

POEMS by Sumana Roy

Paul Music Emporium, Sevoke More

Watching a David Attenborough documentary
about ostrich eggs and tortoise shells
I feel my harmonium-chest, its rib-reeds
a shell from which some life must emerge.
Soon, like a bird whose wings are pickling in rain,
my mind alights on Paul Music Emporium.
Guitars hang like fruit in different stages of ripening;
no, not fruits, but drying clothes,
something used but always renewed,
like these musical instruments.

Musicians are hunters, they're gatherers.
Their instruments, too.
Inside both you hear the elements –
water's auditioning, as in a jaltaranga, primeval;
and fire, now made invisible in culture,
the sound of its flight, in taans, the protein of music;
earth, in music's saltiness, for though we call it sweet,
music, being blood's refugee, is actually salty;
and air, amniotic air, through which we return to our pre-birth.

Here they are in this music store,
as if it was a seafloor.
The tabla, fat, comical, wrapped like sushi;
tanpuras like seahorses that sleep standing
(you tune the knots of what might be their mouths);
a violin like an animal that has lost a limb;
flutes like wayward reeds, without homes,
like the air inside them;
bagpipes dislocated mouths of sharks.
When my mind comes up for air,
bubbles form,
as I imagine they do inside harmoniums,
where air goes out for parole
and returns, as to a diver's nostrils.

Outside, on Hill Cart Road, honks and horns,
without sur, without taal, like fart.

I pluck a string of the tanpura –
air oxidises it into music immediately.
I pat its bottom – where it was gourd once,
a shell, from where all beauty, all music comes:
oysters and lungs, shellfish and urn,



every instrument a shrine to music.

*'The shells of ostrich eggs have become thinner
since the Industrial Revolution'.*

I'm nodding in agreement –
human music too, I want to add, clearing my throat.

Bolo Hori Hori Bol –

someone's died at Himalayan Nursing Home nearby.

*'The egg shell should be strong enough to protect life,
thin enough to let the chick emerge ...'*

A musician locks the harmonium's bellows,
the reeds shudder, gasp together.

I walk outside Paul Music Emporium –
here too is everything,
everything perishable,
like voice, like sound, like life.



Sukna Junction

The toy-train's just about to start –
it's humming, it's now spitting vowels.
We're talking about dullo khursani.
Behind us, three aged men,
their sideburns like newspapers,
are singing *Mere sapno ki rani*.
The song's like petrol; no, like fire,
moving, growing, twisting in the wind.

Mere sapno ki rani ...

A Nepali woman's speaking like a hawker,
her eyes plucking her child like a thorn,
calling the baby as if it were an adjective –
Chhito chhito, aunoos na nani.

Mere sapno ki rani ...

Adam has no Hindi, he turns towards me.
Dullo's round, I say; no, I don't say,
my fingers squeeze into a circle, like a kiss.
He might misunderstand, I think, and so
I use words to clothe my fingers –
the chilli's heat becomes a mudra,
the contours of dullo khursani.

Mere sapno ki rani ...

The sky's losing its youth,
the wet floor's drying unequally.
A sparrow's here, looking like a poet.
'Rajesh Khanna'; 'Sharmila'; 'Kishore'.
Proper nouns become worms –
the bird's found its food,
everything else's a bore.

Mere sapno ki rani ...

The train's moving like bones.
It ran faster in the film.
It's slowing, like a fish on stone.
The world's older, its shoelace's untying.

Mere sapno ki rani

The hands of the old men are clapping –
their memory's a bed in an inn.



Branches of trees are rushing in
like quotes, as if continuing
their argument with man's civilising.

*Phool si khil ke, paas aa dil ke
Dur se mil ke chain na aaye*

The train's slowing down, it's panting,
as if the journey's been a mistake.
The incandescence of distance,
its wrinkled breath, its foamy ache.
The wagon's smelling of idle steam,
of momos with twitching skin,
the crushed seeds of dullo khursani.
Adam rubs his nose on his sleeve –
'What's the name of the chilli again?'
I'm about to say 'Dullo ...'
but the mercury of the song's spilled out

Mere sapno ki rani ...



Komal Gandhar at Kurseong

I am ungrateful –
I forget that my legs have brought me here.
It only comes later,
with the irreparable helplessness
of staring at my feet emerging
from under a table like twin rats.
They've brought me here, to Kurseong.
Ghashey ghashey pa felechhi ...
(Could Ritwik have shot this only here?)

Akash bhawra shurjo tara ...
The sky's wearing an apron tonight –
it too needs protection from the wind,
like doctors do, from whom they save.
The wind moves through its dark tarpaulin
with the speed of blood –
the same ambition, to move against knowledge.

Tahari majhkaney peyechhi more sthan ...
Much has happened here.
And yet it seems new,
as if undeserving of history.
This tiny town, bursting with schools,
like fields inside a cow's stomach –
how the hills here look younger,
less tired of waiting, less selfish.
It must be the schoolchildren
and their socks – how they roll down
to the ankles, voluptuous with joy.
Chhoriye aachhey ananderei daan ...

The tirelessness of joy
on Anil Chatterjee's face,
the nobility of sloping roofs,
mimicking the truth of the mountains,
Ghatak's camera, wiser than light.
Kaan petechhi, chokh melechhi ...

Far away, beyond the pigment of loss,
two lovers, hidden by patriarchal clouds,
still, as if surprise hasn't reached them yet.
Ghatak's men, without moustaches,
their hair from a different age
(hairstyles, unlike hair, undergo evolution).
Inside my mouth the taste of salt,
of translated woollens and decadent light,
carved like meat, the meat of joy.

Bishmoye tai jaagey aamar gaan ...



Pagla Jhora

Like love moves diagonally against arithmetic,
water rushes against the vertigo of roads.
Anything that protests madness we call mad.
And so this stream, its water broken like seed husk.

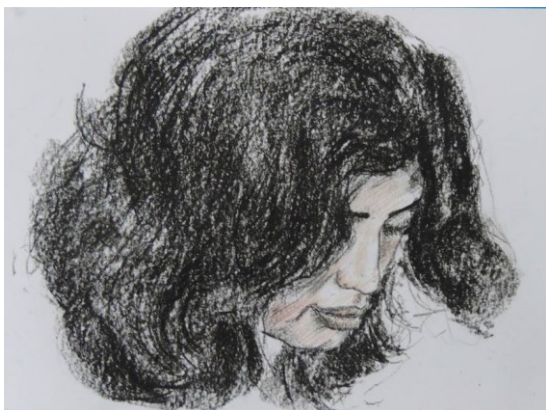
Water crosses the road like an animal,
indifferent to brakes and headlights.
It has no surname, it is an orphan.
The jeep stops – water pats its tyres.

Light is lactating. The day will rust soon.
I think of Tagore – he'd stopped here.
The zoo of water's still naked on the rocks.
Here it's falling slower – as if it were on a wheelchair.

Muktodhara, his play, the king and his men;
the dam on the river, the tourism of destinies.
Paglajhora, waterfall, his amphibious inspiration.

And inside it is life, indistinguishable from death,
the same face on either side, like comb, like sleep,
and like this water, this leopard-spotted water.

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Poet, novelist, feature and fiction writer Sumana Roy's first book, *How I Became a Tree*, a work of non-fiction, was published in India in February 2017. Her first novel, *Missing*, came out in April 2018. Her poems and essays have appeared in *Granta*, *Guernica*, *LARB*, *Drunken Boat*, the *Prairie Schooner*, *Berfrois*, *The Common*, and other journals. She lives in Siliguri, India.

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