

Gayatribala Panda

The Shrine of Goddess Shakti

My wishes hop step after step
and reach her first.
My washed body, draped in immaculate white,
trails behind each time;
it hurts, the cause is unknown to me,
as my feet negotiate the bloodied
corridor where sharp rays of blood
splays the floor.

The spot of the sacrifice is teeming.
Amid the melee I no longer see
the innocent faces;
they have been severed off their necks,
and those awaiting death
in stoic silence,
their innards uncoil and wriggle out,
the eyes squeeze out
a ray of forlorn tear –
'Please take us away from here,'
they would have uttered
had there been a voice in there.

I can't see their faces
I can't see
the slaughter's hands,
his cutlass, knife, other tools;
all I see is the splash of red,
the blood
of the sacrifices
and its scarlet dash.

Amid this scarlet carnival
I stand
armoured with my wishes before the Goddess.
Secure. Tall.

I shall leave the shrine
and return home in a while.
I will carry home
the meat of the sacrifice and
some fresh blood securely wrapped
in a taro leaf.
My family, my kith and kin
will be overwhelmed;
the aroma of blood

will seep into their body and
blend in their veins,
'the goddess will answer our wishes' –
their thirst will turn rapturous.

The shrine will flash
in all my dreams,
my eardrums resounding
its thunderous miracles,
at the edge of my four-poster
will stand that innocent goat
whose flesh holds out
the promise to my redemption,
whose tear testifies the notification
of my triumph,
whose blood smells of my prosperous future –
and she will ask:
'What is the color of the wishes
you have said before the Goddess?

Is it a shade deeper than my blood?'

O

The Woman who did not die

The woman did not die
despite her ceaseless battles
with gang-rapes,
dowry tortures, abortions.
She rises a thousand times
and stands up.
She rises from the pyre of her injury,
where the flames of shame,
humiliation blaze
and spread through the universe.
Her dishevelled hair, attire,
her eyes of ember,
and she tells the world:
I am alive.

The mirror of her body
reflects the terrible fate of a million women.
Her eyeballs bear documentary evidence
of endless brutalities.
Each pore of her skin
carry faces of horripilant moments.
The swiftest stream of her blood
host flames of revenge.

Her uterus carries the semen
of denial, injustice and humiliation.

Yet standing on the last rung of life
the woman yells out:
I am alive.

Each accident,
every blotch
fades away into the relaxing jaws of time;
each new shame, every obscene thrill
gets documented by history;
the mortal forehead of each
is adorned with layers of clay.

Yet,
the woman who did not die
takes off sari from her *yoni*
peels off bark from history
to illustrate the world –
no one can estimate
the cost of her wounds –
neither time,
nor the world!

Sometimes
the woman who did not die
knocks at my door
in the middle of the night
and tells:
'Don't be restless inhaling raw blood
instead compose a slogan –
thicker than raw blood
and more acute
which would transform suddenly
myriad flowers into bombs.

She tucks a flaming torch
into my shaky palms
and tells:
'spread out, ruin him
and fabricated masculinity'.
She sows the fragrance of jasmine
of overwhelming self confidence
into my cheerless evenings and says:
'you, the ultimate Goddess of your fate,
turn yourself into a resolve'.

I feel closely the wounds
of the woman who did not die,
embrace her

and remove carefully my clothes.
Lo, my body too has the same wounds,
on which time is growing layers of bark
I tell the woman:
'Look,
like you I too have not died;
I have managed to elude
the call of death'.

O

The Poem

Mere love
mere sorrow
mere revolt
mere hunger
do not make a poem.

Come, I'll tell you
what all a poem is made of:

An elegant death –
that you call a poem;
that makes us lose ourselves
amid ancient, forgotten and lost words.

A poem is a resplendent sin
that salvages us
from years of inevitable,
irrelevant drudgery
towards a new thrill
and attainment.

A poem is a bashful memory
which, like the first touch of rain,
can spread a tremor
in the nerves at any moment
when you are old
when you are young.

A poem is a fresh dream
that squeezes itself
in the layers of the eyes
long after the night is gone,
and stuns
and transcends the layers of realization.
of course –
beyond the sin that is banal
the death that is obscure

the bashfulness that remains invisible
the dream that remains inaccessible –
a poem is much more.

Come, let me explain it to you.

A poem weeds out
the ugly helplessness of man
and dig up
a piece of land.
It buries itself there as a seed;
it grows into a tree,
laden with blossoms and fruits.
It becomes a shelter,
an assurance.

A poem is the sky of a star
that twinkles forever.

O

The Musings of a Woman about herself

I always wanted to ask Ma,
when does a woman
think about herself
during her lifespan?

As she tends to the fish
with a country kitchen cutter,
her gashed finger
drops trails of blood.
She is engrossed –
how she forgot in the morning
to fix the button
to her husband's shirt,
how the drumstick tree in their backyard
has sprouted little flowers,
how to put the glass jar in the Sun
so that its pickled berries
do not grow fungus.

As evening glides by
she hurries up to collect from the terrace
the winnowing fan of bamboo strips
on which she sun-dries
balls of black gram paste.
She rolls cotton wicks in the God's room
lest the evening hour slips away.

At the altar of the holy basil
she finalizes the dinner menu
for the daughter
of her husband's elder brother
who would be a bride soon.

I always thought to ask Ma
if a woman ever thinks about herself.

Because when I was a young girl,
I had a lot to think about –
exam questions,
care for hair fall
cosmetic products
for a bright skin,
etc.

I never understood then
why a woman
never thinks about herself,
though there are myriad personal issues
a woman could be bothered about.

My present is the twinkling lonely time.
Amid the deep sighs of my collective present
stands my mother;
the woman
and her lively performance of joviality,
the lanes and bylanes of her mortal years
through which she carries
her absence within her
like the odour of sweat.
My collective musings crash there
and return.

If a tear rolls down her eye
burying her years,
why does the woman wipe it off
hurriedly
away from an onlookers eyes?

I thought I would ask this to Ma.

O

The Lantern

It is a fact
that a lantern flickers within me incessantly,
in warm incandescence.
I endure intermittently

its heat.
My organs and limbs are smeared with its dark shoot.

It has guided me through countless decays
and losses
and is still aflame;
I am getting used to decays and losses.
Now I can even address them my *luxuries*.

In fact some are naming these luxuries 'sin'.
The lantern now is more luminescent
than the moon rising at the rim
of my soul,
bathed in my desire;
I notice the furtive glare of the earth,
yet I give it a damn with utter contempt.

The lantern braves all these storms!
An arm rises from the heap of wounds
and winds up the wick
and I simmer in the primitive heat –
the heat of hunger – always primitive, binding.

The question now is irrelevant:
why I wished to lose my way in your eyes.

I have nothing more to add.
On the lantern
within me.

O

Books

She opens and closes herself
like she opens and closes a book
to the man's whims.

The man
swims through each of her pages,
as if she is a book,
and pauses
wherever he wishes
to read the page minutely.

When he is overwhelmed and tired,
he pushes the pages to a corner
and snores.

Gratified.

O

Capital

How does a woman invest?

family

love

purity

sin-

does a woman invest on these?

Sometimes

I ask myself this question

and

each time

I fail to garner

an answer.

O

Konark

Standing still like a statue
through years
without moving a limb,
is our singularity –
that is one opinion.

A few other voices join in:
'our nudity is our dissent.'

The delight,
distressed moans
become stones
and the cause of wonder
for the wayfarer,
for the tourist.

Can Konark
be a stretch of time
hewn out of abundance
and repentance?

Time does not answer.

O

Art

Like
selling flesh
buying flesh
too
is an art.

So too is turning flesh.

O

Architecture

From my swiftest blood flow
I produce electricity
and manage myself with the light.

I fashion my weapons
out of my bones and
assure myself of my safety.

I dig a tunnel
through the unfathomable pit
of my flesh.
There
I go to sleep;
I waste myself.
And no one has a clue to all this.

O