

Open Poem

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Translated by Carolyn B. Brown

*galloping over swamps that lie dazed in sweet bindweed
the full moon of Asharh bursts through the iron bars
nooses dangle and levees crumble in tides of laughter
Kapila, goddess of rice, in mud and water, in sweat and toil*

—

every son-of-a-bitch wants to be a poet—even industrious ants
want to fly, tusked boars from the forest dream of sitting on thrones

*

a hole opens in the sky above the third-world marketplace
a god in a khaki uniform clammers down
black boots on his feet, bayonet arrogant in his hand

fields and boat landings lie empty, plundered by
voracious fools, greed and corruption—capitalism's black
claws raze the framework of communities, spilling red blood

this time, Allah willing, the right solutions
will be found, poverty will be replaced by bliss
the khaki-clad god broadcasts these amazing homilies

one year—two at most—then you'll see!
morsels of beggar-flesh stuck in the claws and fangs
of bloodthirsty ghouls, tossed onto carcass heaps

hovering over the third-world sky now, forcing his way
into homes, the khaki-clad god strides, signature
black boots on his feet, bayonet arrogant in his hands

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27 March, night—Poradaha Railway Junction
tempted by a piece of chapati or ruti,
a teenaged girl is raped, left to die—at Shivaganj, thirty
to forty takas for bananas or chilies in the open-air bazaar

along with Saleha, Mallika, or Mina, eighteen
or nineteen year olds are even cheaper—no shortage
of buyers and sellers, crowds on the rampage
everyone learning the law of supply and demand

swindlers—from bureaucrats to the village headman
the witness tree is weighed down by centuries of dread
a gecko's weary eyes shrink from squabbles
a hundred thousand peacock boats have sunk in the floods

only Saodagar, lone merchant, is left drifting
on the current, watching the fickle moon
a puff of cloud slowly grows heavy and bursts
drowning Champaknagar in pounding rain

a shadow lingers, a bone-thin black snake sneaks
through a crack in the lane by Behula's bridal chamber
toward the inner rooms, into the marriage bed—its offspring
blue with poison, each drop of blood seed for another monster

this filthy twisting shadow strikes viciously
gnashing childhood, swallowing young and old
slashing the scorched earth of a suicidal century
pulverizing the banks with water's savage malice

the blood of Nadyathakur and Mahua, stabbed in the heart
prosperous, anonymous household in a casteless community
in a land so fertile, paradise on earth
horrid screeches shatter the spheres from heaven to hell

haunted tamarind on the sunrise side of the courtyard
at midnight, faraway shadows of colonial bogeymen
driving killer winds and clouds in different disguises
searching for hiding places, spying into every nook and cranny

15 June, dawn—yesterday before the sun was up
village farmers cutting marsh grass dragged the rotting
corpses of ten young men out of the swamp
according to rumor some of the farmers have

vanished without a trace—they still haven't come home
this sorcerer-shadow, bloodshed, bullets, guns, rape
black boots, boot rule, starvation, epidemics
slicing through ribs with one thrust of the spade

*

humiliation-stained faces, smudged black from ravenous boots
the moon comes up—wounded chests heave, the tide flows past
unbraiding girls' plaits—bodies of the dead float by
thousands and thousands, beyond counting

racing round the bend, centuries of riverbanks crashing
black masks torn off in silent inner rooms, muttering
conspiracies—sweeping torchlight—pitiful moans
from the corner of the courtyard a raped wife wails

trailing saris torn on batabi thorns—all night long
a wakeful severed head lies in the moon's hammock
plows turn over earth and bones
fields of grain are uprooted with lathi strokes

hearth and home, human dwellings, marketplaces ablaze
mice, dogs, all kinds of birds seek refuge—entire processions
crowds from all directions overwhelm the burning ground
long rows of anonymous bodies lie under broken tombstones

echoing laughter awakens fear, dread—rumblings
rise, earth crashes down, swallowing the granary
faces with dark bruises, cruel bootprints
the moon comes up—wounded chests—impotent terror

*

write a love poem, no matter what you feel
write a love poem, senseless rifle bullets
are aimed at your head—chitchat, shitting, pissing
except for these trifles, everything is banned

poison in the bloodstream, betrayals at birth
Padma's bosom has withered into sand dunes
the moon's spindly skeleton wanders a dark path, nibbling
all night, eyes flicker and flare on the endless mud flats

everything is banned now: eating and drinking, conversation
in the dry season a lizard resting on a beam above starving
shapes and squinting eyes pricks up its ears—the law's
soulless conspiracy hauls in its nets with expert hands

worm-infested skulls, doomed whispers of laughter
the newly risen sun spies a village mother's
dead body (untied from a tree limb) sprawled
over a broken cot—suicide is a great crime

shout, reach out a hand to help, rise up
and march—it's banned now
write a love poem, no matter what you feel
write a love poem, with no risk, no responsibility

*

you're bound to be beaten—the land awakens
to the thwack of violent blows, wind thrashes
the spines of thatched roofs far and wide
rivers of silt wrench the flesh within

year round bamboo walls crack and break
vats of rice, onion seeds, soaking dal
knifelike boots come running down the road, crunching
from the corners of courtyards, blades splitting minds

slashing through brains—the moon's sickle
chops down the rows of green vegetables
cattle herders cower with fear, self-doubt
guts torn to bits from living a lie

sickening blood spattered everywhere
on dust and mud, canals and boats in the water
noble, reassuring words—freedom—Tagore sangeet
folksongs from dark figures stretched along the river

you're bound to be beaten—vicious kicks
blows, terrifying bullets startle a sleeping herd
still safe, the animals are amazed—we've survived!
wounds from clockwork plowing ooze on their necks

the tug and pull of the yoke's gleaming steel
will make a land of plenty—swarms of locusts
overwhelm the rice crop time and again
earth, water, and sky herded by dread fate

*

how long can this go on? how many years of struggle?
from the twenty-first of February 1952 until today
four million martyrs, three million raped women
moaning, Munir Choudhury's blood still flows upstream

how well-trained and tame! cowed by a raised lathi
don't know how to flip a fish in a pan, clueless
just following orders, houses, streets, ghats
immaculate, dirty souls scrubbed clean

spic and span—how long can these dying gasps
last? self-respect, living with dignity—fairytales
grandfathers' ramblings from days gone by
nowadays, cows' severed heads in butcher shops

smoke keeps rising, scorched by the sun's flames
bricks bake in the furnace's suffocating heat
rebukes answered only by a feeble thought, "help
please," like the tide, ebbing and flowing in the veins

how long will this last? trying to stand tall
independence in 1971, brute force of monstrously
swollen rivers, dead youths with their eyes torn out
still trampling over Shahidullah Kaiser's corpse

idle middle-class dilly-dallying in a downtrodden
nation, in elegant cowsheds, in self-satisfaction
without shame or embarrassment in their tidy prison cells
acting like slaves, prisoners drowning in their own urine

*

crossing the seven seas and thirteen rivers to dreamland
the rajah's kotwal has enforced the law of the realm
in the last two years the population has soared
that's why from this day forward no couple
will sleep together or lie down on a bed
or join together as a husband and wife should
unable even to consummate their marriage—if it's proved
that some man or woman, giving way to lust or longing
has broken the law and tempted fate
the sentence will be seven years of hard labor

the rajah knows all—an obedient middle-class
always glad to abide by the rules
that's why whatever the mighty law says
his sham dreamland and edicts endure

if the noose is loosened even an inch, everything
is sure to fall, rajah, his parasol, and all
the smoke and mirrors will plop into the mud

the whole crummy dreamland and its chimerical relics

*

Habuchandra, the stupid rajah, and his councilor, Gobuchandra
rise up from the rubbish heap of stories to display their wares
on the royal throne—if you open the door and come out, you'll see

the rajah walking on foot, escorted by priests and bodyguards
riding chariots and elephants—what a show! what a show!
bizarre speeches buzz—if you open your ears, you'll hear
wear a suit if your lungi's torn, trade your wooden clogs for shoes
then starve any way you can, pare down your expenses
get yourself some blinders and wear them, stuff your ears
with cotton—hurry up, find some other way to walk too!
call a bastard a bastard, call a thief a thief
talking openly means harsh punishment according to the law
if you're told to walk, walk—it's an order, stand still, be quiet!
even the wind has ears, if it finds out, you'll get hard labor
for an "ugh" or an "ah," you'll get your head chopped off
gold and brass, truth and lies cost the same at the market
barter your cow for a dead horse or a sick mule
cold peace of the grave, bitter certainty
houses festooned with cobwebs—frogs, chameleons
conspiracies against the people hatched in garbage heaps
Habuchandra and Gobuchandra are ready to reign
amazing how they manage to juggle the books

*

these lines of poetry, images, walls of marsh grass
and mud, thatched huts, fresh-mopped earthen floors
Kirtonkhola's blood, marrow, and bone—all torn up
crumbling homes of a few thousand prostitutes
veteran police spies and their mangy dogs
in ruthless roundups—farmers' wives, their pots and jugs
landless peasants make a wonderful bonfire
native and foreign leopards conspire under a painted moon
naked imperialism pulverizes acres and acres
of plowed fields, crumbling earth forever floating past
scouring the features off Karim Ali's toothless face
menacing dreams scorched in the Choitro sun
empty sockets, forgotten jawbones, implacable plows
carving out furrows—this time the land will be developed

*

got a problem? lungi torn? patch it!
no undershirt? let the sun dry your sweaty chest
six days a week with no food or water in your belly?
so what! keep fasting, work one more day

back getting crooked? bend down a little lower
standing up straight hurts even more
this will make you free—wishes and longings, rubbish
are you dying? go ahead! such a fuss over nothing

marches, meetings, pros and cons—few can live
in peace—tell your children that eating is banned
wearing clothes is banned, government spooks are everywhere
wandering the streets with uncombed hair is banned too

yank out your hair, bang your head! scared? don't
budge even an inch in the dark, no shouting allowed
keep that smile pasted on your lips! not a peep
all this emotion—what's the point?

cut things down to size—got a stomach? no appetite?
good! hungry? no rice! sweep up those messy feelings
and throw them away—no car to take you places?
no boat? then walk! feeling tired? stand still!

dust stinging your eyes? keep them shut
who else will solve your problems?
practice austerities! lungi torn? mend it
no undershirt? let the sun dry your sweaty chest

tears pricking your broken jaw? let them prick
six days a week with no food or water in your belly?
fasting tomorrow too? are you going to die?
go ahead—no problem, you'll sleep without a care

*

quit screwing around! Jabbar's sweat, pain and suffering
cough consuming his starved, overworked lungs
fate-line dying out on his callused palm
broad brow grimy from weeding the garlic rows
sand dunes, storms seethe on the horizon, blood vessels
burst, Boisakh scowls, thatch flies off the rooftops
bowls of rice are swept away, a starved child's
rotting corpse, accursed history, hypnotic trances
salt tears in Fatima's mud-colored eyes, broken bones
milk from shrunken breasts, black rags clinging to limbs
last night's rice with a couple of chilies, vegetables, sauce
a devoted husband's caresses, sweetness rising in the belly
perfume of kamini penetrating the veiled earth's bridal chamber
the nightly bed of deprivation, a black cobra's flaring hood
landslides on the cloud-covered earth and moon, epidemics
henna-stained nightmares hissing with blood
this hocus-pocus, the whole razzle-dazzle swindle
stop, bastards, right now—quit screwing around, pigs

*

this dream is as old as the earth

the blood of Bagha Jateen
awakens the morning sky

in the dawn light of '52
climbing up the bamboo walls
shining through the windows in the lanes

in the courtyards in '71
rice cooking over the fire
waiting mouths at harvest time

like wanting to touch the clouds
plump rice in burning hunger
water in parching thirst