

MUKTA SAMBRANI

from Broomrider's Book of the Dead

exit

At the end of the day Yama will ask three questions.
What if she has let her tongue dissolve? What if she has forgotten
she has one? If she addresses him with the foreign growth behind her teeth,
if she says I am sorry could you repeat that question,
he will send her back to look where she dropped it among the reeds.
And if she is old and her eyes are weak, what then?

When I write I break into two and then three. I write because I like to think of the press clamoring to meet me. I am likely not to be understood here in the east and there in the west. I like my work to have two headings as far as possible. Like having two heads. Writing about the self in the third person is a gift Ishmail doesn't care about. When I write I have voice. Voices find themselves in me. The line is punctuated like the pauses between waves hitting rock. I have memories and books Ishmail sends me.

Ishmail and Anna were driving downtown for lunch. The driver suddenly stopped at the third traffic signal. A mob was holding up the traffic. The driver disappeared in the crowd. Broomrider stepped into the crowd after him. Ishmail stepped out after her. They got the driver by his yellow turban and set him on fire. Broomrider approached the policeman. He hung his head and mumbled something about backup. The mob flung the driver's turban up in the air. He ran toward Broomrider. His arms flailing around the ball of fire he had become. Then he collapsed. Ishmail quickly put the screaming Broomrider in his car. She has not forgiven him. They got all the women too. That time in Delhi. Years before in Lahore and years later in Ahmedabad. Ishmail presented papers on communal violence at conferences everyone attended. The newspapers reported that he referred to the rioting and the rape as historical indiscretions or indiscretions of history.

Bodies of water

Bodies that join us, stand within and between, remembered
caves and slivers of light. Confluence, growth and ebbing. My hand
in my mother's or father's across oceans. The face of a child
of my water, blood and spirit shines every time I bring water
to my face or drink in ceremony of human ritual and wait. Water
inspires anticipation and waves break the distance of shores
hot and cold. They restore fluids, two liters a day in the bent,
broken frame, the ancient form fills like an urn, asks for sails,
compass and chart. When they sailed, their fates brought them
to wasteful plenty. My ancestors swore never to leave home
for other gods. Every child was tied to earth in ritual oath,
then released when water spoke, untied and floated downriver
in ancient boat, basket or vessel till water found water.
Bodies call from across and within, chasms for crossing, tonight
rain whets and takes my tired and wandering gods to rest.

Burn this book before it burns you. Anna implores you. Anna makes. Anna is split. I am Anna. Anna is made. Anna makes Anna. I am split. I am what I make. I make. I implore you. Burn this book. Don't struggle with who. Or what or why or when. I want you to know that I tried to resolve it. I want you to know that I tried to help you. This is how it is.

In another life I traveled often. Ishmail and his mother joined when we felt like taking them along. We were once on the Bombay-Howrah Mail and Ishmail was having this hideous tantrum. This must have been a long time ago. I was quite in awe of these expressions of creative and passionate rage. Even at seven or eight. Sweet S was with us on that train. Sweet S was this boy with the biggest eyes ever. His mouth was wide. He sat on the berth opposite and stared straight out of the window. He was so shy. He never even looked at his own feet. Ishmail's mother accidentally stepped on his small feet neatly buckled in brown sandals. It was accident. Yes. S said nothing. His mother's eyes grew large and wet. She said he was mute. She would know in the years to come that he wasn't. He spoke with his eyes. Everyone thought he and I were well-behaved children for being so quiet. He climbed into my berth at night and held me. We knew then. We sat up that night in the dark dark train. It rocked and creaked and threatened to lull us to sleep. He let me feel inside his pants. He did not expect the same favor in return. I let him. I did it all the time with Ishmail. He said I was like a green lotus bud. He made me feel beautiful. We met again on the train to Delhi. He was reading Dostoyevsky. He peeped over his book once and then again and again. His eyes were myopic from reading and the perspective that had grown into them. He said he knew my smell. He said he could smell a mango tree miles away.

The woman in the bed next to Painter ran away last year. She called herself Janata Express. She lives in a railway station complex somewhere down south. Janata Express knows all rail routes and railway timetables. She announces arrivals and departures of trains all day long. She cannot go to sleep because she would be causing her passengers serious inconvenience. Her father had been a station master. Janata Express spent her childhood moving from station to station. She calls it a childhood based on the theory of continuous motion. I miss her sometimes. She was all mind. She could go anywhere. She was always getting somewhere. She took me along from time to time. We changed trains at junctions. Sometimes it was Howrah Mail. At other times it was Katgodam Express or the JammuTavi or the Trans-Siberian. And it moved all the time.

I have been thinking. I stare at the ceiling like Mataji and ponder over the mysteries. Life came into existence by the theory of evolution or by a miracle or both. Then we made for ourselves someone called god in our image and said the reverse. Then they started looking for something to believe in. The ceiling has no answers. It stares back when you stare. It helps to stare hard as I think. There are concentric circles of moisture trapped in the ceiling. The main water tank is located directly overhead. We will all be free the day it explodes. It is through her conversations with these rings that Mataji has worked out the equations. Some of these will remain inscribed on the wall. I think I have discovered Mataji's secret. Her strength comes from what pulses through the ceiling. Mataji came here before us. She said she would be here till the end. The last day is five hundred million light years away according to her calculation. We must wait. Unless the dead rise from their ashes and graves. They will have to overthrow the compulsions of the sun and hold the earth down with a giant leather harness. Mataji says they will come for us. She also said they are busy making that harness. It must be a lot of work. We will wait.

Anna's Book of charms

φ

Where the murky
parts in two
three limbs grow
on lotus root
find desire

ω

Turn the circle
square ground
cumin seed
exhale from mouth
stems thorn

Δ

Erase the last
longer wick
wicked curse
the rabbit for
release

ξ

Hold the dragon
smokes in pond
sail a lantern
turn to light
a human fire

ψ

East of radish
field of yellow
roots roost
three mares find
buried calf

Y

Call the mountain
man the gate
align poles north
of crocus burn
at sight

Ⓕ

Bury female
fetus found
fields of glass
cover dead hail
mother rise

3

Return to fire

Sweet S was with Mother and I when we saw the cyclist run over by the truck near Nathadwara. He lay twitching in pain. Mother turned away and covered my eyes. S looked straight out of the window and at the man. No one wanted to touch his mangled torso twisted around his broken legs. There was no blood. There was no time for it. Mother was haunted by the cyclist run over by a truck near Nathadwara for months. No one wanted to touch him. S prayed quietly. Our bus moved on very quickly. Then S wept. The Broomrider passed outside our bus window. The Broomrider also came for the man run over by the train. He was all yellow inside. S said we all are. S was all yellow inside when he died. When we die the cover comes off. It is like we are all always naked inside our clothes and we are all always dead. Mother could not stand Sweet S. She knew it was all going to end in a tragic melodrama. Ishmail could not care less. Ishmail's mother said S was a nice boy. She also kept a file on where he came from and the people in his extended family. This she did as a favor to Mother and expected the same sort of thing in return. Somehow they never had to refer to the file. He gave them no reason to. He just went and died on them.

“Exercise often. Especially work those inner thighs.” from *Broomrider's guide to broomriding*.

Mataji has had a revelation. She can see the dead rise towards the line of the horizon dipping beyond the electric crematorium. She has been chanting continuously for over three days now. They might send her away to make her quiet and let the electric wires dance in her blood. When she comes back she will be pale and crisp like fresh sheets back from laundry. The huge dusty clouds looming in the distance are uncanny. The authorities are puzzled. They are taking Mataji away on a stretcher. She blesses us all before stepping onto the stretcher and then blesses the one doctor who smiles at Painter. He smiles and asks the attendants not to strap her down. He says he will do it himself. They wheel her out quietly. We will not see her for a few days. Painter will give up food. Lisper will weep all the time and cling to me from time to time. She will try to feel my breasts for comfort. The one doctor who smiles at Painter is really young. He does not look like a doctor somehow. He came in one morning and held my hand. He kept saying something like and how are we doing today Ma'am? Now who could Ma'am be? He is so strange sometimes. He wants to see my book. He wants me to become his special case file. Case? Case of mangoes. He wants to hold my hand. He thinks he can look inside my head from there. Nothing can get inside my head. Not sand. Not light. Not air. Mother said that all the time.

Anna's poem about sleep

There is nothing like sleep that desires you—
it is almost always as good a rule
as it is with lovers.
It is better not to desire things like sleep.
They almost always let you down like your lover pinning attention,
staring at the ceiling, forgetting your sixty kilo staring frame,
and proceeding to be desired by sleep.
He would rather not and you would rather
and sleep is a convenient enemy.
And you can't see her with your eyes open.
He stares hard. You stare at him
and wish the ceiling fell on him
and wish sleep took you from here
to wake up later in another Anna poem.
In the poem about sleep, they bury him and let it grow
and creep up tree trunks like his skin, his voice, his blood.
Stone dries.
People must never forget not to dig up their dead.
He floats in liquid space.
Somehow there can never be anything else.
He floats up, head bobbing, kite string in hand.
They say he is happy now.
They say I can sleep now.

of bricolage

when the unrested and fierce decline
and when unrested the fierce decline
and when fierce the unrested decline

all point to cohesion
with the poem ends purpose
who says that of words

elephant swings
his trunk is sheet metal music
or black gold swings elephant

hidden from the rest of the world
the rest of the world hidden from
from the rest of the world hidden intention

speak to my mother tongue
to speak mother my tongue clipped
to my mother speak tongue

what word for language in language
in what language word for language speak
for language word in what language

Sweet S and I walked around the mother of pearl Mazaar of Salim Chisti for hours. S vanished from Ishmail's nightmares a year after his death. S wept at Haldighati. He read aloud from the guidebook between sobs. Chetak ran on three hooves. He bled across the turmeric yellow of the valley. He leapt across the last chasm with the Rana on his back and then lay down with solemn gratitude in his eyes. The Rana wept. I loved Bharatpur. En route there are many yellow on green mustard fields with peacocks descending on low shrubbery from their short and jerky flights. They land embarrassingly heavily for bird bodies and the shrubs cringe from their coarse claws. The shrubs yowl sometimes when the oversized birds begin their unearthly calling. No one has seen peacocks mate. That must be ugly.

S began his Bharatpur morning with death talk. The only thing a human being can't hope to possess is his or her dead body. Bombshell Statement. Ishmail was always smirking and looking on from behind his Nietzsche tome. He said things like S would make a great publicity manager for an undertakers business. He could have one of his fantastic one-liners painted on their glass doors. He could also give lessons to aspiring undertakers on how to gain instant possession of the dispossessed body with the three words that would bring every fresh widow's car to a screeching halt at their over-decorated front door. Or make up for love never felt with lines and flowers and a limousine and a rosewood or fiberglass casket with brass or silver or both etchings engraved with her favorite line from the lists S could whip up. You can live in heaven forever but you have to die first. You are best when dead because that is when you are missed the most. S and I rode around the sanctuary on bicycles. Ishmail followed with his Sartre in the electric-car. The rot had already set-in. S said he felt like a schoolgirl who wants to beat every boy in town in bicycle races up and down the biggest bridge. At night I could hear them across the wall. Ishmail asked S if he wanted to be reborn on earth. If he would like to be a Purple moorhen or a common Painted-stork. S wanted to be born overseas. A Non-resident Indian fantasy. S wanted to be a Siberian crane. A freakish extinct relic. Sweet S. Nothing short of the dramatic. He wanted to be tall. Wanted super model legs and freaky headgear for enhanced height. He wants to come to Bharatpur every year. That is if they are not entirely extinct by then. An antelope carcass lay rotting in the swamp. It fed whole hierarchies of food chains for over three months before all evidence of it disappeared. It left a wet stench in the earth and a brown and yellow stain under the wild grass. Sometimes a whole lifetime goes by before you remember.

inhale

You've been here long enough, she says. Make your way to heaven now. Go to your god.
He won't have me with the wooden leg, the old woman says or the swellings on my hips.
They swathe her, search her, bathe her in alarm. The nurse says no swelling here.
Only wood. At night they feed her grapes and help her bring them up again.
With her one wooden finger she points at the latch on the crib. Take it down, she says,
let me have my gods, she says pointing to the frames and idols on the tall shelf.

Intermittently she misremembers names, shapes, species, makes evolutionary leaps
sedation brings diurnal dreams and night songs from the shredded rag of memory,
where did you hide my baby? Go get my brother or the other man, my husband
call the Police, call the doctor, my father, look look, my wooden wing is turning
green. Pluck this flower off me. Wear it in your hair before the hour of sawdust.
I must ask the dog if it is time. Is he beginning to howl? Take it down, she says.

Insaan

Insaan meditated on the drop of rainwater. The cattle tracks were lost in the slush. In the absence of the rising dust the twilight hour approached more rapidly. Someone sang the song of the Godhuli hour in the distance. Insaan talked to the tree. It rained hard and relentlessly on Buddha in penance that year. The hour of homecoming came and went. It dripped green nectar on his head, a drop alternately from the sky and the tree.

A hand emerged from the puddle, his twin, Insaan like him. She rose, held him and then all color drained. She slipped from his hand. He made her from memory, mud and water, man and not man, woman and not woman. The torrent passed. He knelt in the mud and caressed the puddle for her face. The sap ran down his cheek. He asked the tree "ke tumi" like Tagore had asked the sun. The tree silently pointed at the sky.

The sun had a way of avoiding the crumpled tissue of overcast skies. The feather in his pocket was damp from keeping. He set it free. Her breath covered the tree and the butterfly rising to his throat. He lay down beside her, mud and water in his eyes.

so you may find your name etched or who writes riddles or letters on grain

lo

after angels reveal blood lineage from sea to city you trace these for the unseen or unseeing

mi

when it calls

it calls infinite

tie

soar

or skin of skin

resplendent

beloved

or home on a hill

se

honest passions/ sip different /nouns missed /streets walls and cobble hemispheric change/ latitudes of fault no lines
of no return/ endless seam to seam

oh

scatter my line
encounters and wander-
lust after road
name the foreign and the found

au

my thimble
oven mitten dyed purple
moor or hen or what I may remember vermilion cascade in a circle drawn to vie o you

be

from the widest
letter narrow alley spaces missed between grudging and giving
he takes she makes her way and distance leaves rustling

The leaves must spring from dew
There must be dew
There must be water, even on the moon
among the faults, such lines as occur
on the rocks, such forms, among thorns
the many voices as inhabit fingers or
my throat under yours and among the
needs, such as there are, the collapsing
walls, muted as the submerged throb.

Variegated corpses for identification-
sutured, antiseptic, pain threshold reducer,

I now care about people I didn't know yesterday
You know the kind?

Don't scratch me there tulip,
There's a sore spot under that finger nail.
It's a drunken question-
I believe in the power of water.
That's how life is. It is cruel.

What Wind

Love is not possession,
But the possession of love—

Do me this service of honesty
Even if—

Don't toss thoughts around
Like stars scatter.

I'm just like the characters in my books
Have always been- quite ephemeral.

It seems like a long conversation
Or a note to self,

The lives they didn't,
The girl monk in the practice monastery-

Would she write letters?
Confess dishonesty in all honesty?

Uncut A Poem for Michael McClure

On the east wing rooftop of Building A
more towards a more technological start,
pretend monks met with their black books
and declared India India,
washed their hands of baggage tags,
collected over quests for mystic peace,
purged the yogic necessity for weed
with weed and died.

In the west wing auditorium of the building
he addresses the gathering
with smashing poise
and lots of free advice,
a gnawing sense of hunger
and much diluted zen potion
the monks are worried sick about.
He announces to the world that India is India too.

Anna is going to shave her head,
go to Dharamshala,
take pranic healing lessons,
weep for Tibet,
stare hard
so the future begins to make itself
and take the Gandhi video home tonight
to sleep with her.