

Classic Poetry Series

Arundhathi Subramaniam

- poems -

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Arundhathi Subramaniam(1967 -)

Arundhathi Subramaniam is a poet and writer and on spirituality and culture. She has worked over the years as poetry editor, curator, and journalist on literature, classical dance and theatre. She divides her time between Bombay and a yoga centre in Coimbatore.

Arundhathi Subramaniam is the author of three books of poems: most recently *Where I Live: New & Selected Poems* Bloodaxe Books, UK. Her prose works include the bestselling biography of a contemporary mystic *Sadhguru: More Than a Life*, Penguin and a book on the Buddha (*Book of Buddha*), Penguin Books (reprinted several times). As editor, she has worked on a Penguin anthology of essays on sacred journeys in the country (*Pilgrim's India*), and co-edited a Penguin anthology of contemporary Indian love poems in English (*Confronting Love*).

As a poet, she has been invited to literary conferences and festivals in various parts of India, as well as in the UK, Italy, Spain, Holland, Turkey, China, West Africa and Israel, and her work has been translated into several languages, including Hindi, Tamil, Italian and Spanish.

She has received the Raza Award for Poetry (2009), as well as the Charles Wallace Fellowship (for a 3-month writing residency at the University of Stirling) in 2003; the Visiting Arts Fellowship for a poetry tour of the UK (organized by the Poetry Society) in 2006; and the Homi Bhabha Fellowship in 2012.

In 2004, she was invited to edit the India domain of the Poetry International Web, which grew into a significant web journal of contemporary Indian poetry.

Her poetry has been published in various international journals and anthologies, including *Reasons for Belonging: Fourteen Contemporary Poets* (Penguin India); *Sixty Indian Poets* (Penguin India), *Both Sides of the Sky* (National Book Trust, India), *We Speak in Changing Languages* (Sahitya Akademi), *Fulcrum No 4: An Annual of Poetry and Aesthetics* (Fulcrum Poetry Press, US), *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets* (Bloodaxe, UK) and *Atlas: New Writing* (Crossword/ Aark Arts).

Arundhathi has worked at the National Centre for the Performing Arts, Mumbai, for several years, leading a discussion-based inter-arts forum named Chauraha. She has also been Head of Indian Classical Dance at the NCPA. She has written on literature, classical dance, theatre and culture for various newspapers

(including The Times of India, The Hindu, The Indian Express, among others) since 1989. She has also been columnist on culture and literature for Time Out, Mumbai, The Indian Express and New Woman.

5:46, Andheri Local

In the women's compartment
of a Bombay local
we seek
no personal epiphanies.
Like metal licked by relentless acetylene
we are welded—
dreams, disasters,
germs, destinies,
flesh and organza,
odours and ovaries
A thousand-limbed
million-tongued, multi spoused
Kali on wheels.

When I descend
I could choose
to dice carrots
or a lover
I postpone the latter.

Arundhathi Subramaniam

Another Way

To swing yourself
from moment to moment,
to weave a clause
that leaves room
for reminiscence and surprise,
that breathes,
welcomes commas,
dips and soars
through air-pockets of vowel,
lingers over the granularity of consonant,
never racing to the full-stop,
content sometimes
with the question mark,
even if it's the oldest one in the book.

To stand
in the vast howling, rain-gouged
openness of a page,
asking the question
that has been asked before,
knowing the gale of a thousand libraries
will whip it into the dark.

To leave no footprints
in the warm alluvium,
no Dolby echoes
to reverberate through prayer halls,
no epitaphs,
no saffron flags.

This was also a way
of keeping the faith.

Arundhathi Subramaniam

Catnap

This shoebox started out
a stiff-upper-lipped quadrilateral,
Upholder of Symmetry, Proportion, Principle,
sanctuary to an upright couple
of pedigree leather moccasins.

This week
shoebox learns
to sigh
de-
cant,
contemplate

gravity.

Old idealist softens,
grows whiskers,
paw,
drowsing chin,
slumped tail,
Arctic eye.

Form is emptiness
Emptiness is form, Shariputra.

Shoebox abdicates
shape
and Gucci worship,

secedes from
nostalgia.

Pukka sahib
learns
to purr.

Arundhathi Subramaniam

Confession

'To take a homeopathic approach to the soul is to deal with
the darkness in ways that are in tune with the dark.'

---Thomas Moore

It's taken time
to realise
no one survives.
Not even the ordinary.

Time to own up then
to blue throat
and gall bladder extraordinaire,

to rages pristine,
guilt unsmear'd
by mediocrity,

separation traumas
subcontinental
and griefs that dare
to be primordial.

Time to iron out
a face corrugated
by perennial hope,

time to shrug off
the harlotry
and admit
there's nothing hygienic
about this darkness –
no potted palms,
no elevator music.

I erupt from pillars,
half-lion half-woman.

The poor space index I demand
is nothing short

of epic.

I still wait sometimes
for a flicker of revelation
but for the most part
I'm unbribable.

When I open the coffee percolator
the roof flies off.

Arundhathi Subramaniam

Demand

And on days like this
nothing else will do.

Nothing but that whisper
of breath against the ear.

Breath that's warm
like the sigh of palmyra trees
in Tirunelveli plantations.

Breath
that's crisp
like linen, rice-starched,
dhoop-soaked,
in a family cupboard.

Breath
to be trusted,

with a thread maybe
of something
your foremothers never knew,
or pretended not to -
the spice-mist
of hookah on winter nights
in Isfahan, or raw splatter
of Himalayan rain, or wine
baroque with the sun
of al-Andalus.

Breath
of outsider,
ancestor,
friend,

who leaves nothing more than this
signature of air
against skin,
reminding you

that there's nothing respectable
about family linen
when cupboard doors close,

reminding you
that this
this uncensored wilderness
of greed
is simply -
or not so simply -

body.

Arundhathi Subramaniam

Heirloom

My grandmother,
wise even at eight,
hid under her bed
when her first suitor came home.

Grave and serene
her features, defined
as majestically as a head
on an old coin, I realise
through photographs, clouded
by the silt of seasons, like the patina
of age on Kanjeevaram silks,
that in her day, girls of eight didn't
have broken teeth or grazed elbows.

Now in her kitchen,
she quietly stirs ancestral
aromas of warm coconut lullabies,
her voice tracing the familiar
mosaic of family fables, chipped
by repetition.

And yet,
in the languorous swirl
of sari, she carries the secret
of a world where nayikas still walk
with the liquid tread of those
who know their bodies as well
as they know their minds, still glide
down deserted streets - to meet
dark forbidden paramours whose eyes
smoulder like lanterns in winter -
and return before sunset, the flowers
in their hair radiating the perfume
of an unrecorded language of romance.

The secret of a world
that she refuses to bequeath
with her recipes

and her genes.

Arundhathi Subramaniam

Home

Give me a home
that isn't mine,
where I can slip in and out of rooms
without a trace,
never worrying
about the plumbing,
the colour of the curtains,
the cacophony of books by the bedside.

A home that I can wear lightly,
where the rooms aren't clogged
with yesterday's conversations,
where the self doesn't bloat
to fill in the crevices.

A home, like this body,
so alien when I try to belong,
so hospitable
when I decide I'm just visiting.

Arundhathi Subramaniam

I Live On A Road

I live on a road,
a long magic road,
full of beautiful people.

The women cultivate long mocha legs
and the men sculpt their torsos
right down to the designer curlicue
of hair under each arm.

The lure is the same:
to confront self with self
in this ancient city of mirrors
that can bloat you
into a centrespread,
dismantle you
into eyes, hair, teeth, butt,
shrink you
into a commercial break,
explode you
into 70 mm immortality.

But life on this road is about waiting –
about austerities at the gym
and the beauty parlour,
about prayer outside the shrines
of red-eyed producers,
about PG digs waiting to balloon
into penthouses,
auto rickshaws into Ferraris,
mice into chauffeurs.

Blessed by an epidemic
of desperate hope,
at any moment,
my road
might beanstalk
to heaven.

Arundhathi Subramaniam

Leapfrog

("Anyone who has sufficient language nurses ambitions of writing a scripture" – Sadhguru)

Not scripture, no,
but grant me the gasp
of bridged synapse,
the lightning alignment
of marrow, mind and blood
that allows words
to spring

from the cusp of breathsong,
from a place radiant
with birdflight and rivergreen.

Not the certainty
of stone, but grant me
the quiet logic
of rain,
of love,
of the simple calendars of my childhood
of saints aureoled by overripe lemons.

Grant me the fierce tenderness
of watching
word slither into word,
into the miraculous algae
of language,
untamed by doubt
or gravity,

words careening,
diving,
 swarming, un-
forming, wilder
than snowstorms in Antarctica, wetter
than days in Cherrapunjee,

alighting on paper, only

for a moment,
tenuous, breathing,
amphibious,
before
 leaping
to some place the voice
is still learning

to reach.

Not scripture,
but a tadpole among the stars,
unafraid to plunge
deeper
if it must –

only if it must –

into transit.

Arundhathi Subramaniam

Prayer

May things stay the way they are
in the simplest place you know.

May the shuttered windows
keep the air as cool as bottled jasmine.
May you never forget to listen
to the crumpled whisper of sheets
that mould themselves to your sleeping form.
May the pillows always be silvered
with cat-down and the muted percussion
of a lover's breath.
May the murmur of the wall clock
continue to decree that your providence
run ten minutes slow.

May nothing be disturbed
in the simplest place you know
for it is here in the foetal hush
that blueprints dissolve
and poems begin,
and faith spreads like the hum of crickets,
faith in a time
when maps shall fade,
nostalgia cease
and the vigil end.

Arundhathi Subramaniam

Recycled

Driving through the Trossachs I see
the picture I drew as a 7ve-year-old
in Bombay – a rectangle
with two square windows,
isosceles roof, smoking chimney,
and girl with yellow hair
standing in the driveway,
flanked by two flower pots.

And there is comfort in knowing
what we are so often told,
that fancy has wings
and dreams come true,
even if it takes years
for them to take root
in some corner
of a foreign land
that is forever India.

Arundhathi Subramaniam

Rutting

There was nothing simple about it
even then -

an eleven-year-old's hunger
for the wet perfection

of the Alhambra, the musky torsos
of football stars, ancient Egypt and Jacques Cousteau's

lurching empires of the sea, bazaars
in Mughal India, the sacred plunge

into a Cadbury's Five Star bar, Kanchenjanga, kisses bluer
than the Adriatic, honeystain of sunlight

on temple wall, a moon-lathered Parthenon, draught
of northern air in Scottish castles. The child god craving

to pop a universe
into one's mouth.

It's back again,
the lust
that is the deepest
I have known,

celebrated by paperback romances
in station bookstalls, by poets in the dungeons
of Toledo, by bards crooning foreverness
and gut-thump on FM radio
in Bombay traffic jams -

an undoing,
an unmaking,
raw
raw -

a monsoonal ferocity
of need.

Arundhathi Subramaniam

Sister

Supple as wisteria
her plait of hair across our beds -
my talisman at the age of five
against torch-eyed gods and ancestors
who leaked nocturnally
out of cupboards, keyholes,
the crevices of festering karmas.

Later
we drank deep draughts
of monsoon wind together,
locked eyes in mistrust,
littered our bedroom with books, fuzzy battle-lines,
quivering dominions of love and malice,
even as we ruptured time,
scooping world upon world
out of cavernous weekend afternoons
through the alchemy of mutual dream -
turquoise summers over ruined Mycenae,
the moon-watered stone of Egyptian temples,
and those times we set the zephyr whispering
under the black skies of Khorasan.

Clothes were never shared,
diaries zealously guarded,
but in the hour before the mind
carves out its own fiefdoms of memory
we dipped into the same dark estuaries
of lust, grief and silted longing.

Now in rooms
deodorised into neutrality,
we sniff covertly
for new secrets, new battles, new men,
always careful to evade
the sharp salinity of recollection,
anything that could plunge us back
to the roiling green swamp of our beginnings.

But tonight if I stood at my window
it would take very little, or so it would seem,
to swing myself across
to that blazing pageant of peonies
that is your Brooklyn back-garden,
careening across continents
on that long-vanished plait of hair,
sleek with moonshine,
fragrant with Atlantic breezes.

Arundhathi Subramaniam

Strategist

The trick to deal
with a body under siege
is to keep things moving,

to be juggler
at the moment
when all the balls are up in the air,
a whirling polka of asteroids and moons,

to be metrician of the innards,
calibrating the jostle
and squelch of commerce
in those places where blood
meets feeling.

Fear.
Chill in the joints,
primal rheumatism.

Envy.
The marrow igloos
into windowlessness.

Regret.
Time stops in the throat.
A piercing fishbone recollection
of the sea.

Rage.
Old friend.
Ambassador to the world
that I am.

The trick is not to noun
yourself into corners.
Water the plants.
Go for a walk.
Inhabit the verb.

The City And I

(returning to Bombay after November 26, 2008) □

This time we didn't circle each other
hackles raised,
fur bristling.

This time there was space
between us -
and we weren't competing.

Space enough and more

for the nose-digging librarian
and her stainless steel tiffin box,

for the Little Theatre peon to read me
his Marathi poems
on rainy afternoons

for the woman on the 7.10 Bhayandar slow
with green combs in her hair
to say
and say again,
He's coming to get me.
He's coming

This time
the city surged
towards me

mangy
bruised-eyed
non-vaccinated

suddenly
mine.

Arundhathi Subramaniam

The Same Questions

Again and again the same questions, my love,
those that confront us
and vex nations,
or so they claim -

how to disarm
when we still hear
the rattle of sabre,
the hiss of tyre
from the time I rode my red cycle
all those summers ago
in my grandmother's back-garden
over darting currents of millipede,
watching them,
juicy, bulging, with purpose,
flatten in moments
into a few hectic streaks of slime,

how to disarm,
how to choose
mothwing over metal,
underbelly over claw,
how to reveal raw white nerve fibre
even while the drowsing mind still clutches
at carapace and fang,

how to believe
this gift of inner wrist
is going to make it just a little easier
for a whale to sing again in a distant ocean
or a grasshopper to dream
in some sunwarmed lull of savannah.

Arundhathi Subramaniam

To The Welsh Critic Who Doesn'T Find Me Identifiably Indian

You believe you know me,
wide-eyed Eng Lit type
from a sun-scalded colony,
reading my Keats – or is it yours –
while my country detonates
on your television screen.

You imagine you've cracked
my deepest fantasy –
oh, to be in an Edwardian vicarage,
living out my dharma
with every sip of dandelion tea
and dreams of the weekend jumble sale...

You may have a point.
I know nothing about silly mid-offs,
I stammer through my Tamil,
and I long for a nirvana
that is hermetic,
odour-free,
bottled in Switzerland,
money-back-guaranteed.

This business about language,
how much of it is mine,
how much yours,
how much from the mind,
how much from the gut,
how much is too little,
how much too much,
how much from the salon,
how much from the slum,
how I say verisimilitude,
how I say Brihadaranyaka,
how I say vaazhapazham –
it's all yours to measure,
the pathology of my breath,

the halitosis of gender,
my homogenised plosives
about as rustic
as a mouth-freshened global village.

Arbiter of identity,
remake me as you will.
Write me a new alphabet of danger,
a new patois to match
the Chola bronze of my skin.
Teach me how to come of age
in a literature you've bark-scratched
into scripture.
Smear my consonants
with cow-dung and turmeric and godhuli.
Pity me, sweating,
rancid, on the other side of the counter.
Stamp my papers,
lease me a new anxiety,
grant me a visa
to the country of my birth.
Teach me how to belong,
the way you do,
on every page of world history.

Arundhati Subramaniam

Tree

It takes a certain cussedness
to be a tree in this city,
a certain inflexible woodenness

to dig in your heels
and hold your own
amid lamp-posts sleek as mannequins
and buildings that hold sun and glass together
with more will-power than cement,

to continue that dated ritual,
re-issuing a tireless
maze of phalange and webbing,
perpetuating that third world profusion
of outstretched hand,
each with its blaze of finger
and more finger -
so many ways of tasting neon,
so many ways of latticing a wind,
so many ways of being ancillary to the self
without resenting it.

Arundhathi Subramaniam

Winter, Delhi, 1997

My grandparents in January
on a garden swing
discuss old friends from Rangoon,
the parliamentary session, chrysanthemums,
an electricity bill.

In the shadows, I eavesdrop,
eighth grandchild, peripheral, half-forgotten,
enveloped carelessly
by the great winter shawl of their affection.

Our dissensions are ceremonial.
I growl obligingly
when he speaks of a Hindu nation,
he waves a dismissive hand
when I threaten romance with a Pakistani cricketer.

But there is more that connects us
than speech savoured with the tartness of old curd
that links me sweetly to her,
and a blurry outline of nose
that links me to him,
and there is more that connects us
than their daughter who birthed me.

I ask for no more.
Irreplaceable, I belong here
like I never will again,
my credentials never in question,
my tertiary nook in a gnarled family tree
non-negotiable.

And we both know
they will never need me
as much as I, them.
The inequality is comforting.

Arundhathi Subramaniam