



### **NAVARATRI 2013**

#### **Sankalpam**

Like the fresh green leaves on a new shoot,  
still wearing the sun on their sleeves,  
I write these lines on the night before the first morning.

Renewal comes with great work now.  
Many steps, many missteps,  
many kinds of healing  
and many kinds of healers,  
have gone into this renewal.

I don't want to remind you of how long autumn and winter were.  
Finally, my soul was so frost-bitten  
and my spirit so weary  
that I could barely carry myself from one moment into the next.

It still hurts to remember.

Renewal is fragile too,  
and every moment fraught with the risk  
of returning to old, debilitating habits.

But here I am,  
on the night before  
and something has worked,  
because I am here  
once more.

*Mahalaya Amavasya  
October 4, 2013.*



### **Prathamam**

Sometimes  
you blaze through me  
like a comet,  
all fire and fury.  
If I open my eyes and look at  
someone, something  
I know it will be reduced to ashes.

I cannot identify the spark  
because sparks fly about everywhere.

I just feel the fire.  
And it burns me  
to my essence.

And just renewed,  
I am spent.

*October 5, 2013*



### **Dvitiyai**

Music brings its own silences,  
have you noticed?

Rhythm regulates breath.  
The cascade of notes washes away  
the keenness of feeling,  
all those edges and tripwires.  
Like the caress of your loving hand.

Compassion stills the tandavam within me.

The flames have died down,  
but make no mistake,  
the embers are alive.  
Which movement of air,  
which whisper, will stir them again,  
I cannot predict.

But for now,  
my heart beats with the music  
for the dispossessed and the wounded  
and the hurting and the powerless  
and the exhausted and the invisible  
and the silent,  
as my eyes search for  
and my hand records  
signs of their own simmering embers,  
signs of life...  
jubilant and determined.

*October 6, 2013*



### **Tritiyai**

Sometimes it's all a blur.  
Back-to-back, back-to-back  
we check tasks off in a day.  
Look back, and nothing stands out.

What is the purpose of my life,  
we ask, knowing no one will answer.  
No one knows the answer for sure.

But each of us has a theory.  
The purpose of life is to be happy.  
The purpose of life is to be useful.  
The purpose of life is to evolve in spirit.  
The purpose of life is to give.  
The purpose of life?  
Life has no purpose. It simply is.

Each theory has the ring of truth to it.  
Sometimes the one in my hand doesn't seem to work,  
it doesn't make me feel like getting up in the morning.  
So I think it's the wrong one.  
I reach for another. But that doesn't feel right.

The purpose of life is to sort through purposes of life  
till life itself is done.

And then, it really won't matter, will it?

*October 7, 2013*



### **Chaturti**

A string of beads.  
A string of notes.  
A string of words.  
Small things, great pleasures.  
The act of putting them together,  
the greatest pleasure of all.

Happiness, success,  
the purpose of life.  
I really don't know anything about these  
after all these years.  
We're talking about methods and measures  
as well, and if you don't know what something is,  
how do you measure it?

The purpose of life is to be happy,  
I heard, and it resonated.  
But what is happiness?  
I have learned  
that it is not in people;  
that it is not in things;  
that it is not in rewards;  
that it is not in acquisition  
of places, people, things or knowledge;  
that it is not outside me,  
and it doesn't seem to be inside.

The only places I sometimes glimpse it  
are in my breath, or in your presence,  
and aren't those the same thing?

And then maybe  
in the snatch of a song,  
in a toothless smile,  
in the absorption of work,  
in shared laughter,  
in one single moment.

Similarly, success.  
What is success?  
I thought and think  
success is process—meditative, honest, sustained effort.  
Keeping up the motion and the faith  
on a road of your choice  
as true to yourself as you can be  
no matter what.  
And then, I see I travel alone.  
I mean, everyone else is travelling in groups  
of people that reinforce and sustain each other.  
Money, name, recognition and a certain security  
all seem better assured where they are.

I look at my lonely road  
which, I now notice,  
is full of hardship.  
Solitary sometimes makes for lonely,  
unsupported, friendless.  
And unappreciated.  
I just want a little bit of that stuff over there.  
A little bit of money so that I can function in this world.  
A little bit of recognition to keep me going when I am tired.  
I don't even need the comfort of the pack.

This is such a tiring journey.  
We've made it too hard.  
After all this trudging,  
I can barely see the milestones.  
So many nights, so many days  
so many sunrises and sunsets  
that the road seems to have no beginning or end.

Aadyante rahite devi.  
That is what my life feels like.  
You, without beginning or end.

*October 8, 2013*



## **Panchami**

Some things remain a constant in life.

Pain.

The aches and agonies of a malfunctioning body.

But I am not my body.

The fatigue that comes from constant interactions.

But those are performances. All of them.

The exhaustion of a full day of hard work.

I own that exhaustion.

Anger.

Somewhere in the pit of my stomach, a toxin I make.

I can and must spit it out.

Somewhere at my nerve ends, sparked by every passing wind.

I tell myself the sparks are blossoms.

Somewhere in my heart, an engine to action.

In my hands, the power to change the world.

Grief.

Life is loss, everything we know keeps changing.

I am the stillness at the centre.

Life is memory, rose, sepia, grey and murky.

I take what I need, I leave the rest.

Life is bad things happening, and learning to make them good.

I try to live it with heart, with all of my heart.

Faith.

Who else do you have, where else can you go?

I walk alone, but I feel you walk with me.

Who will listen to you, who else cares?

To you, I need not speak. You hear me in my silence.

One still point, simply there, solidly present.

Somewhere in the middle of my thrashing and flailing about, I know that.

You. The alchemist.

Making pain compassion.

Making anger action.

Making grief empathy.

Making faith fuel.

You. Constant and best companion.

*October 9, 2013*



## **Shashti**

What's your master-plan?  
Send me a post-card.

Get up.  
Brush my teeth. That other stuff.  
Take out milk. Boil milk.  
Make tea. Make coffee.  
Think: Today will I finish writing about conflict impact there?  
Keep out the vegetables.  
Fill the water-bottles.  
Think: This is annoying work.  
But the people I write about would give anything to do it.  
I know, I know.  
Take out the tiffin.  
Make the lists of the day time.  
Defrost. Thaw. Heat. Eat.  
Clear up. Clean up.  
More tea. More coffee. Some fruit?  
Think: Uff. This work never ends.  
A programme idea around female foeticide.  
Come on, come on, give me a working idea this year.  
Change the dusters around.  
Medicines, medicines, don't forget the medicines.  
Phew!  
Sit at the computer.  
Think: I want to go back to sleep.

Blankness. Exhaustion.  
But nonono. Work now! While you can.  
A detour through the inbox and the networks.  
140 characters.  
Yo! Must. Share. Words. Work. Work.

What's your master-plan, lady?  
Tweet me a DM.

Clothes for ironing.  
Sexual violence during conflict.  
Phone call about venues.  
Voting and women and proportional representation.  
Make mid-morning tea.  
Back to work, back to work.  
Ticktockticktock.  
You want a Skype appointment? Let's see.



Pang. Pang. Pang.  
Time for lunch. (Thank you for sending a cook!)  
Eat. Clean. Yes, make the change on the calendar.  
Clear. Don't forget. Fruits and vegetables.

Back at the desk.  
(Which desk? Doesn't matter. Stay with the story!)  
Another chakkar through the inboxes and networks.  
How do people submit stuff like this? Needs editing!  
Uff, this is still trending.  
What do I have in common with all these people?  
Work. Work. Work. UN Resolutions.  
Resolution to finish this section today.  
Must tweet that resolution out.  
Remember to send that reminder to follow-up.

What's your master-plan, Madam Architect?  
Write me a 1200-word column.

And it's time to make the tea.  
It's time to walk.  
It's time to come see you.  
It's time to heat the dinner.  
Heat. Eat. Clear. Clean.  
(Come clean, come clean, what's the plan?)  
Ticktockticktock.  
"Lose the morning list" time.  
Facetime. Soaptime. Worktime.  
Bedtime.

And Shashti has gone by.  
Another day.  
What has changed?

I've run 798 kilometres today  
but remain where I was this morning.  
What's the master-plan?

Come on, you can tell me now.

*October 10, 2013.*



## Saptami

Did you know (have I told you before)  
that I am named for a saptamatrika?  
That is always at the back of my mind.  
Seven mothers.

My seventh mother  
is full of life, irrepressibly so.  
Everything is of interest to her  
and you can count on her  
to have an opinion on most of it.  
I have seen life try to subdue her spirit  
but it retires hurt to the pavilion,  
beaten by her strong core.

My sixth mother  
is, is, is, a fragrant lily.  
(Wherever she is now, she is still both mother and lily.)  
Gentleness and firmness are both qualities  
I associate with her, like water.  
Laughter and tears make up our story together  
--neither of us will tell you more.  
Water transforms what it encounters  
quietly, surely.

My fifth mother  
is a teacher extraordinaire.  
She knows when she sees  
and she teaches when she looks.  
There are also many unwritten op-eds in her eyes  
and undirected theatricals in her imagination.  
And songs that she refuses to sing  
but that her feet and hands move to anyway.  
And she brings laughter and song  
when she comes.

My fourth mother  
lives with and for her words.  
She doesn't speak as much  
but they fill pieces of paper  
that you could be sitting on  
or setting your tea-cup on.  
Once when she spoke,  
she moved crowded halls to applause.  
Today, her small songs and verses  
remind the world she lives in it and still cares,  
even though sometimes she seems so far away.

My third mother  
opened her heart and home  
to mother everyone she met,  
when but a girl herself.  
She should have been a lawyer, they said,  
but she became an advocate for those around her.  
Through her words, her deeds, her food,  
she has spoken love and courage into countless lives.  
Into her story merge innumerable others—  
every detail a treasure.

My second mother  
is the mother who carried me for nine months,  
bore me and has borne with me for five decades.  
Maybe this is why patience is always the first word I associate with  
her.  
Endurance. Patience. Forbearance. Satisfaction.  
The qualities I am still trying to learn from her.  
From her, I have the gift of words;  
but from her, too, I have the craving for silence.  
Let's leave unsaid what need not be said.  
Enough.

My first mother  
is the mother of all mothers.  
You, who else?  
From you, through you, in you, with you,  
because of you, in spite of you--  
all the others, all the mothers.  
We begin with you and end with you.  
This is why the saptamatrika has one name.  
Your name.

My name.  
Which is your name.  
Which contains the names of seven mothers.  
I have the name. I must have the essence  
of each of them, of all of them,  
of you.  
And we, that is all of us, that is you,  
this one essence that we are  
are all the mother-presences, in every form,  
that ever were and ever will be,  
and also those that will never be.  
We connect the world by being.  
That is our deepest truth.  
Perhaps.

*October 11, 2013*



## **Ashtami**

There are always so many words I mean to write  
but they disappear by the time I get here.

Today, after months, I sit here  
with the familiar physical sensation of tears  
I cannot cry.  
The choked silence of my heavy heart  
is the background score to this morning.

Did I want to write to you about resilience?  
About scraping oneself off the ground  
and rebuilding, one step at a time?  
About grabbing on to whatever passes  
to prevent drowning,  
and then finding it was the door-handle  
to another deep pool?

I actually cannot recall.

Some words were positive, I think,  
about such things as resilience, survival  
and even new leaves in spring.

Some words were about words that stay in my head.

Samyam.

Virakti. Vairagyam.

Measured. Balance.

Peace. Breath.

Process. Journey.

Compassion.

Words that are like perfect sea-shells gathered here and there  
to be cherished, examined often,  
held against the ear to catch their secret meanings  
and their mystic messages.

Some words must have been  
about the things that make me angry.  
You know those are in abundance.  
I won't even list them here;  
you know what they are.

At this moment,  
all I can feel is profound exhaustion.  
Some things never change, it seems.  
Enough.  
Really, enough.

*October 12, 2013*



## **Navami**

Every year, I wonder which of your gifts  
I should rest and worship on this day.

Musical instruments. Check.  
And voice too. Done.  
Pens, pencils, paints, suchlike. Check.  
Paper, notebooks. See.  
Laptop, desktop. Right on top.  
Pen drives, floppy drives, CDs and DVDs. Yes.  
Books, notes. In the foundation.  
Actually, all the appurtenances of my life  
are assembled before you.

But what about my intelligence,  
your best gift, my sharpest instrument?  
Can I stop it for a day?

We both know I have not mastered  
how to stop my thoughts,  
how to barricade that song in my head,  
how to hold back speech,  
how to still comprehension,  
how to let touch and taste be  
without interpretation,  
how to cease...  
only to revive it all with the sunrise.

When every part of me  
is your gift and your instrument,  
any other offering short-changes you.

And so I give you myself.

*kaayena vacha manasendriyairvaa*  
through body, speech, heart and sensee  
*buddhyaatmanaava prakrute svabhaavaat*  
by virtue of my intelligence, feelings, nature or temperament  
*karomi yadyat sakalam parasmai*  
whatever I do or end up doing,  
all of it is for you.

And for  
*kara charana kritam vaak kaayajam karmajam vaa*  
the things that my hands and feet do,  
the consequence of body and expression,  
*shravana nayana jam vaa maanasam va aparaadham*  
mistakes my senses and my intelligences make and cause,  
*vihitam avihitam vaa sarvam etat kshamasva*  
knowingly or unknowingly,  
please forgive me.

*October 13, 2013.*





## **Dashami**

For the tenth day,  
ten thoughts that lead nowhere.

1)

We code each other's lives,  
file them using taxonomies  
that we could scarcely fit ourselves.

2)

The violence of our everyday lives  
--our words, our deeds, our thoughts,  
belies the non-violence we otherwise uphold.

3)

You think you have nothing to say,  
until someone who really wants to know  
what you think, asks.

4)

Hope is like Lucy sometimes,  
dwelling among the untrodden ways,  
half-hidden from the eye.

5)

So many of us live with  
such unbearable levels of fatigue,  
that they must actually be bearable.

6)

Our days and selves are stretched so much  
that they leave far behind  
the elasticity of a good rubber band.

7)

Giving today has become about accountability  
--what are you going to do with my money—  
when ultimately, that doesn't matter.

8)

Ultimately, nothing much matters.  
That thought can either send us back to bed  
or scurrying about frantically anyway.

9)

It really is the residue of small things  
that remain in the sieve of our memory.  
Life is not headline news, but marginalia.

10)

The more we yearn to let go, to give away,  
the tighter we seem to hold on.  
Who's giving these contradictory instructions?

Today's offering proves  
(what we both know)  
that the use of words does not indicate  
the existence of content.  
If you want to know what is in my heart,  
listen to my silence.

*October 14, 2013*



## **Samapti**

These ten days come around every year.  
Sometimes we celebrate them as a festival.  
Sometimes I celebrate you anyway.  
Sometimes, both.

And each year, I spill hundreds of words  
in some attempt to reach you  
only to find, as predictably as the festival calendar,  
that you are where I am.  
You are me, I am you.  
This is my usual resting-point.

But this year, taking all that for granted  
because by now, we both should,  
I am just going to ask you for help.

Help me  
get up with hope and get through each day with patience.  
Help me  
find energy without rummaging too hard in my spirit.  
Help me  
find joy where I now just see endless dreariness.  
Help me  
find the flow and be in it, unresisting.  
Help me  
hold on to stillness within even while on the move between tasks.  
Help me  
be silence even in my work with words.  
Help me  
do all the work you create for me, as well as it needs to be done.  
Help me  
find rest. I am so very tired.  
Help me.

Remember,  
I count on the abundance of your grace.

*October 14, 2013.*