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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*

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.*