

We survived Covid-19; we know what dying is

Hot flushes in my feet, I cannot sleep,
afraid of the train running within me
as I lie on bed, my limbs shaking
as though I am in a trance with fever
that feels like the womb in childbirth,
head stiff like muted groans
of a hundred bombs exploding.

There is a leopard on the newspaper front-page,
glorious on Delhi streets,
unafraid as we lie huddled in our homes,
besieged by the clamour of metal plates,
pigeons circling over manicured parks,
dogs morphing into lions.

I see the forest collapsing into the night,
the little backs of animals shining
in the moonlight, the jackals and the deers running,
the elephants swirling their trunks
into banana groves, the halo around the lion
swaying like rings of fire, city roads sinking
beneath their weight, deserted colonies flooded
with antelopes and eagles.

Into this world, I think of the ocean
carrying us to faraway lands, hungry migrants
dying on ships, the pandemics of the past,
the conquest of humans on the back of nature,
the colonising duel of the powerful and the powerless.

I wonder if the world has turned upside down,
if the shadow of the beast has swallowed our homes,
if the river has risen like skyscrapers,
if the cyclones have come to our doors,
if doves have turned into owls,
if sky overhead is forever weeping,
if I am a changed person, in our altered universe.

I touch my burning skin and tell the mirror I shall survive.

I utter a thousand affirmations before the statues in prayer.

I wave to the neighbour I barely recognise, from balconies.

I watch television all day, turn rooms into granaries.

I shudder to hear door knocks, afraid to open doors.

I walk around in circles to keep my heart pumping.

I fear running into humans in lifts, roads, rooms.

Somewhere deep into the forest, someone echoes these back to me.

Flash flood

“The flood brings down corruption-fed bridges,”
the *panchayat** officer told me in *Jogbani**
one August day when the rice farmer
toiled in the field all day and
nothing about life was august or bright.
Next morning, perched in the thatches
of his hut swimming in water,
the farmer looked on calmly,
and the officer had left.
Like the demanding *baraatis** in marriages,
the river had arrived, like a banished *apsara**
swallowing ripe harvests, huts, *chai* stalls
along the *Biratnagar** border,
but the farmer told me,
rains were nice for paddy fields.
Between the night and the morning,
*darzanon** died in Jogbani,
tied to *charpais* sailing with carcasses,
corpses entwined in fences, trees, canals,
a measure of life’s smallness in the face of death,
of eternal embraces in fatalistic unions of couples,
children and parents, livestock and masters,
old and young, dead and defeated.
Jogbani is now a map,
a giant purple patch on NASA imagery,
but the rice farmer agreed,
this flash flood is not
colorful enough for news flash.

Note:

chai: tea

Jogbani – a flood prone village in the Indian state of Bihar

Darzanon दर्जनों – dozens

Charpai चारपाई – cot

Apsara अप्सरा - danseuse in heaven

Baraatis बाराती – members of a wedding party/procession

Panchayat पंचायत - village council

Biratnagar: A border town between Bihar and Nepal

A poem on graveyards

Leaves have fallen and lie buried
like chocolate flakes in a cup of milk,
like dead meat in sub-zero temperature,
like a grove full of bears hibernating.

I shall write a poem for this day,
of trees that were always brown,
like decaying lichen, a sore wound,
and snow untouched by the Sun.

The world is a giant ice cove,
its posthumous whiteness making
the bed where volcanoes rest,
extinct as dead fish in the sea.

I will write a poem on graveyards.