



ya devi sarva bhooteshu matru roopena samsthita
namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namaha

*Devi, who art manifest in all existence as mother,
I worship thee, over and over and over again.*

Sankalpam

In my mirror, under the tubelight
is a face that makes me sigh.

A roadmap to journeys past,
it shows no sign of happy sojourns and successful quests.
A desert without oases, a garden of unseemly weeds
what I see shows what I waited for, what I lost.

My eyes look tired, my hair limp and grey,
and even were I not vain, would I look away
not wanting to see.

The weight of grief, the burden of unexpressed anger
pin to the floor the chance of a smile that stays put.

I was looking for you.
You were supposed to meet me here.

Where are you, Devi?
This is not the first time you have missed a date we made.
And this is not the first time I will wait for you
with patience that comes and goes
and a jumble of words, lines and colours.

My gaze stays on the mirror
that like the screen in a documentary on the birth of worms
begins to wrinkle and roll
revealing fissures that become cracks
and shatter it to shards.

I will wait right here at the appointed place.
Shards or not, I do not want to miss our meeting.

Mahalaya Amavasya

Sepia Stranger

Looking back at me
through the thick frame of her glasses
she looks, as always, for her daughters.
Her eyes are quiet and not just with the silence of the ages;
they also echo the serenity of her spirit.

What must she be thinking?
What are you thinking?
Nothing much, she says.
Tell me, tell me, I have such a need to know you.
My story is a short one and
you know its sequel better than I do.
What is there to tell?

Mother, I want to know you.
I want to know your feelings,
your thoughts, your perceptions.
When you look at us, what are you thinking?

Who am I to say? She asks.
You inhabit life-stages and worlds I never dreamt of.
You live in places that I read about.
What do I know?
A little bit of music, a whole lot of love, some pain.

Sing for me, I beg.
She smiles. And I see that she must have been a wild one
under that stern sepia exterior.
I haven't sung for ages, she says, beginning
like her daughters, grand-daughters and their daughters.

A beautiful disembodied voice and a sad, sad song in a happy tune.
A little girl having music lessons.
A scholar transcribing accounting records.
A teenager making a political choice.
A daughter, a sister, a teacher.
A radio performer. A singing bride.
A friend and ally in an alien place.
A well-loved wife with a clean, clean house.
A mother. A mother. A mother.
A mother. A mother. A mother.
A...moth...er....

The song ends abruptly.

Mother, sing some more.

Sing about... and I can't ask.

There are things that I want to know--

what was it like were you happy which was best

how did it feel were you sad what do you think of us

what would you say to them how did it turn out

how did we turn out--

but I cannot really ask her.

So I just say, one more, just one more song.

All across the decades and the ages,

I hear her laugh. Child, she says,

what more can I sing?

She adds, with some indulgence:

You are my song.

And then, she is gone. The lady I never met.

Serious in sepia. Absent and present.

Forgotten, far away and yet, familiar.

Blue and white pottery

Blue and white, lying on a mat,
reading stories in a Deepavali Malar.
White and blue, sitting by potted plants in the balcony
watching the world go by.
Blue and white, every night,
Scheherezade to children of the black-out.

Lights out, the civil defence patrol signals,
paper-blackened glass blots out the light of candles.
We don't want their air-force to see us.
Inside, by candlenight, blue and white,
night by night, sings us stories that never end.

Beleaguered maidens, speaking snakes with diamonds on their foreheads,
unexpected misfortunes, triumphs won by virtue and wisdom.
Blue and white, night after night.

White and blue, did this happen to you?

In a large square house, amid the coconut groves,
children in and out, in and out,
in and out...
blue with effort, white with exhaustion.
And for what? This one to love,
that one to let go. This one to feed,
that one to dress.

Life meandered through the groves, streams and years.
The children left. The river ran dry.
The song lingers.
The stories, the best stories, went on
with the children
from waking to sleep to dream and beyond.
Larger than my life, that I can tell you.

Blue and white, fragile as that Rajasthan vase.
White faith and blue, fading fast too.

The Friendship Of Story And Song

Two young brides enter a big house,
from alternative universes.
Golden spires and golden fields
do not gild their status.
They bond, over trepidation
and over song.

The words that they cannot freely speak
and the fears they know they share
become swaram and sahyam
generously shared and quietly learnt.

A few years, and a dozen children later,
one friend remains.
To sing, to remember,
to tell the story of a friendship
to their common grandchildren.

It should have been two old ladies
rediscovering that youthful alliance.
She has left me to tell this story,
and no chance to chuckle together over fate.

Story and song,
sometimes a secret
sometimes silence
sometimes performance
sometimes memory
sometimes the future.
This is our gift to you, they say.

My grandmothers,
music and word,
singer and song,
laughter and tears,
pain and release.

Prathamam

The fingers keep time
as incessantly
as time marches on.

Sometimes they keep time to an aalapanai,
slow to begin with,
warming up to a frenzy and a song.
The way she learnt to read,
one letter, then one word, then one sentence
at a time.

Sometimes they drum a polka,
brisk and steadily so,
from start to finish.
Like her engagement with the world
beyond the confines of her homes.

Sometimes they suggest a rhythmic chant,
reflection of her breath,
in and out, mostly reliable.
The way she was in each home
always there integrally
even when she had just arrived.

Sometimes they are soft as a lullaby,
comforting and nurturing the children of the world.
Small hands that powdered her crinkly back.
Small feet that scrambled to get her stick.
Small mouths, a million plus, that she fed.
Small dreams that she listened to, seriously.

Sometimes, just sometimes, the fingers rest
and her voice rises: Stop this child
who was usually running wild around her aged body
who was about to hurt herself
who was about to twist or turn in a way
the old lady could not even watch.

And then they resume their vigil over time.
Birth, childhood, sickness, marriage, childbirth, death.
Twenty-four samskaras performed over nearly a century
of living.
The fingers kept time, watching life mindfully
with love but without attachment to good things or bad.
Bearing witness to each minute and feeling,
and then moving on,
her fingers learned to play the rhythm of the moment.

The fingers still keep time.
The fingers are now time,
and hence the drumming timeless.

Saraswati, soft and wrinkled
gentle and animated, every moment a learning moment,
mother to the universe, fortitude to its injured
child with her children, always reserving
for herself the right to indulge
and exercising it only as love.
Saraswati, keeping time.

Dvitiyai

It takes a lot of patience
to play snakes and ladders.
Any child can tell you that.
Just when you think
the game is yours,
and only ladders lie ahead,
comes a snake with other plans for you.
It takes a lot of patience
to play snakes and ladders
and she is a master-player.



Snakes and ladders come together.
Certainty, mystery.
Joy, loss.
Sickness, success.
Leadership, struggle.
Labour, laughter.
Love, heartache.
Hardship, delight.
Confidence, crisis.
Poverty, pride, pleasure.
Promise, sadness.
Yearning, managing.
Basking, grieving.
Leaving, surviving.
Enduring, enduring.
Up the hard way, down the easy.
Snakes and ladders, night and day,
endlessly.

What is the secret of your success?
the flashing lights asked.
Patience, she said, patience.



Ladder. Patience. Snake. Patience.
Snake. Patience. Ladder. Patience.

Is that all? Are you sure?
Yes, yes, she impatiently said.
Then sheepishly, patience for the big game,
patience with the small game,
patience for learning patience.



Tritiyai

The Gardener

To each life, its purpose.
Hers, to protect the saplings
left exposed by the felling of the tree
in last night's storm.
When they went to bed
she was thinking of nothing more sombre
than life's small pleasures,
and not half as pompously as that.
The brewing storm registered as a passing thought
as she drifted to sleep.

Daybreak, and
as she opened her eyes,
the bright sun of the post-storm morning
made her blink.
Breathing the cool air
she saw the wreckage in the garden.

The tree was gone.
The large, strong, invincible tree,
whose branches she had clambered up and down,
and where a swing had occupied her for hours,
was gone.
Gone, it's gentle shade and the fruits it yielded
to nourish her afternoons of play
and to tempt her during mornings of work.
And the garden was empty.

She thought of the many creatures
the tree had sheltered.
Were they well? Were they still alive?
A reconaissance expedition brought her to a row of saplings.
Sheltered by the tree, nurtured by its shadow,
they stood exposed to the elements,
unable to provide for themselves.
She knew what she must do.

From that day,
she was the gardener.
Rock against the wind.
Shade against the sun.
Reaching, teaching,
pruning, praising.
She tended these saplings,
little thought to other things.

And in her care, they grew.
They rose, they blossomed,
and in turn, they nurtured other saplings
as she had shown them to do.
And in her care of them
she scarcely noticed how they'd grown.
She continued to tend to them
as she had in the early days,
not hearing their wish
to care for her now.

It's our turn, they said.
We'll be fine, they shrugged of her fingers.
Let us give back to you.
She simply did not notice.
The trees that sheltered the rest of the garden
remained in her eyes, saplings in need of care.

And beyond their protestations
they saw her single-pointed commitment
and accepted it as their blessing.
And the gardener tended her life's purpose
as if it were still the morning after the storm.

Chaturti

The Performer and the Ascetic

The crowd calls out to her,
two hundred strong in one voice.
She speaks and the others cease.
Pindrop silence. Thunderous applause.
The ascetic walks away, never looking back.

In twilight's shadow, by dim light
pen to paper, note to song.
The troupe assembles. The show begins.
An instant classic, the audience sings.
The performer glows backstage, soaking it in.

Voice carried over air and water,
enters countless homes each night.
Mouth chants words, heart explores silence.
The praise pours in. The fans legion.
The ascetic moves on, nothing stands still.

A hermitage of benches and chalk.
Flowers at her feet in perpetual motion.
Words tumble out of her silence,
garlands of meaning and melody.
The audience assembles at the performer's pleasure.

Handmade essays in history and myth.
Clay in her fingernails, paint on her hands.
On display is her arts-spanning imagination,
beyond anything her admirers have seen.
The offering made, the ascetic leaves the theatre.

Her needs minimized, her desires an unexplored country,
she tends the wilderness within.
In its rich silence, are found the twins
conscience and creativity.
The audience cannot get enough of the performer.

She has made a habit of simplicity,
a virtue of disinterest, indifferent
to those who would give her silk
and gold and other finery.
What you see is what you get, the ascetic says.

In this garden of creative freedom
the performing ascetic walks a tightrope
between denial and craving, unknown to herself.
Her hard-preserved detachment is what she gives.
Her resilient art is what she gets.

All else is a sideshow — the audience,
the applause, the hermitage, the spiritual quest.
The main event is the rivalry within her,
between the performer and the ascetic,
one pulling towards the light, the other pulling away,
towards and away, towards and away, towards and away.

Panchami

Perpetual motion

Her eyes
observe a million oddities
and nuances a minute,
and in fluid and transparent motion,
express her every response.

Her hands
working as fast as sound,
sustain the ever-hungry,
nurture the ever-needy,
articulate the ineffable.

Her feet
move like the wind on the prairie
through the mundane motions of the day
their dance making magic of them
for the children who watch.

She speaks very little
but says a whole lot.
And yet, there are within her
many silences beyond our reach.
Her motion is her quest for stillness.

Three worlds of meaning
seem to dwell within her spirit.
The unsaid but expressed.
The spoken but unstated.
The unspoken, unarticulated, unutterable.

Dancing,
like her eyes, her hands, her feet
in their struggle to merge
or emerge.
Motion in stillness. Stillness in motion.

Shashiti

Water Eternal

Water does not break.
It freezes.
It boils.
It chills.
It simmers.
But it does not break.

Water does not tear.
It expands.
It contracts.
It drops.
It pours.
But it does not tear.

Water does not change.
It is cleansed.
It is polluted.
It is coloured.
It is flavoured.
But it does not change

Water does not cease.
It absorbs.
It is absorbed.
It evaporates.
It condense.
But it does not cease.

Water merges without words
into nature
into humans
into objects
into dreams
but it remains water.

Water sustains until provoked.
Then, it rises
it sweeps
it swallows
it inundates.
When provoked, water
destroys.

But still, water cleanses.
Every drop a new lease of life.
Every flood a chance to start
over.

Saptami

Just Joy

Face alert with anticipation
over the most mundane events of a day,
a twist of lemon in boring water,
joy spurts out of her spirit.

For every plan and project,
the more outrageous the better,
a dash of red paint on a school wall,
joy splashes out of her spirit.

Bar two ingredients for taste
and four for smell, delighting in
all life's seasons and seasonings
joy splutters out of her spirit.

Head full of data, mind full of questions,
mundane, arcane, inane, germane,
all sorted and filed by category, with
joy tucked into every folder of her spirit.

Parties, picnics, problems, predicaments—
full attention fair and square,
without regard to sequence or timing,
joy owns all moments of her spirit.

Confidence and conviction
over matters large and small,
always battle-ready, heart without fear, but
joy replaces rancour in her spirit.

The past is a technicolour movie.
The future is a fearful blur.
The present of the present—the perennial
mountain spring of joy bubbling out of her spirit.

Trickle washes away worry.
Trickle erases anger.
Trickle soothes hurt.
Joy trickles like balm through her spirit.

Trickle turns to torrent
adding life to the society of the dull
adding commentary to routine
adding laughter and life.

Asbtami

So here I am
among the shards of shattered glass,
looking for me,
waiting for you.

I have looked closely from a distance
at the shards that caught my eye,
afraid to touch them and cut my fingers.
I have listened to their story
and it has been rivetting.
But I have still been waiting
a lifetime for you
amid these ruins.

Did I find myself at least?
Not really.
A little piece here, a little piece there.
A story, a song,
stray, almost accidental, instances of being in the present.
Yes, I am a little like the gardener,
a lot like the performer,
wanting to be like the ascetic.
Wishing I could be dancing joy
instead of weighty leaden negativity.
Wishing I could be patient and adaptable water.
But I am a little of all those things, you know.

I am patient.
Why else would I be waiting for you
in the middle of broken glass pieces
just because you said you would come
--not at an appointed moment,
but just that you would?
And I am trusting too,
in spite of your making me wait always.
I can be water—seeking stories and song
even in these cutting fragments.
Finding story and song in them.

Amma, it is not comfortable here without you.
I am tired of these glass pieces
and these words that now come out of weariness
and not joy.
And yes, when you come, I will be joy.
(I can hear, be in the moment, child,
be in the moment.
If you are not joy now,
then you never will be.)

The tears fall from my eyes.
Like a child left in a playground,
long after the sun has set,
long after the other children have gone,
I am alone, waiting for my mother.
The trees have become marauders.
The clouds have become ghosts.
The moon teases me—that bully!
The swings creak eerily in the breeze.
And around me glass, so I cannot run.

I want my mother.
Devi, come soon.

Navami



My sobs deepen.
My chest hurts with the effort
of heaving my sorrows out of my
body.
My stomach hurts with the pressure
of fears and imaginary threats.
My grip over my huddled body
tightens,
and my eyes could not shut tighter
with fevicol.

Through this fog
creeps in the perception of change.

The smell of fear is now like roses and sandalwood.
The taste of resentment is now like honey.
My limbs lighten like air,
and my leaden feet are moving.
The air is both cool and warm—
cool to the body, warm to the heart.

I think, my dancing feet are not touching glass.
I open my eyes and behold the mirror again.
Here, I am.

I am who I saw before this story began.
Tired, grey, burdened, unsmiling.

I blink, and there I am again,
but this time, a mosaic of shards,
each with its own story and song.
I am story and song,
I am time
and the time-keeper.
I am patience.
I am the gardener,
the performer, the ascetic.
I am perpetual motion.
I am joy.
I am water, air, fire, earth,
and more.
The mosaic makes up me.

As I adjust to the idea of being a wall
in a Central Asian mosque,
I blink again,
and what I see is what I know was always in the
mirror
invisible to my eye until now.

I see myself. Of course.
But the miracle is that
you are also in the mirror.
Not with me. You are me.
I am you.
That is the miracle.

Yes, yes, I see it.
Are you adequately amused?

Oh Devi, can you see me now?
The grey is silver,
the exhaustion is glow,
the burden is shakti,
and the smile is magic and permanent.

I am so glorious when I am you.
Yes, I am beginning to understand
that I am always you.
I am shakti and karuna.
I am beyond anger, grief and melancholy.
I am your eyes, your hands,
your heart, your feet.
Dancing stillness, infusions of joy.
I am creativity, story and song,
singer and listener, keeper of time.
I am time.
I am all the colours of the universe.
I am all the seasons of a life.
I am a child. I am a mother.
I am a teacher. I am a student.
I am all the elements
and all the directions.
I am you, Amma, I am you.

In the mirror is our face,
and it is now pure laughter.
Laughter that is delight,
glee, pleasure, surprise,
and let's face it, a little madness, too.

Amma, what is our next leela going to be?
Devi, what shall we do next for this world?
Shall we heal the sick?
Shall we give to the deprived?
Shall we love the unloved?
Shall we bring peace?
What will we do, you and I,
one face in the mirror,
one heart in the world,
a million pairs of hands and feet?

And this is my final Navaratri miracle,
the last gift of that old mirror:
The reflection now holds the one that is the two of
us,
and in us, it holds the world.
Five billion plus, and the two of us,
one face in the mirror,
all glory, all splendour, all love.

*ya devi sarva bhooteshu matru roopena samsthita
namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namaha.*

Vijayadashami

