

New Poems

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The afternoons are dark in the hills of Niyamgiri

Like his ancestors and those before him

Nauri finds his own path through the hills of Niyamgiri.

The last of the sun glistens on the three straight lines drawn on his forehead,

protection from the evil forces, his mother had claimed-

her voice from childhood, a constant reminder

that the lines need to be drawn- in turmeric, Yellow.

There are nine varieties of rice,

to where Nauri will walk, and whisper in secret to the Gods.

The battles of Bauxite are over for now,

and thanks, must be given in songs.

From a nearby hill,

a voice floats down-

It is a mating song,

and old Nauri smiles young, from his distance.

The women are out to woo the men.



Night fall is hasty here,
and the smell of Mahua flowers, bite.

The moon shies behind the yellow bamboo,
and suddenly the world is a Li Cheng painting come alive.
The village *Bejuni* commands a dance-
and yet, this high priestess doesn't marry.
She who talks to the earth- Mother Goddess,
speaks of the cycle of sowing- the harvest becomes a song.

These hills and forests grow eyes,
the Goddess at the tops awakens.
All night long, she woos them-
and the spirits come to reside.

Nauri can hear them clearer now,
the mountain top must be near, he thinks.
Still walking,
he hears the dance in his mind.
Hands around their waist they would move,
dark, warm hands caressing each other-
slowly at first, and then to the tempo of the drums.

There are flowers on the bamboo this year,
observes Nauri-
the lines on his face crinkle.



Where he walks, the earth has aged,
his shadow of worry, perpendicular.
A distant thunder claps a sinister laugh,
Nauri's shadow is long here.
Drought would come, he envisages-
nature hath spoken in flowers, abundant.

He looks for the nest of black-hooded *Bhartia*,
its mouth faces the North.
The monsoon shall come with terrible storms,
and all of Nauri's plants would be tall-
he shakes his head and flings his arms,
strange defeat in each shoulder blade.

Nauri is ageless and beyond time,
in him, the village resides.
Some say it is time,
and the full moon shall talk of death soon.
The journey downhill begins,
the village is a speck in the forest below.

One by one the stars gather into the shadows,
Nauri's song for the Mahua is heavy, low
and scented- of tomorrow's sorrows come today.
He eats them in abstract worry,
and then sings about them from sweet memory.



The Gods come down, when Nauri sings,
familiar fingers touch his ribs-
the constellations come alive, tonight.

Nauri shall live on this summer,
when the rain is a storm, and the rice without scent.
Tomorrow when the drums beat,
the Bauxite ravaged and plundered in the sacred hills,
Nauri would have closed his eyes-
but the young would still sing of the bamboo flowers that Nauri saw-
long may he live, in this song divine.

*Bejuni- A village Shaman, Bhartia-A bird found in India

*The Niyamgiri Hills are a mountain range in the Eastern Indian state of Orissa. Home to the Dongria tribes, who successfully fought off attempts of mining their sacred mountain's rich deposit of bauxite. Nauri is a farmer there, known for his indigenous traditional methods of farming.



When I ask my father for a story

He begins on most days without a preamble,
as if pain is a universally understood collective.

Somewhere in between- a harmonium,
and my aunt's voice join in.

The story becomes a song, a *bhatiali*.

All night long they sing from memory,
in singing, they become children again.

If my grandfather were alive,
he would play the Tabla, or the Sarangi perhaps- (he had mastered both somehow)
For now, I can only imagine his thousand and one curls,
swinging in the light of leftover Halogen lamps- from yesterday's street corners,
and the un-named insects that had died in between.

I've never seen the green fields of Syllhet, of Sunamgunj,
nor the Dhansiri, of Jibananda's poetry.

But I love to hear the land of my forefathers sung;
how the fishes shyly jump at night, how water flows into water
when it rains, and the smells of moss pervades-
how the grains bend with the weight of the wind,
the music of my grandfather's morning prayers,
I hear it all being sung now- this evening at home, far from home.



Both brother and sister laugh and cry at once,
their stories last all night.

In me they last forever.

** Bhatiali- a form of folk music predominant in both Bangladesh and West Bengal.*



A Useful tree

The Moringa is a useful tree,
again and again, its usefulness ratified-
The yellowed leaves picked hastily,
the soil fertilized on time-
the little white flowers mulled over.

In homes where the *grammar* varies from high blood sugar to hypertension, and stories
of erratic heartbeats-
the Moringa brings in sanity,
even happiness I'm told.

There are days however, when it refuses to bend-
the leaves grow higher than the hand will allow.
There's more unnecessary yellow than green,
and sometimes the stalks are too tiny for healthiness, I think.

But on nights when the rain is a hesitant shadow
and a song easy on the tongue,
the Moringa, and I -
we stare at the same emptiness,
promises of the same effervescence.

Released from the burden of usefulness, hope is more than a sliver here-
in indignant anger,



I watch some yellow fall
and then some green too.

Rather spitefully, I tell her

“Tomorrow when your leaves are no longer, the stem will be broken, your girth neatly folded into bits- why not grow, be useful, sing your songs when asleep?”

The Moringa whispers-

“Beyond your gates, a hundred steps from the road on the right is a tree that someone broke on a whim,

the next day- thinking it was dead,

few others cut it into halves-

the leaves were torn,

each little part sold with pleasure.

The boy had cried, 'herbal medicines that heal the body'

Go find the song of *that* tree now-can you?

But in the night, when all usefulness is a thing of the past

and songs frequent the dreamer-

the tree grows again, like some secret magic spell,

mumbo jumbo and silver chimes ring in happiness at last.

Tomorrow, take a walk there.

The leaves would have sprouted,

Green and some more Green.

Look for the smell of pleasure,

pluck some, and caress yourself-

The Moringa, it understands pleasure.”



Between Sleep and Blindness: Flailing Light

Caught between sleep and alarmed wake,
you walk back home.

Waylaid by grass, on a whim you stop, forget, lie down-
curious to see that growth again,
tremendous.

From seed comes ingenuity-you think
like a blind man smelling his hands in light,
you observe the grass, this meticulous aversion to homogeneity
in each blade.

You think of time, then.

Time was when, the *Jolpai* would fall on rusted tinned roofs,
in a slow village by the Dihing-
music here is a blank verse, like an engine falling into a lake
and memory is everything and beyond.

All night long you count the numbers,
Jolpai greens- now salt, now peppery, now sweet.

Day light is weary and too soon,
cold as sleet- you rise.

Buried in your brains is the bare music of silence, of growth falling down.

You finally realize the crack,
from where the night smelt of citrus,



and you let the light in.

Tremendous flailing light.

** Jolpai- The Indian olive*

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