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## POEMS

### Chandini's Thumbprint

*Chandini holds the pot spoon wherever she goes.*

In her bedroom, she makes vows  
before sunrise,  
singing to herself;  
all to keep her bosom calm.

At the fireside, tired  
from sleepless nights before;  
she makes *dhal* and rice and *bhajie*  
to nourish her husband,  
blessing the food in saucepans  
for his journey into the canefield.

*A woman has no time for afternoon breeze  
on the verandah.*

The vegetable garden awaits her strong  
hands.  
She fills her basket and makes her own path,  
walking barefeet for miles to the market;  
all to earn her own wages.

Why are those hands so heavy and red  
across her neck? Answer me!  
Answer me now!

In her belly, unseen torture  
silence!  
Again and again.

She counts the days and thinks  
of her children on the edge,  
She buys pencils and books and shoes  
for their entrance to school.  
Her only consolation is this privilege:  
to push for their education, her girls  
especially.

*Chandini knows limitations, but she works  
out everything.  
She looks for the moon every night.*

Now comes her husband's silence,  
she puts her thumbprint  
on the front door, on every window,  
high up on the ceiling;  
She walks for miles –  
Every step she takes  
for the house and land in her name.

Gone are the days of outrage.  
Each step, a breath of fire!  
Each step, the woman who dares!  
—Janet Naidu

## Trails of Treasures

Not so long ago,  
 roses whispered the gentle song of your  
 name,  
 and your mother held you close  
 in her arms, her eyes and heart listening.  
 Her garden widened with sunflowers  
 across promises of a fragrant future  
 like a vessel at harbor –  
 with every comfort for the journey.

I slip into memory  
 and catch your enduring years  
 in a basket of floral keepsakes –  
 a birth marks a mother's grace  
 like a velvet sky at nightfall, looming.  
 Every glance unfolds another moment  
 captured by the boldness of wings,  
 by the freshness of paintings.

The soft pull of eastern drums  
 echo and warm your heart,  
 like an infant on its mother's bed.  
 The sun follows you through the fields  
 where your name is planted, grown  
 among the women, girls too  
 adorned in colourful head ties.  
 Their grass knives swing in the sun  
 cutting new grass without malice.

But their moments cannot pass  
 without the wild songs and rhymes  
 that ring of lessons in pride: of survival  
 in the way some work shortens play.

Your heart missed a privilege,  
 only fingertips away  
 where skipping ropes and hop scotch  
 swelled in girlish giggles.  
 Not even a day of A and B or C

made it your way – but pages at night,  
 not even another alphabet, in your veins  
 –  
 but eastern languages at wasteland.  
 Still, not one leftover book,  
 shortened pencil  
 or unmatched ribbons in your hair  
 for only a day.

I hear the penalty in your voice,  
 deep void as your head leaned  
 against the school – in the yard alone,  
 hiding your face from the rain.  
 There, you glimpsed a pressed uniform,  
 girls ten years or so, clapping a rhyme.  
 The small of the window left you gazing  
 into the ways of the school room.  
 But the grass bundle you carried  
 remained at your feet, waiting.

Each sunrise caressed your steps  
 across the long distances  
 in weight upon your head

Now, I walk with you – in your hand,  
 along the length of your feet  
 carrying the unwritten words  
 in my heart.

I feel your time – your golden heart  
 hiding its silent wish – to read.  
 Our nights move, slowly receding  
 long after the sun closes her door.  
 your gentle walk nurtures my spirit,  
 In a way, like a waterfall  
 constant, voluminous in flow.  
 Still, like a sunburst,  
 your eyes smile a thousand gifts.

—*Janet Naidu*

## Ammani's Cushion

In courtship, he reveals his dreams  
pouring out daily doses of deep nectar  
to sweeten her and nurture some sense  
of domestic bliss.

She too had dreams concealed,  
bursting like midday hibiscus,  
She too walks the earth.

He gathers himself, many sleepless nights,  
aching heart and lonesome days.  
The equation: he knows the wind carries  
bare branches  
missing the fruits of necessity,  
the comfort of family.

Restlessly, he approaches her in the garden.

“I who am strong,  
like a lantern post,  
Should a storm prompt me,  
Should lightning torment me,  
I would fall, I know.  
Without you, I cannot go on.”

Ammani leans her head  
against the bark of the golden apple tree.

“I know you are only feeling this today,  
when the sun is low and the clouds are dark.  
These days, you must look for the rare moon  
to shine in your heart,  
the wonders that are before you,  
dreams perhaps of this new place.  
I release you from this state of darkness  
by virtue of divine love.”

She upholds the doctrines of friendship  
between man and woman, similar to godly  
affection.

Anand cups his chin with both hands,  
despondent  
that Ammani wants to remain by herself  
and not merge with him in a matrimonial  
bond.  
He did not know that from her childhood  
days,

she had witnessed much turbulence, distant  
attachments.

Anand sees his pensive and sorrowful eyes  
evenly reflected in Ammani's.

“I don't know why I suffer like this.  
I am happy you are my friend  
But I need more – a wife to cook sweet  
dishes  
like my mother, the devoted goddess.  
A man's future is in the blessing of a wife,  
the heart of home and family.”

Ammani, unaffected by blissful temptation,  
hears the call of the Bluebird,  
like a clock ticking inside her body.  
Love comes after midnight, soundless and  
shapeless.

“I am not made like a hammock  
but a little cushion, not big enough for two  
in days of rest and time alone.”

He now sees light rain at her window:

“I have waited many moons to break  
My silence of deeper thoughts.  
Since childhood, I felt sure  
you would come to me.  
Long ago I was strong,  
tilled the land since a teenager,  
reaped rice harvest.  
But now – now I want to pursue higher  
knowledge  
for better work, family...  
I want to rest near you  
as a husband who comes home  
to his wife for tenderness.”

She wraps her arms around the tree trunk  
like a soft cushion against her bosom.

“Like a lantern post  
should a storm impel me  
I would surely fall, I know;  
But these days  
The sun comes regularly,  
The clouds dance.”

Anand appears pensive:  
 “My dear friend, in divine love,  
 I feel your strong heart near.”

Ammani gazes at the tree top:  
 “Like a lantern post,  
 I too dream of higher knowledge  
 For better work.  
 My arms are strong  
 and I think of higher beings.”

Anand’s eyes hold a steady gaze, welling  
 up:  
 “Oh dear goddess, freedom washes your feet  
 to dance in the sunlight  
 to make pathways for your own being.  
 I understand this new dance of life  
 To love – togetherness and as separate self.”

—*Janet Naidu*

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## Tower of Babel on the Suriname River

I who wrote  
 about your world  
 am deaf and dumb  
 in the language  
 that you speak

I who live by discourse  
 disputes and diatribes  
 weave webs of words  
 learn to *look*  
 in your presence

You play with silence  
 paint with your eyes  
 tell stories with your body  
 you translate yourself with jewellery  
 tight tiger leggings  
 long fuchsia nails  
 you talk in monosyllables

I say something  
 you ask what it is  
 I reword my question  
 you answer another  
 I speak of cooking  
 you talk of roasting—  
 tongues converse  
 —*Gloria Wekker*

*Paramaribo/Amsterdam,  
 October 1997.*