

ROHAN CHHETRI

FISH CROSS THE BORDER IN THE RAIN

One June day, I go down to the river with Father.
I take his old scooter, and he rides pillion
Singing songs because the breeze makes him young in the face.

The dam in the kingdom across the border is relieved.
When we reach, the river is a gray slither
Of silt and gravel torn from the gorges.
A few men are fishing with a lead battery
casting a high voltage wave across the water.

Discs of current round the startled fish belly up.
We sit and watch the river nip the embankment.
Behind us the villages bloom outward in circles of death.
Jungles Grandfather cleared when he first crossed the border.

Half of these villages once belonged to him, Father says.
By the time he died, he'd given everything away.
As if ceding wholly his grip on the land
And what he thought it owed him.

Now shoal after bright
Shoal of fish heave the nets. Stunned
For a minute, the fish dream up new lives.

They wake, suddenly old, huddled in a foreign prison
Gasping against each other's gills
Blinded like a sack of mirrors.

SONNET IN THE LATE STYLE OF FALL

We do not know it yet but it speaks to
Our old suspicion of beauty. Wind riot
In streets, the souging deeper in leaves
Now they're turning that brittle brick-red.
Light shortens for us too, we use what is
Left, and in turn reveal our slow spoil.
But what is the heat of so much beauty
Before death, this carnival in the garb
Just to throw some leafminers off the scent.
Sleek motorbikes soon useless in the sleet
Power through streets in the crush of leaves.
The trees, never having moved, know this:
With bound feet our hands become pleading
Things, misery language without speech.

***POEM WITH RITUAL, BROKEN GUARDRAIL,
IMAGINARY NOVEL, & CURSE***

Night of liminal rain. Fall rain like a hose sluicing down the butcher's platform after a long day. This morning the high wind, sun crowning out of the double gloom, the empty starling nest swayed in the treetop.

There are things I have to close before winter comes, openings, wounds like windows left unlatched in the blizzard. Once I could prism the motherlode to a single point of devotion, meatbone of love and long hair, the thick strobelight of ardor fracturing back toward a single source. Now I have to write the warmth back into my hands, my old talons want the grip of things long ago. Now things lie diffused on the earth but from a great height you begin to see again.

After a long stay in the mountains once, when I came down I was changed. I loved her still, but without madness. Her body cold against my arms, I insisted she stay in bed a little longer. I resented her but knew the blue arm of frost was all mine, growing inside me.

I'd seen too much. Sucked on broken spears from the frozen waterfalls when stranded in thirst, seen black bears bounding the trails when it grew dark. I'd seen a village direct the madness of men through capricious deities. Time must be named its stochastic nature shaped in the ritual of our birth, I told her.

I didn't sign up for this, she said and drove away. That night, she totaled her rage against a broken guardrail the car bonnet caved into her chest.

I let her go then
Wrote the great unforgiving tale of madness from the wreck—

Found narrative, white root translucence drinking every animal trajectory of me. In improvisation, I couldn't see myself. I simulated an intensity of her death truer than her blood-rimmed face of survival in the hospital bed. The way you discover a new word and see it everywhere, something followed me that was formal, observant, rote.

Followed my protagonist home into the ruined tea estate. *Always make your character wait for a greater madness.* I did. Left him in the vortex of that village where the soldiers had moved in making the clubhouse their barracks, I left him there with his minor grief, left him where the dead of the town had begun talking through a little girl:

broadcasting first the ghost of the last British planter in town, a prisoner of war-turned-priest, who fell in love with a native woman and was lynched outside the

factory in 1951. And the little girl? She was the one from our forefathers' origin tales. Centuries ago in the ancient mountain village, where the clan first named this curse that would follow them back one day in a town under siege, a little girl laughed under a full moon one night and jumped into a vat of boiling milk.

BLOOD RECITAL

A zebra finch sings in a cage, but born
Inside doesn't know it. Orange beak
Tweezing into the feeder. It tumbles its head
In water, preens, then perches on a stick

To let out a wormy little turd in white.
It's been doing that all day, chirping in misery
For a mate. Trying every permutation of its one song.
All its bright plumage going to waste.

Then as if to catch a breath it goes quiet
The waning light grows stranger, & crickets
Begin. The hedge sparrows lift off into dark.

Some wind cleaving through leaves.
Then no wind at all. The rocking chair still
Like someone shot in the forehead.

EQUINOX TRANSIT

Mild morning on the first day of fall, treetops in the wind asking *Must it be...* Empty streets, few leaves on the ground. Yellow butterflies like messengers of grass. Round grey sparrows flit about the flower beds. No dark squirrels, though, handing out flyers to the black mass. No light in the attic windows: obsidian eye-slits of a Sybil gazing in. No light into the mouldy scream-room beyond the pale insects on the sill of a half-boarded window. Jet plane roars in the sky like a god convulsing in a night terror. One impatient tree letting go, stamping the sidewalk laden with its own green now festering yellow: leaf after leaf swirling down at each gust. Something about it that of a piebald gypsy horse with its shy flamboyance. Only one human being at a time on the long suburban street now: an old black man in a red shirt on a motorized wheelchair passes at the edge of the frame a little girl on her way to bible study. They shall reserve the easy formalities, observe the cold custom of dry countries. Somewhere, someone drunk is riding a lawnmower into a greenhouse. Somewhere motorbikes power through the well of death. A kind of chirping fills the air, passerines or crickets, hard to tell, faking their bit on the last String Quartet. *It must be.* A flock of blackbirds stitch a slow veil across the sky. They bring to mind a large Hasidic family I once saw at a grimy Greyhound station, attired in heavy black, slumped in the cold benches of the waiting room at dawn.

*ELEGY TO THE MOUSE WITH ITS SOFT HEAD
CRUSHED IN THE TOMCAT MOUSETRAP*

From the kitchen window where I've just tossed your frigid body, so stricken with extruding the ghost all night it looks like something uncoupled from a crucifix, I watch you land belly up in the snow. When I hinged back the guillotine from your bludgeoned head & dragged you out — smear of peanut butter on your whiskers, one clean ear folded back embedded into the bruise, a dry speck of blood on your forehead — I wondered whether you tasted what you came for in the dark. For days you scurried around the house, driving grown men to plant baits. And not what I wanted to be this morning: the first to discover you at my feet, muzzle clamped in the fatal saltlick, frozen in the tentative, & propped up against your belly like a prize hunt, as I stood waiting for my coffee to brew. It gave me no joy. I whispered an empty apology out of habit, as I rolled your body — astonishingly pink on the underside — onto a dustpan. But before I cast you out into the cold hoping the neighbor's cat gets to you before it thaws, I examined you under the light. Not the dark slits of your eyes like the ill-lit subtraction of long haunted rooms, but your limbs, like that of something stillborn, pale digits folded like a dead monk's against the grey ease of death.

TWO RIVERSONGS

Raidāk River, Thimpu

Wind braiding through pine.
On a fog-rimmed cliff, I faced the abysmal green
And pissed into the breeze.
Stranded halfway to the capital
In a foreign country our jalopy, an 800 Maruti
Fumed at the bonnet with the fan belt
Combusting in a jet black foul
Like something ailing exiting a child.

In my language, there is a name for this music,
This shape, *integritas*, long aerial notes
Heaving through each needle until
The conifers swell with a low sibilant underroar.

But standing there, dick out against the abyss
The dusk and the gray fog gulping in
I shivered and couldn't remember a thing.

When we did make it to the city that night,
Tired as drunken night truckers who fall asleep
Straight on the wheel as they pull in
To the grimy harbors of the border town at dusk,
We only wanted to drink

To defer this holy sleep folding back inside us.

On the riverbank
Under the bridge, where we reached
Feeling our tired feet on the warm boulders,
We sat facing a jangling river. In the dark
Its only form: the flowing.

Someone lit up something we could smoke,
Released sleek-throated bottles out of misery.
The night air descended like a caul

Then as if a heavy lid were pushed above us:
The moon

A bright column fell not on the long water
But on the blanched foreheads of my friends
And I read therein something
Monstrous, dear old familiar something

Dragged from our childhood
Come back bright as *itself*.

I felt it leap
Across my chest, a black groundswell
Of blood moving in.

LADKU RIVER, NEPAL

That afternoon the man at the reception offered to pack a little lunch for us, and drew us a map to the river that comes down, he said, in icy flares straight from the torso of the Mahabharata Hills at the foot of the village. Our bodies dimming from the finitude of how long we were allowed each other in this country, we left the resort hiking downhill, facing the Langtang Ranges, now emptied of clouds. We held hands as if holding each other aloft, as if aware of each ache lighting up the other's bones. We heard the water from the red dirt road beside a bullet-ridden primary school, past the bend where feral monkeys sat baring their brown teeth, sunning their genitals: we heard the smooth rockbed being strummed upon. When we reached, two village kids stoning a water snake: a flash of grass green wriggling headless in the riverbed, unaware. The water so cold, neither of us had the heart to go in first, the surface turning glass-hard, impossible by the minute. Then, You dipped a foot in, your shriek a knife grating through, your hips & back gliding buoyant in the cold rush as you held a mossy rock underneath & fell silent. I followed, watching the wet hair clumped around your face and thought of blindness as mercy in the face of death. I thought of us and the longing we were making out of this immersion, the pain deities drowning out of us giving us this irredeemable illusion of lightness, even love.

DAŚĀI

It is childhood again. None of that new money in the family yet. Only the smell of new clothes and small bills still cool from the bank vault. We're looking our best huddled in the back of a Canter the factory is letting us use for a day. Our great-grandparents are alive, giants walking the earth still. We see them once every year on this day. Later, they will go, one following the other within a month, but today, that irrevocable, heavy curtain hasn't fallen in our lives. Later, we'll tremble in our sleep, like the branches of a tree whose base is grafted by an unseen hand. Then we'll leave, all in directions sudden, uncharted as death itself. We'll forget the way to the old house. But today, we're going there, shaking together in the back of this truck, singing. Our foreheads itchy and fragrant in a pink crust of vermilion, yogurt and rice beads. This is the big day that brings the branches back to seed in the old house, the blood back to the hearth. Dozen goats fattened all summer have been slaughtered one by one for the feast. By the time we arrive, they're simmering in a cinnamon gravy we can smell from the bend of the old school nine houses away. Great-grandfather, old doctor, paces the courtyard, waiting for us. All his eight daughters come home today. The wind is cool, his wrinkled face dappled in sunlight pouring through palm trees. Standing there he begins to believe this could go on forever now. Death is still a long way off: she's lost on a highway somewhere, crossed a wrong border into another kingdom looking for him. Gazing into the bright fields he sees a straw-head, then his old white shirt buttoned up on a stick cross, leaning halfway in the shock of yellow maize.