away and

they can go back to their homes

with fish on the porch

and seaweed on the walls.

On a very hot day of the summer

You run past the grass
to the dark, leveled asphalt,
feeling the heat on
the soles of your toes,
and stand there under
the harsh afternoon sun,
your arms wide open to
its brazen violence.

Your summer dresses hang
from your shoulders
like wilting flowers
of defiant blue, pink,
orange, red and yellow;
you hold hands and spin
around on your toes
awkwardly and laugh.

You look up and it's
late and you break
away from them;
you feel the softness
of the grass, it is
cool and wet, and inside
it is all the same
all over again.

**Bharat Iyer is 19, resides in Delhi and like The Tick.*

Emblems pre-and-post spaces

She was shown your hand
She saw blue patches
in her always-already variegated texture
She was shown your pen
she read orders and
devoured words, phrases and syllables
patriarchalized
She was shown your eyes
she cried
dry
hopes and desires
t
r
i
c
k
l
ing
down her porous face
She heard his eyes
And smelt fear and hopelessness
She smelt his movements
And tightened the
Threads and buttons
Of her
Body and mind
Not in fear of his
Manimal-like touches
Digging deeper in her formlessness
Fear of deconsecrating I-don't-know-what
Once upon a time, there lived Her
She was chlorophyllised by JB, S de B, AR,
AW, MD, SBA, ECS, ST, KM, VW, KM again, RB, LA,

Who talk to me in my N-REM cycling through those
Patches, pores and formlessness
Filling those spaces
Those emblems that you showed me
You show me now
(I smirk)
You look into my eyes,
My skin and my form
O!, spectrophobia!
You are paralyzed by the very idea
And fear of sharing power

Come, fill in these
And dream.

It feels very nice when a leaking tap begins to flow

I leak
When I prepare potatoes and cheese which
Masticates and digests your yummy arrogance
Au
lieu
de corn
When I wear red, red, red and more red
Gushing through your rough veins
Instead
Of
black
When I move right, left, to and fro controlled by
The remote of your boneless muscle
Instead
Of
Flow
ing
Flowing along the smooth labyrinth of
My unknown
Journey
Space

I flow.
It all started when my sister
Said
'it feels nice when a leaking tap begins to flow'

****Gayatri Viswanath lives in Mumbai and is a student of literature at Jai Hind College.***

Onion Rings

Today King Abdullah II of Jordan went to The Lake View Restaurant in Oroville, California and ordered a plate of onion rings.

I love this sentence. It has ten nouns in it.

The original sentence had twelve nouns.

For the King of Jordan also ordered nachos and a grilled turkey sandwich with his onion rings.

Before the original sentence, a customer noticed that King Abdullah II came to the restaurant on his Harley Davidson Motorcycle.

If the reporters who love to write about royalty had known this, they would have actually written a sentence that had 13 nouns in it.

Imagine!

King Abdullah II of Jordan went to The Lake View Restaurant in Oroville, California on his Harley Davidson motorcycle and ordered a plate of onion rings, a grilled turkey sandwich, and nachos.

The next sentence is very beautiful but it has only a few nouns but they are choice.

King Jordan smiled at his onion rings.

Yes he did. And then he looked out the window. Yes he did.

After that, the story just talks about motorcycles and the feeling of the wind in your hair when you are a king and how it is something.

****Ricky Garni is a graphic designer and father of two, living in Carrboro, NC. His most recent work can be found in Mad Swirl, Evergreen Review, and The Pedestal Magazine. The biographies he loves best and confuse him the most always end with this kind of a sentence: "At which point he quit work and decided to devote his life entirely to poetry."***

Facing West from a Shore

Facing west from a shore,
inquiring, tireless, seeking what would be
whispers of some theme— perhaps my aging,
but west from a shore,
do I give the debris of thoughts alive,
as by here in ink page— perhaps un-spare,
or do I stir morsels with a bony stick,
stirring and stirring it to nothing?

I cannot see far, but I hear:
speak short, family— I think I am one, and done,
with you, just as you near with joy,
but for my covering the pale green to a burial
in flowers.

I grasp at my deceased father; my nuance
of his attributes excavate him and the past,
selected to adore the rest, and henceforth I
have to be as pig-herd or actor to a memory.

What sense of living is it that humans so
strongly seek it afar, ethereal or faithful,
and as with distance feel to close in, to ascertain,
and somehow reach it living?

How all grows steady when singular
is how a recluse, withdrawn to many men,
is managed; I swear I have no sight
dropped from outer whims,
but that of my own fairing heartbeat and times.

Hellstruck Waterfalling

Any day when I followed the sound in a downward wilderness,
by stair-like mold beacons, when I followed the sound, myself in halves,
mocking the sound when I followed the sound, arguing these halves manifest,
wet, modern, when I followed the sound, a master, foreboding noise,
how I heard or why, when I followed the sound was a miracle in halves,
my past in tangles, when I followed, for some future I'd heard—
I had crawled into fellowship, and the sound, when I came across
the rushed falls draped ever rockward down.

**Ray Succre is an undergraduate currently living on the southern Oregon coast with his wife and son. He has had poems published in Aesthetica, Poets and Artists, and Pank. His novels Tatterdemalion (2008) and Amphisbaena (2009) are widely available in print. Other Cruel Things (2009), an online collection of poetry, is available through Differentia Press.*

For inquiry, publication histories, and information, visit him online: <http://raysuccre.blogspot.com>

Children

It is an amazing thing to watch these children

They are beautiful they run & they laugh

They fall down & cry

And in another minute they are up & laughing again

They are so small I peer down at them

And look again to see what it is I'm missing

I look to see them laughing

They are laughing with the world

Somebody showed them it is a good thing to laugh

And they will be hearing this again later

When the laughing gets harder & harder

They will be told it's their civic duty

To laugh & the camera is indeed watching

And by that time they'll have forgotten

That it all really happened before

They ever thought of anything

And their laughter will never be better

Than it was tonight flying around the concrete

In a little toy plastic truck

**Born in Wisconsin Robert is an enthusiastic citizen of Los Angeles. He has published a lot of poems in LA & elsewhere, founded a television show in Santa Barbara for writers, produced & hosted 150 one-hr programs. He also received an NEA fellowship in literature in 1995 for an mss of poems.*

