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Rooftop Cities

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Rooftop Cities

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

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M.A. Kansas State University, 1994

May 2012

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For my family

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Introduction

Rooftop Cities is influenced by my life in Central and South Asia: in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan's mountain-valley capital; in Mumbai (Bombay), India, one of the most densely populated cities in the world; and in Hyderabad, a fast-growing technology center carved out of the rock of the Deccan Plateau between North and South India. My engagement with these cultures compels the poems. India, especially, is a country of contrast and contradiction: of astounding beauty and arresting filth, of great wealth and terrible poverty, of division and unity, and of immense suffering and exuberant celebration. With vibrant colors and textures, with distinct flavors and inexplicable smells, with cacophony, song and silence, India both soothes and overwhelms.

Lyrics of place, the poems explore landscapes—the foothills of Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, in “Walking the hills of the Ala-Too,” or the floodplains and tea plantations of Assam, India, in “Landscapes, North”—and the collage-like juxtapositions of cityscapes in “Rooftop City.” Many poems grapple with the fragmentation of experience and the incongruities within these settings. In Hyderabad, where I live now, landscape and cityscape are not neatly separated. Rather, rural and urban, ancient and modern, collide and share the same space: water buffalo lumbering across a highway block lanes to reach grazing land that persists amidst high-rises, while the seemingly lawless traffic lurches around them—luxury cars, auto rickshaws, cows, motorcycles, oxen carts, pedestrians, stray dogs, camels and bicycles, all vying for the right-of-way. Within the mayhem, the cityscape poems are populated by local trees, flowers, and birds, revealing beauty and harshness in both rural and urban worlds.

I wander slowly, residing for a few years in each city, striving to live fully in each. Emphasizing the necessity of attention, Denise Levertov asks, “Without Attention—to the world

outside us, to the voices within us—what poems could possibly come into existence?” (“Origins” 263). Through intense attention to my surroundings, through details and sensory images, the poems offer associations. Attention involves all of the senses, but even beyond recording the specifics of place, attention draws me to the human condition, the need and suffering, the character and resilience of the people, their dilemmas, paradoxes and injustices. Hoping to increase my awareness, I seek to cultivate an open attentiveness, as Jane Hirshfield calls for in her poem, “At Night.” Open attentiveness, a way to “fathom” the world, involves awareness of the periphery, a shift and widening of focus to include what is outside of my usual field of attention. This openness to perceiving what is outside the “frame” can lead to a deeper understanding of each other, of our existence, of the wider “given world” (Hirshfield 285). Through this depth of attention and by fully entering into particular experience, the poems reach both outward and inward; through attentiveness and exploring relationships with people and place, and my responses, the poems inhabit both personal and social worlds.

A poem’s location is realized in multiple ways, for example, through physical and sensory detail on the surface of the poem, and through mood below the surface. The conditions that allow the evocation of place—depth of attention and fully entering into experience—also stimulate the imagination. Beyond observation, it is through the imagination that I hope to deepen understanding, through imaginative connections, and empathy. Place, landscape and cityscape, spark the imagination in creating the world of the poem, a world that is “*imagined* as much as it is *actual*” (Kaminsky; emphasis added). Although the poems arise from *my* observations and perceptions, my life in a particular time and place, and my internal dialogue, the poem, through attention and imagination, is an attempt to reach across the gap between experience and expression, to reveal meaning. In this way, poetry is a process of engagement and

of reaching out to the world. Levertov describes the transition from inner world to communication, or from “inner experience” to “concrete manifestation,” while discussing the French painter Jean Hélion: “The act of realizing inner experience in material substance is in itself an action *toward others*.... the very fact of concrete manifestation, of paint, of words, reaches over beyond the world of inner dialogue” (“Origins” 259).

My choosing to live abroad was driven by my desire to experience places and relationships, to push boundaries and open myself to different perspectives. I wanted to meet people and physically experience places that I had only seen in photographs or paintings, read about, and imagined. The writing process also is a continual search for the “new” or for different ways of fathoming the familiar, as in “Ceremony,” an expression of a wedding and marriage. Through particulars, images, and metaphor, the poems present people, gestures, events and perspectives. Imagination and immediacy—putting the speaker in the midst of the scene—energize and bring to life the moment. In my poems, I want to “put life on the page,” as Ilya Kaminsky says, “to find a texture of life in the lines.” Immediacy decreases the distance between the speaker and the subject, the poem and the emotional impulse.

Through attention, imagination and immediacy, a poem may inspire the empathy that is important for mutual understanding and human connection in our fragmented and often chaotic world. Through the writing process, I attempt to work beyond my own limitations, to *imagine* another’s situation, a movement toward “recognition,” as Levertov explains: “... no recognition of others is possible without the imagination. The imagination of what it is to be those other forms of life that want to live is the only way to recognition; and it is that imaginative recognition that brings compassion to birth” (“Origins” 262). In my writing, as in my life abroad, although I cannot fully transcend the limitations my own culture places upon me, I can try to be

aware of my own biases and question my assumptions. Imaginative empathy can inspire a step toward awareness (away from indifference), and even work inwardly to provoke transformation, and action. Despite the realization that empathy is *imaginary* and that “There are limits to imagination,” these acts (this work), empathy and compassion, are a requirement of our humanity (Hass 3).

While recognizing that I am an outsider who perceives through distances of language, religion, and culture, I try to engage with my surroundings, rather than avoiding the challenges of that which I do not fully understand. Each day I must make a choice, to immerse myself in an unfamiliar culture, or to hide in familiarity. Although after living abroad for most of a decade, I find myself less quick to judge or make simplistic comparisons, encounters in a new place still can be disconcerting. Before moving to a country, I try to learn about the place, including the history, religions, literature, arts, and customs, and while living there I continue asking questions, reading and travelling in order to gain a wider perspective. But, despite these preparations, I realize I am not always successful in overcoming my insecurities or biases, or in adjusting my expectations. I fail to reach out because of lack of knowledge, misunderstandings, or fear. At times, I am overwhelmed by the onrush of incoherent images, sounds, smells, and languages.

On these days, I may withdraw, seeking refuge in time spent with my family, and I may write, putting to paper the disparate images and experiences beyond my understanding. Sometimes, the writing process leads to a poem, and to connections or discovery. A poem like “Disorient” reveals tension and ambivalence in a desire for involvement that is often thwarted by my own hesitation and others’ responses to my differences; but, I continue to search for ways to participate beyond my uncertainties, to enter into the humanity of each place, while keeping in mind the advantages my situation offers, including the luxury of choice.

As an American woman living abroad, I am between two (and sometimes more) cultures, and I must make a home in each. Just as place in poetry is more than geographical, home is more than location; home and culture are also psychological and emotional, carried within us, as in “Beyond the neatline.” From this in-between perspective as a foreigner, I am drawn to margins and gaps, to moments of separation and intersection. There is an attraction to this in-between or on-the-margins state. The uncertainty and impermanence, though disconcerting, are also exciting; and there is a delight in mobility, fresh experience, and change. Moving from place to place—always situated between places—produces energy. Taking risks and pushing past boundaries heightens the sense of being alive. This in-between perspective is at once enlivening and alienating.

In the mutable cities of Mumbai and Hyderabad, I feel at once inundated, invaded and intoxicated by multiplicity. I feel pressed against, surrounded, and alone. Within minutes, I can feel anonymous, and then suddenly integrated, belonging with this vast humanity. Embodying these senses of alienation and involvement, the poems come from different vantage points—as onlooker in “Tin Can Pyramid,” or as participant in “Ode to Alphonsos” and “Breakfast on Old Bombay”—and with distant or intimate voices. Living between cultures often involves uncertainty regarding how others expect me to behave, how I would like to behave, and how I may feel compelled to behave in any given situation. A situation that seems simple on the surface may reveal complicated layers of expectation, and even risk. Questions arise: Which social barriers do I raise, or hide behind? Which do I try to lower, or transcend? Which do I desire or reject? Assumptions about conduct can conflict with experience, inserting doubt. Place, situation, image, and metaphor enable a poem to face dilemmas and *imagine* choices: What can and should I do? What do I have to do? What should I *not* do? It is important to me that my

poems inhabit moments, not necessarily lived narratives, but through the “living imagination,” conveying tension and human vulnerability (Levertov, “Admonition” 253).

Of course, I am not alone; I wander with my husband and children. My responsibility is not only to myself, but to my daughters, fostering and nurturing their movement and belonging in the world. My poems explore family and marriage, as in “On Lord Rama’s birthday,” through the stresses and anxieties of a mobile lifestyle that can drive us away from each other, or deepen our relationships, bringing us closer. By extending our idea of family, we pull together a “local” family in each place. International mobility, a growing phenomenon, can be personally isolating, but it can also expand our sense of family and community, a means of overcoming alienation. In each new place, I long for a community in which I am not simply or always on the margins, an impetus for participation. I try to engage with each place, even when experiences are awkward or uncomfortable. This is one aspect of my writing process. But, there is also a quieter aspect, when I turn inward and “listen” to the unconscious. In “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision,” Adrienne Rich suggests the role of the unconscious in the writing of poetry, stating, “... poems are like dreams: in them you put what you don’t know you know” (352). The unconscious acts on, or works to recall, the words and find the form on the page, and the poet must allow this interaction, or must listen to the unconscious. The writing process also is an act of listening, an act of discovery. All of the poetic elements—particulars, images, imagination and the unconscious—come together to make the poem. A poem is not merely a predetermined conclusion; rather, the elements of poetry come from and are acted on by the unconscious to create an art of discovery. According to Levertov, if a poet attempts to write for “*someone out there*,” that poet “is in immediate danger of externalizing his activity, of distorting his vision to accommodate it to what he knows, or supposes he know, his audience requires, or to what he

thinks it ought to hear“ (“Origins” 256). Through the unconscious, associations made between sensory images and metaphors are allowed to surface through the imagination, reaching beyond what I know and understand. Rather than forcing conclusions onto a poem, I hope to learn from the poem’s multiple layers and meanings, as Kaminsky describes: “The poem—as you are saying it aloud—it changes you, it makes you say things to yourself, it makes you take them inside your body and live by them, if only for a moment.”

Poetry allows me to explore connections and the space(s) between, to find and ask questions, to enter the conversation and complicate simplistic assumptions of difference. Through poetry, I delve into my experiences moving from place to place, the challenges and excitement this lifestyle offers, the alienation, and the joy in relationships. Poetry is a means toward understanding and finding a way through this world, especially when anything I do to help in my daily life seems futile against the immensities of conflict, poverty and injustice. My poetics remain rooted in these basic elements: images and particulars from observation and attention, imagination and immediacy, and “listening” to the unconscious, making associations and connections. Poetry is an art of discovery, a process of reaching inward, where awareness and transformation begin. Although I cannot embody all that is Kyrgyzstan, or India, or my next home on the page, I embrace possibility and change while writing of that which attracts and repels, which stops me in my tracks, which resonates.

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Disorient

A stuttering weave through Hyderabad's Old City:
auto rickshaws bleat and smoke
packed three or four to a seat. Passing cyclists
barely dodge our side-view mirrors, startling
my daughters. A traffic cop whips up disorder,
his arms pointing always

elsewhere. On handcarts, fly-full figs
in sticky piles, flip-flops
in rainbow rows. On heads
tower artificial flowers, sloshing
buckets of buffalo milk. Shoppers teem
in the street. Children scurry
through swaying legs, almost

under our tires. Young girls point,
begging their mothers for sequined dresses,
kaleidoscopic bangles in baskets.
A family squeezes by on a motorbike,
the woman sitting side-saddle
holds her infant, rests her other hand
on her husband's thigh. But for me,
all is vertigo, not a feather-fall

of turquoise sari, not glass bangles'
musical clinks. We reach
the traffic circle and a boy
in a plastic bag hat taps
my window, shifts

to find my averted eyes.
After their births, I wrapped my daughters
in cream lace, held their fragile heads
over the font, prayed wisdom, strength,
love. Now watching this begging boy,
they have no need to hide their eyes.
Did his father whisper blessings in his

newborn's ear, place chewed date on
the tiny tongue, the weight
in silver of newly shaved hair
given away, two goats
slaughtered and shared? What is

his beautiful name?
Before driving away, I drop
only coins into his hand. From the north,
monsoon clouds close in.

Street Sweeper

Stooped parallel to the road,
a woman works a date-palm broom

in tempo as she sweeps fallen leaves
through shadows. Dust swirls

but still her red and silver bangles shine
from wrist to elbow. After months without pay,

she will join tomorrow's march, her broom raised
against indifference. Balancing

the loaded basket on her head, she steps
toward the gardens of Jubilee,

where legislators convene, and dumps
the contents over the fence, adding

to a growing pile of refuse.

Corner Cobbler

A ragged tarpaulin sags over his turbaned head
as the cobbler sits, his back against sun-scorched stone,
waiting in the heat and sudden rain for customers
to squat beside his worn leather bag of hammers

and brushes, passed down. In this caste of wayside
shoemakers, many have given up on inherited skills
and turned to labor for a living. But on our busy corner
he waits each morning to polish our shoes, mend

our torn soles. As I crouch near his rock workbench,
cutting, tapping, and stitching he repairs
my daughter's favorite sandals, the red ones,
the only shoes she agrees to wear,

and for a few coins, the ones
she no longer has to part with.

From nameless edges

Dry leaves blown among grasses speak
 voices of old stories pushed through roots
to a narrow ache. Words drop
as stones echo change.

We climb down the bank
 and open ourselves
to once stagnant water now gliding
with small fish. Murmuring

we move too fast, even as we try
 to keep still. From nameless edges
we reach the trestle, imagine ourselves
caught on the tracks, but one train's light

lifts us to day, again. Have we learned
 anything here to believe in
more than once? When we try to remember,
we hear a hornbill's broken call.

Ode to Alphonso

Hanging molten gold, the Alphonso
in towering leaves lures
with an ancient fragrance,
the tree's branches open

as the fruit's names, haapoos, haafos,
aapoos. When Alphonso burst
into ripeness, in villages we pluck them
freely from orchards. Neighbor lavishes
neighbor with mounded plates,
a single tree's abundance perfuming
many houses. Anchored deep

the canopy reigns
over the grape arbor, the sugarcane field.
Seasonal stalls sprout roadside with
fat yellow drupes bedded in hay.
After spring's humming, Alphonso fill

our palms. To squelch the heat,
in gardens, streetside or in the bath
we inhale skins like wine
before hedgehog-slicing
buttery, saffron flesh. Intoxicated

we bite, suck every morsel
from the stone. Juice dribbles
down our chins. Our arms'
sweet sweat we lick
tongue-full from elbow to wrist.
One hand eating, the other begging,
slicken in like seed.

Sweet Shop

Sold by kilo,
but today by the piece:
milk squares, fig and cashew,
almond rolls, or pistachio. Locals
savor their favorites whole
while we nibble, discerning
flavors and ingredients. We take in
this unfamiliar country bit by bit.

On Lord Rama's birthday

and the anniversary of his marriage to Sita—
the start of wedding season—my husband and I
are not speaking, since the night before, something
about the *samedamncurry* that spiraled into everything

either of us had ever done wrong. Now, I'm out driving
where narrow streets known only by their destinations
meet Old Bombay Highway. A couple argues
in the intersection. He cocks his untidy mustache, spits

words over horns and whining engines. Heaving
a bucket in each hand, she shakes her dirty curls,
hurls words back. With his free hands he does not help
with her burdens, just prods her on. A recoiling whip,

she resists, as motorbikes swerve within inches.
No longer able to balance the heavy buckets
she stumbles forward, and together
they make it across. Traffic roars by
as I turn back toward home.

Breakfast on Old Bombay

Where our unpaved lane crosses Old Bombay,
the fruit vendor heaps watermelon wedges behind glass
and pyramids green coconuts chest high. With a curved blade,
she chops a crude white star in a coconut top and inserts
a straw for me to sip the bitter water. The chaatwallah

parks his tin cart and heats a wide round pan. We circle together
passing rumors, scooping fried poori bhaji from banana leaves
with our right hands. Old ladies squat among cracked coconut husks,
selling marigolds for prayers at roadside temples, before we
each plunge into another day, lips spice licked.

Lengthening Day

a.m.

Three girls in navy saris squat under a crown
of serrated leaves.

Opening and closing fine blades in rhythm, they slow-scissor
the grass, level. A Pitta bird, hiding,
whistles her complaint.

Working on a holiday that marks the longer day,
the girls' hands glisten in the heat, braid-heavy
against their mosquito-buzzed backs.

noon

Unripe tamarind gnarls droop from tendrils. In rushed want,
small Swathi thumbnail scrapes their tender brown skins,
sucks the red-sour juice and puckers, soundless tears.

Three ashy wood swallows preen on a wire. Too early,
Neem branches catch the neighbor boys' newsprint kite.
Blooms and jagged leaf sprays tangle the twine.

The brothers wrestle the foliage with a sharpened stick to draw out
joy, but tree limbs tie the strings tight.

p.m.

Thousands of kites kaleidoscope over rooftops as one flyer steps
into air, entranced by paper diamonds striving for the sun.

On their motorbike, a family crests the hill, looking up into jeweled twilight.
Invisible against a half-empty moon, a manjha
spills rubies along the young girl's throat.

Migratory birds snared by the glass-laced sky, pelicans, painted storks,
and black ibis plunge, their feathers in useless knots.

Rescuers walking the quiet city lanes at dawn
cradle wounded wings in gauze.

Rooftop City

Where Ganesh dances streetside on bamboo pandals
with glass offerings at his feet, I stand streetside
breathing palm dust and furious exhaust. Orange-gold
marigolds are hung in welcome over every door

of buildings crumbling to beauty in this sea
of high-rise, tin, and blue tarp roofs
where I am never alone
in a sea of naked feet walking the alley maze,

a maze of walls written in red paan spit.
Where I drink coconut and sugarcane.
Beggars tear my heart rootless from the street,
morning ragas sing to my asanas, and I salute the sun

with small poems. Shining as cut glass, the sea waves
engrave black rocks, and toxic,
beat against the rocks from Worli to Marine,
crashing over low walls and restless children

who never see the shards that tear their feet.
Where millions heading home
from textile mills and cubicles debark from trains,
en masse push toward chawls, three meters square,

stand together on rooftops and in streets
day and night and the unmoving air

The Moment Before

You turn away
knee-deep in ocean foam

as pale orchids lower bruised lips
from morning winds, your blue-white cheeks

brushed red by sand
like parting words. Along the reef

a barracuda hovers
just under waves, tempered scales

quiver over coral caves. At night
we rise toward each other

then fall away, forgetting
the first touch, the opening in the cresting

wave. In shallows, two silver squid,
translucent tendrils in salty clouds

swim eye to eye, still
curved against each other.

Beyond the neatline

I bring a home
to hold boundless names,

a mosaic traversing lowlands
and uplands beyond the neatline.

On a scale without preference,
my words' contours
match the hachure of gradient slopes

in relief, I trace time,
unfolding overlays,
meander lines of questions

and memory's landmarks—
each day's merciful currents.

Landscapes, North

i

Row upon row of low tea bushes bud
green to the horizon, disrupted

only by shade trees rising against
a ruinous sun. River valley wealth

rooted in soil and weather. Each pruned plant
nurtures new growth, captures

dew in small palms until
spring harvest:

trade in fragrant leaf
steams from our copper cups.

ii

Green and yellow gradations cross the floodplain
to distant hills' folds. Grasses bend

above their heads as elephants feed, coil their trunks
around tall stalks and tear them from the land,

beat the roots against the ground to shake off soil
before pushing the bundles into their mouths.

Another thicket snaps—a calf feeds at her mother's side,
a grey glimpse between blades. As we approach their herd

assembled by the pond, the matriarch's silhouette
uncurls its trunk high, releasing water across her back.

iii

Wild cotton, winter stark,
rises straight over the savannah.

Flung out from a thorny trunk,
leafless branches' crimson blooms

brush mist. Crows and bulbuls
savor nectar from the deep chalices.

Roots and bark can heal burns. Soft wood endures
water for canoes and coffins.

In summer, brown pods, swollen
with silky fiber, are gleaned for quilts

against freezing nights. Those remaining crack open,
freeing floss and seed to drift away.

Kaziranga

We climb spiral stone steps to scan
the floodplains extending to Himalayan
foothills, their contours blurred blue
by winter's early sunset.

Drawing my daughter back
from the railless tower's edge,
together we watch as across the pond
from towering grass

emerges an Indian rhino, immense
even from this distance, head bent
to graze a patch of marsh plants,
her single horn jutting from her snout.

A calf stays close by her mother's
armor-plated side, *rhinoceros*
unicornis, cousin to the mythic creature,
both coveted for a single magic horn,

translucent beauty when carved
for dagger handles, said to detect poison,
cure fevers. The same fiber as human hair
and fingernails, but valued as gold. Poachers

will track a rhino, bring her crashing down
in daylight to gouge the horn from her head,
leave an open wound, abandon her great body,
and her calf, unsheltered, in tall thickets.

Unlike swamp deer's flecked camouflage,
rhinos glow, moon slivers
between green and copper grass,
their grey-brown skin bathed in cooling mud
dries almost white under the relentless sun.

Weave

She weaves outside the yellow mud house,
head bowed at her loom. The sun glints
through banana leaves. A young bride to be,
she patterns light with her eye. She dreams designs,

dreams of holding his hand in the purple shade
of palms along a slanted fence,
their shadows against the land.

Each morning, she sets

bamboo traps shallow in the stream,
on the cool bank, waits for fish curve and flash,
the current's work, a passive catch. She winds
her net through ripples for silver fin and tail,

pours life into a narrow basket she wove
with her own hands. Counting thread from thread
she throws the shuttle back and forth,
red on red on white. Coarse cotton

for his waist at work in the fields. Fine cotton
to adorn his head while he plays music,
reverberation of a single string.
Flute, buffalo horn, and drums beat slowly,

then fast, as she twirls. In her mind, new hues
bloom to dye the silk strands. He climbs
blue hills, chases mauve-lipped foxtail
orchids she will braid into her hair and

dance. Count threads. Push peddles.
The shuttle keeps time. Once the cotton
is stretched to size across the loom,
there is no starting over.

Pigeon Milk

Ring within ring of metal perches stand
on the sand. Auntie swings wide the gate,
steps to the center. Pigeons, like meddling in-laws,
fly in from all directions. Reaching into her paper bag,

Auntie swings wide the gate,
flings arcs of forgiveness
flying in all directions. Reaching into her bag
full of seeds, in a circle

she flings arcs of forgiveness,
hand in bag, light fist, extend arm out, release
handfuls of seed. In the circle
she beckons us to join her:

hand in bag, light fist, extend arm out, release
from the ground to roost rings.
She beckons us to join her
as feather dust falls unnoticed

to the ground from roost rings.
Sin gathers in corners.
Feather dust falls unnoticed.
Uncle hangs a wooden owl on the sill

while sin gathers in corners.
Auntie learns to love the flock,
but Uncle hangs an owl on the sill
to chase the birds away.

Auntie learns to love the flock,
knows all of their names,
refuses to chase the birds away.
She curses those who pillage gentler seed,

but knows all of their names,
their quirks and needs.
Cursing those who pillage gentler seed,
each day she fills the feeders

according to their quirks and needs.
Under mango and palash trees,
each day she fills the feeders.
Holding wide just-opened blossoms,

Auntie steps to the center,
ring within ring.

Monsoon Song

Dip water from monsoon-wet leaves
 with the brush-tipped tongue of a sunbird.
In our hair jasmine garlands weave.

To each cluster cleaves
 a potent fragrance nightly captured.
Moonlight shines from the monsoon leaves.

Tonight, we believe
 the impulsive promises lovers conjure.
But tangled jasmine deceives.

Hasty breaths retrieve
 our damp mouths' words.
Dawn dries darkness from the leaves.

Night's torpor grieves
 for our faltering gestures.
By morning the jasmine aroma recedes.

A sunbird's rapid flight perceives
 in morning's rifts our return augured:
water drips again, again from the monsoon leaves.
 Wilted jasmine unweaves.

Momentary Geographies

Batholiths thrust from a turn of hills.
Without clouds, extremes exfoliate the outer layers
and rock shells fall away as onion skins,
our essentials precariously balanced.

Risk sculpted through ages,
on one foot, kneeling, or tilted together,
dares gravity,
equal pressure at our cusp.

Glaciers slow-grind rock flour,
carve valley abrasions like transgressions
elide support.
Erosion through moisture and cold:

a pebble, your averted look picking up speed,
my raised eyebrow scree slope,
one devastating word,
our avalanche of acts.

Melt to a river serpentine undulations of leave
and return. Build debris deltas,
sin sediments
fill our lakes again.

Limestone dissolves, our cave of remorse,
drips stalactite torments,
stalagmites we slump behind,
futilely kick.

Rain drops. Sudden-waters' violence
births churning refuse.
The fragment flow dissipates,
a sucked-dry retribution.

Plateau monsoon feeds the thick coarse vine
stalking our trellis,
humid jungle of doubt
disgorges lavender blooms, spews tendrils

from ground to roof serried leaves and nectar swill,
 our tenebrous breeding ground.
Mosquitoes, flies, feral catwalk
caterwauling in our bedroom ears.

Grip the black metal, curve and tangle,
with a dull axe in hand hack away
 the dispensable,
divulge the trellis, lucent,

the once barren patch beneath—
 mere green shoots.

Beggar of Narne Road

There where the road climbs to eroded batholiths,
 unlikely forms balanced as if on fingernails,
you lie flat, stomach and chin against hot asphalt,
legs in broken angles.

We slow our cars for the speed bump
just beyond you,
 as you hold up your hands to us
in supplication, but we drive
only inches away from your limbs
splayed across summer's concrete bed.

You had slept on cave floors
in the north, cold through to bone,
imagining melting.
 You scraped your way south
to end up here, near this cemetery,
its white stones' slanted indifference
to dust, to wait just out of the way
of the generous and guilty.

But we coax you closer to center, in the way.
Chaos moves compassion. Maybe
we brake and open the window
to drop down coins, or lean from our bikes
for your blessing's bow. If we stop
and leave our cars to walk toward you,
pressing paper to your palm, we look up
 into the rock face, suspended
 in falling.

The Workman

They say the shock wave hits,
then the sound. Force rolled me
back from the desk
before I heard the explosion

and ran downstairs yelling to find
the children safe. They say duck
and cover, but I hurried to a window—
charred metal scattered

across the yard—before turning back
to shelter my daughters, their small hands tight
over their ears, mouths open.
They say a workman filling a compressor

without a gauge was thrown from a house
when the tank burst. One bearded cheek torn,
an arm ripped from the elbow, they say
he lay on the lawn begging

to be killed. Not one
in the circle of onlookers stepped forward
to apply pressure to wounds. Not one,
they say, pressed a palm to his shoulder,

assuring him "Help is on the way,"
in any language he understood
until an ambulance arrived
to take him away. They say

not one knelt by his side.
Not one held his good hand
as he lay on the grass surrounded,
alone. That evening, a gardener
hosed blood and bone into the street.

Neighborhood trench

Vessel of foul afterthoughts
our walls cannot keep out

you bring pestilence
stagnant silence

mosquito menace.
Laborers' latrine, fuliginous

muck writhing
with larvae.

Dengue-vector spawn
bite suck mainline

but are tasty food for birds, frogs.
You the catalyst?

We sleep under nets
which catch only nightmares.

Her call only grows louder

As I poured, my daughter's throat burned
blue. To my honor she drank.
Her compulsion to sing helped the balm
to cease her fluttering. Not to clip her wings,
just check their span, I had sent the girl away,
but I could not stifle her song's reach. She returned,
jabbering. The good doctor supplied simple means.
But her call only grows louder.

Hands full of salted cashews, she roamed the roads
and spun her father's shame. Untethered, she flew
with permutation's blacker threads. Weaver bird,
pattern a modest daughter's love I pled,
but she grew, a Koel girl gathering clouds.
Praise your father with honeyed talk I begged,
but she, a buzzing gnat, hugged the lamp and they
swooped her up, waiting until night those lusty
acrobats that turn and twist, flash turquoise wings and dive,
those rollers perched on wires stretched between poles.
With silence only in dreams, I seek relief.

Despite my warnings she reached up,
unlike the humble willow she would not bend
her branches back to land. O, I often spoke
of tradition, caste, family a girl's responsibility,
my pockets full of sesame and toffee.
She once told me gentle stories, her small hands
swiftly stealing sweets—*Daddy*.
I hear her, there on the stairs.

A silver bell chorus she runs to me,
bringing thunderous rains. How many phony,
posing peacocks, their green crests and
ornate fans vibrating? Every blue tarp rustled,
every village curtain opened for her.
Her unsavory music still reaches my rank cage.

My fading sparrow wakes, my fledgling,
softening consonants to sing-song, a breeze
caught in palm leaves. Even here
her voice lilts, a half-laugh hush. Bobbing on the branch
of the tamarind tree, she sings—*Daddy*.
Her incessant chattering steals my sleep.

Auntie

In the slanting shadow of your voice,
we made our stories, grateful to be imagined

away from the stifled breath,
the small words of home. Return now

to mornings cross-legged on your floor,
to those bits of song, your rhythms against doubt.

Mynas circling for seeds, we still seek
your door, opened—

you, who were always gathering fledglings,
leaned in the doorway

toward us, as the sun spun through swept dust
like forgetting.

in the moment he chooses an ending
for David

On a stone lane in Karachi
a man wells deep black pools.

Rage's thumb pressing the horizon,
he hurls his bomb-laden car
into yours
—erupts.

Back here in Bishkek, ash
covers everything,

from burning trash and coal.
Midmorning sun stills
branches' budding patterns

on stones I climb out of the city
as trains rumble, sirens fade.
Engulfed in mountain streams

I hold remnants,
what will disappear when I leave.

Road Number 78

We will walk this road seventy-eight
times seven times to find you,
bowlegged in traffic, our hair matted
past our waists, our skinny legs bare, wanting bread
and honey. We will walk this road seventy-eight
times eighty times and rest on the low wall
of a traffic island, one hand shading our eyes
from the sun reflected by saris, spotless
against endless grime, in galaxies of streets
ever wounded for widening through sacred grounds—
mosques and temples tucked under flyovers.
Balancing silver platters of marigold strands
to wrap around you, we find you seventy-eight times
seventy-eight times while we walk this road.

From the tamarind tree

She swings beyond branch or ivy,
a thought ahead, then through,

then left behind. Out of reach
of the past, of a moss and leaf

conspired bed, the wind's hands
along her dress. Touch,

an intake of breath,
an absent swinging up, legs out

then in, back and forth
in time. Not doused

in light she swings,
a letting go above brittle grass.

Reclamation

Barefoot men perch on crisscrossed bamboo scaffolds
forty stories high, like crow specks in branches, they claim
the sky above me, guiding steel beams into place

as the sun, setting, glances off Bombay's changing lines.
Below, palm trees wear battered leaves at random monsoon angles,
bent up or cracked toward the ground, behind carnival rides

warming up for evening. An empty ark rocks in its frame
and a miniature Ferris wheel turns in front of monumental tetrapods
tossed like giant cement jacks mid-game to reclaim

ground lost to the sea. As I walk past smoked-corn vendors'
smoldering coals and heaped husks, street children just awaken
as the day leaves silhouettes of scavengers

rummaging through trash bins and a tattered horse
dragging an empty carriage through the street.
I join the millions lining up for trains home.

Tin Can Pyramid

We stand, squeamish
by a pungent sea
watching the monkey man
at a makeshift carnival,
my daughter atop
her daddy's shoulders.
Through the dark, waves throb
against rocks. In a ragged ring

of onlookers, I step back
from the monkey, her red
sequined tutu glinting
beneath the street lamp.
Her threadbare master clicks
his tongue, thumps
a drum. The monkey jumps,
somersaults over a stick
raised high. She flicks her tail
and clammers, teetering
on one leg atop
a tin can pyramid.
Scrambling down to the clatter
of cans, she quivers her nose over

their empty coin cup, where
a girl in pigtails stamps her feet
too close. The monkey, frantic,
pounces into her arms. Shrieking,
the girl locks eyes with my daughter. While,
her parents argue and the man
wrenches the monkey from her chest,
I slink away
following the crowd.

Nights at the Chemists

Insects to fluorescence, we buzz in
from the street, press each other
against the kiosk counter
between pharmaceuticals jammed
from floor to ceiling

and us, as over traffic's clamor
we call out for drugs and doses.
Barefoot boys clinging to rolling ladders
strain to fill our self-prescribed needs:
cheap pills, syrups, injections

to medicate a deepening unease.
We all crowd in—
sweaty teens, dark-dyed businessmen,
grey and widening women
counting on undiluted relief. As my

hastily counted fix, foil
and brown paper wrapped,
is shoved under the grid
with change, I scarcely turn
and another elbows in to fill my space.

Instants

from the Hussain Sagar Express

place

Sunlight disappears between trains
slow station.

She squats on the tracks
placid facing
(never mind private) millions
crushing through narrow doors.

Forgotten worlds away
her baby shins to cinders
crawls scattered lines of chappals
and ankles on the platform.

A stranger scoops him up
just from under an eight-foot cart
tilted with rubble.
Tracks remember anvils and haste.

Finishing ablutions she steps from the stage.

time

Early a.m. women in line to haul rocks:

Surprising that the tree buds do not just loose from their moorings
through watery haze in thirsty numbers
steam to the pavement.

The women's slick salt arms'
limp laze fans
the heat closer.

Tell the sun to wait its tempest.
They are not ready for sky's white torrent
clouds sizzled behind them.

Stone crown balanced
the next woman drops
thin gray cotton about her face.

action

She shrinks like shade brittle at noon
 a tin cup of millet with curd
for the baby.

She shuffles around the corner
 tight past fishmongers' wares
blistering belly-up on the pavement
 sea scent the close air.

The child sleeps around her
 like a shawl as she rises to labor
balancing stones
with the sweat of each scar.

Ajanta Caves

Where centuries of monks' footsteps
smoothed the stairs,
lantern smoke from cupped-hand niches
laced stone walls black,
and shallow arches
opened to prayers and sleep,

now we queue, noisy tourists,
corral our children around dark turns,
gag at guano smells and shudder
at a sudden flap of wings. Traveling
monks, saffron-robed, kneel
before the stupa and chant. Silenced
by their meeting hands, we lean toward
ancient rhythms, joining voices. One by one

we return to the road, leaving behind
the refuse of visitors. Once hidden,
these rock-hewn temples overlook
a diminishing river. From between
low hills that barely break the sky, a blued sun
nearly lights the bangles along women's arms
as they walk toward home, heads high
with cumbrous bundles, balanced.

Walking the hills of the Ala-Too

Through brush, tall thistle and thorn scrape
along the valley ridge, a landscape

of winged seekers and predators,
we are spare and scurrying, beholden

like lambs and calves on crumbling acres.
Frost over the orchards of a small world—devastation.

But the trees cluster crimson fruit. Bright arils bruised
and tart balance harsh forces. The dog chews

loosed pheasant feathers, shattered quills
like nail clippings trail from his mouth.

We have trekked long and hard up hills
today. I pull my hat down and turning south

scan the low clouds, seeking
the steppe eagle. She fills her wings.

Ceremony

In birch shadow, shorn
a carcass hangs, hind limbs strung,
throat slit, draining to mark

what is ours, blood soaking through grass
into soil, roots to bind us
within tradition. But for all that

history, I want to skin and gut
this kill—cavity of vitals caught in a bowl—
want to rip fat, braid innards, hoard bone,

carving a sharp hull of doubt into familiar
symbols: wooly crown on top
a mutton tub. Nomadic our growth until

this brink, as if, from girl to woman
from boy to man, turning,
too, on this spit. Char mutton black. Pull

rosy silk away from bone, with hands and mouths
join, suck marrow, kiss. Scald onion rings
with broth, salt black radish and mound trays,

a garnish. Boil crown down to skull, our coronation
filling fragrant pots. Pluck an eye and most
satisfactory bones according to

this woman, this man. On a wool-warm rug
our oath: passing faith from form to map,
a hip coupling us, gist and crux.

Cab Driver's Advice on My Daughter's Fever

You must listen to the people's medicine.
The doctor's medicine treats one member
of the body. Wrecks another.
Eases the stomach, but disrupts the mind.
The people's medicine heals

body and soul. Mama was a seer
and a healer. She read cards.
For men and women filled with future's dread,
she laid cards on the table. Without looking down,
she gave a clearing, not a path—

what they needed to hear. They paid.
Mama handed out recipes like wild cards:
Boil chicken stomach. Grind fine
with pestle and mortar. Mix with hot water
and a bit of honey. Drink. All
will be well. My grandparents were seers,
my gypsy blood. Because these gifts

were wrong, I turned away
toward one God. As we need, God gives
without cards. I asked Mama once
to show me how. Follow your God,

she said. Read their eyes.
Nazis came to our house
in Romania. Mama cooked.
They did not abuse her because
of her invalid son. Polio.
One year in bed, I searched
a small world. I knew God. Papa fought

in the war. Mama boiled tea,
fried potatoes. They played cards
at our table. Mama's averted
eyes. They pitied her, her blond
dragging boy. When they left, the villagers
scorned and starved us. Papa
brought us here. His large hands

would throttle. Or shake.
My boys never smoked or drank.
I could reach them. My wife,
thanks be to God for her soul,
laughed, called me fascist.
Peace to you. My soul is strong.

From the garden

Between succulent and ornamental
choose tough flesh, moist holdings:
mammillaria and rebutia,

hedged by stone,
lure with spirals and hair-fine spines,
yellow stamens pooled in scarlet stars.

Flowers open as the light
intensifies. While young lovers hide
in shade, shallow roots drink

dew dripped from skin,
filling bodies with milky pulp.
Blossoms close at dusk, in the way

we no longer know touch, how
not to turn away toward the beautiful
useless: showy, cultivated,

demanding our gaze, animal
shapes wild in topiary,
wingthorn's stained-glass spurs,

weeping sedge's blue slink
to deception. Cream baobab buds
seduce with musk,

then wilt. Breathing Autumn Damask,
we find the roses. Floribunda
encircled, we are home,

writing each other through thorn and petal,
knowing again the apricot blush
of the fall's last bed.

Notes on the Poems

“Breakfast on Old Bombay”

A chaatwallah is a vendor of Indian street food. Poori bhaji is wheat flour rounds with spiced potatoes.

“Lengthening Day”

During Sankranthi, a festival at the start of spring, kites are flown from the rooftops in many cities of India. A manjha is a kite line coated with powdered glass.

“From the tamarind tree”

After the painting “Swing” by Kowta Anand Mohan Shastri in the Telugu Chitrakala Vijayanthi Gallery at the Chitramayee State Gallery of Fine Arts, Hyderabad, India.

Vita

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