

P O E M S by Barnali Ray Shukla

Earth calling

She sat stitching a river
along hems, fraying with
myths of going underground

The silt doesn't breathe
sits by the edges, bakes
mud cakes of journeys
for a return gift for
the delta

Pebbles caper and roll
pause for a breath
in a brook, pluck rainbows
on their way, no rush
for gold, but the rocks
grow boulder

Rocks don't hold water
they try, pry,
skirt the issue



roll

tumble

roll

along the rush

downstream

tear

her

sides

reckless

with gravity—

She dances along

in her frenzy,

discomfiting sages

across ages, beyond

a curse to tone down

bow and bend

She does that

Just that

Only for the Mother.



Moringa

Uma's hair now pure silver,
swore in a bun, wispy, some
loose. Few strands talk to the
wind as she speeds on a rickshaw.

A stranger drives her, at an arm's
length with a promise of sinew
and sin, stories luscious with
tropics, lifetime of sun, as he burnt

the tar with his rickshaw, racing
against time, like her mind,
to when she was thirteen
along the banks of river Damodar.

Uma holds to nothing new,
only that one ride home from
the Kali temple, Kali temple to home,
every season, every sundown, one ride

along the Damodar -- swollen, shameless,
taunting her evenings that wore her like a
saree. Not a single tie, no trace of a stitch



just layers around her brown body, losing

itself to gravity and years of wait for a man,
claimed by the Raj, tear her nights but she
wears each day younger in her mind, but the
body doesn't listen.

“That's what Moringa does,” he'd say.

“Morning you mean?”

“Moringa!” he'd laugh and leap for a drumstick.

He wrote on her back with Moringa, songs of
hunger, about people, prisons, treason, about
justice. The nation burnt and many died for that freedom—

The two wanted to live but he had lied, had
died, one August night; she lives for an answer
... 'coz he never lied before, never died before.

She locks herself alone, to savour the lengths
of Moringa, she calls it her mate, her flute,
prays to the Kali to forgive her.

She keeps her freedom and him alive, in Moringa.



Waiting is the same in any language

The ocean surfs
news reach
but messages
come bottled,
none for him.

She has worn winter
sworn silence, come March
she's woken up in
a language wet with noise
to bank on earth on her way
to an address, adding salt to
taste, her sweetness waiting
to embrace tides in her wings

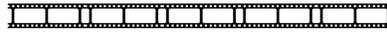
of water,
to meet the ocean
a timeless need.

He waits in time
folds himself

in whale songs, reaches
for the moon, needy as



he waits for her and her words
she speaks sweet and he, salt—
but the waiting is the same
in any language.



The Orifice : A short note on the poems

Of all elements, I have been particularly intrigued by ‘water’.

This persistent, determined cosmopolitan citizen of our ecosystem has been so much more than chemistry can define. This is perhaps not the place to talk about the element in itself but that it features as the protagonist in my engagement with borders. That has been a journey which has affected my gaze, my internality in embracing a journey and the fallibility of it all but understanding that identity, like rivers, can be shape shifting but along its way, it only enriches.

Liquid Borders, my documentary, which hopes to explore the understanding of borders, internal and external has nurtured poetry as well.

‘Earth calling’, is my homage to the subterranean river *Saraswati*, which for me symbolises a free spirited woman who walks the talk. Patriarchy feels challenged by her sense of purpose and her journey and thinks little before marginalising her.

With ‘Moringa’, I hope to cast this as tree of life, for Uma. A woman in her sunset years who waits for the lover to return, who perhaps is dead and gone. Eating Moringa and thinking of her lush days, brings back the ensemble mornings with her lover, which she chooses to recreate with the drumstick.

‘Waiting is the same in any language’ is the confluence of omnipresence of water, across two avatars of this shape shifting element . The plurality of form it takes is finally an extension of the other. I must admit, this poem too came about during the making of ‘Liquid Borders’.

The journeys of territorial challenges so melt away in rivers and oceans.

In the filming process, we haven’t overpromised with answers about borders but we have chosen to raise a few questions that don’t necessarily take the shape of words.

Here I rest my case with the ocean as the all embracing, inclusive, unfussy lover who is patient and the river which grows, changes, evolves. She is in a grid of season but beyond challenges of walls and boundaries, will certainly some day, add salt to taste, as she reaches her ocean.





Barnali Ray Shukla is an Indian writer, filmmaker and a poet. Her writing has featured in *SunflowerCollective*, *OutOfPrint*, *OUTCAST*, *Bengaluru Review*, *Indian Ruminations*, *Anthology of Contemporary Indian Poetry II*, *Indian Quarterly*, *Modern English Poetry by Younger Indians* (Sahitya Akademi), *The World That Belongs to Us* (Harper Collins, India), *Have a Safe Journey* (Amaryllis, India), *Hibiscus* (Hawakal Publishers), *Borderless* (Singapore), *Voice&*

Verse (Hong Kong), *UCityReview* (USA) and *A Portrait in Blues* (UK) etc. Her maiden poetry collection is called *Apostrophe* (RLFPA 2016).

In her cine life Barnali has written and directed one full length feature, two documentaries, and two short films. Her newest venture, *Once Upon A Sky* (2019) is themed on the Indian paragliding scene and blends documentary with creative narrative.

She lives in Mumbai with her plants, books and a husband.

