

When Will It Rain

drums and gongs call it dawn
as if it might rain today

the sun hasn't reached the lotuses yet, their petals
are still curled up, the screwpine, jasmine, and chameli
and the blossoms on the fruit tree haven't opened their eyes

the herd came running
the conch will blow soon, someone says
someone else says, today's the beginning of the end
they've taken pots of parched rice, plain and sweet
and hung them from tattered towels over their shoulders

everyone's ready—the children, though nestled
in their mothers' saris, may not really be safe
the bird's vision may be imperfect, but it knows exactly
which is the plant, the leaves, and which is the succulent mouse

nearby, laments have grown louder—it's coming
who doesn't know the connection between festivals and death
there's nothing new to say about that—a chunk of father's arm
will fall to the ground—some will be scared when they see
grass sprouting from the wound again

waterlogged clouds aren't supposed to know these things
no one will come running or rowing a boat
against the current, absentminded, indifferent
water, they say, lacks the slightest trace of lust

this is how poetry teaches, scattering puns everywhere
or surrounding us with a steady dazzle of lightning
but then the sky is blank, as if someone had shaken out
an immaculate winding cloth from the east

to the northwest—still, the festival keeps going, the sticks
have struck the drums, the world has been roused, uncoiling
its great body, the sun opens its eyes, twin droplets of blood

somewhere an angry cloud is calling—listen

My Mother

this unfamiliar tree bearing fruit over here
it's my mother

mango and rose-apple, pomegranate, pear
or maybe star-apple, hogplum too
guava, pomelo, kamranga
so much pain and love, sacrifice and patience

as if all the pronouns of the world
the adjectives, nouns, and prepositions
of a village too, a field, a map with no form

are my mother's other names
expelled from heaven
crossing timidly over to the underworld

No One Belonging to Me

with the meeting of the Baleshwar and Pashur in his heart
the man floats till he reaches dry land
Mehendigang market, Char Baisha's shrine

half-broken voices, rain-soaked footsteps, whispers among
potatoes and onions in shuttered shops and warehouses
hurricane lanterns' smoky glow like muddy water at high tide

faces look familiar, bangles and laughter jangle
thatched roofs are slick and mossy in the moonlight
a flirtatious sari slips off a head, everything is dripping, dropping

in Banishanta village nothing moves under the man's gaze
market stalls, narrow path obliterated by water and mud
paddy on both sides, shaora bushes—father and grand-

father, come back, son—cold touch of people you don't belong to
shadows, odor of shrouds and incense rises from the graves
a sickle of light crosses the fields on the moon's twelfth night

suddenly, a circus tent touches the body and takes flight
arthritic sleep, miserable horse's hoofbeats, dead tiger's ribcage
tendons—but the man's illusion hasn't shattered

with only the meeting of the Baleshwar and Pashur in his heart
he floats till he digs into the bank one night
knees smudged with dirt, palms smelling of scum and fish scales

At Aricha Ghat

at midnight the moon was lying across
Padma and Jamuna's sand-and-water-covered cot

this time, it said, this time, tide, come willingly
it's the season for balancing your ledger to the last cent

the skiff with the broken prow in the cove has witnessed
all these great departures for the banks of the Styx

countless crossings, fatal shores, remote ghost trees on both sides
faithful wives, metaphors with no memories, the cosmos

colorless smells, this journey from the ocean to the Himalayas
Padma and Jamuna 's water and sand, self-satisfied, dissatisfied release

lolling on the makeshift cot, the moon calls, come, today I am
the earth's twin sister, a frozen floodtide of flesh and blood

Unresolved

the moon struck them as a little more shameless that day
they felt as if the snake really lay hidden in the grass too

by then even the girl's moans had become stifled
their slightly guilty expressions were washed away by indifferent dew

one by one, the five of them unbuttoned their pants slowly
and relieved themselves a little by pouring water for the moon

then they headed home, some through fields and brush, some turning
at crossroads, to knock at midnight—get up wife, give me rice ma

their darling boys had come home, all sighed with relief
only one among them woke up his sister, washed

his hands and face, and sat down to eat—don't be angry dear
chucking her under the chin—he's struck by surprise

the face of that working girl was just like the moon—
could it be that this one man might not be a man

A Winter's Tale

enough—such terrible cold—it's dawn
his eyes opened slowly—look
a pair of mynahs come up to the window
in the ground, talking beak to beak, wing to wing

quavering dew climbs the jute leaves
once he was a boy with no elephant in his elephant pen
no horse in his horse stall . . .
still he would cross calm skies and seas

on a cane raft—the rest of the story is familiar
after eighty winters piled with dust and straw
bamboo leaves and grass make a lap for him one day
and cry—so you've come back, child . . . with sand-

painted faces day and night unfurl
a soft white sheet and smooth it over
his makeshift green cot—eyes closed in sleep
he too sees—the tender cleansing is complete

children—golden and silver—are yawning everywhere
even the frozen stones thaw—in such sunshine

Known, Unknown

there was a river—in the darkness a single wave
startles both its banks, as formless
as the earth's rumblings or the sky's trembling harvest

yes, yes, you're right, that's the river that runs
from Pabna down through Faridpur toward Barisal
as if a huge crocodile had disgorged fields and pathways

a map—close to the banks countless mute
shadows rush past, breathing hard
tense and aloof, everything else stands deaf and still

a sudden lightning strike whistles, a boat leaves the ghat on the tide
muscles grow stronger from digging bodies in the benumbed heat
sounds rise up from inside the graves, crumbling, crumbling

the moon and stars are still awake over the courtyard
the poet knows why even now he's in perpetual exile