

Poetry Series

Prathibha Nandakumar
- poems -

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Prathibha Nandakumar()

Absent Presence

Just that he was making good poems and reminded
us of the power of words and seduction of thoughts

Is it more than that or is it only my love of words
when his photos move and words cry and the coffee house
acts as the centre stage where folks make love eating apple pie

and his absent presence defines silence that speaks

Prathibha Nandakumar

'Amma, Amma, Will My Cat Eat My Rat? '

-1-

The child came running, scared
'Amma, Amma, will my cat eat my rat? '

She was consoling personified

'No, no, its your cat
and your rat, aren't they? '

'But... but... do they know it? '

'They know because...'

God! why are children's eyes so
clear and deep?

'They know because the river
does not drown its fish
and the hill does not gobble up
the young ones playing in its lap'

The child went away satisfied.

-2-

But doesnt it happen?
Doesnt the river drown its fish?
Hill gobble up the young ones playing in its lap?
The flowers snuff out their own fragrance?

Even the loved ones have to stay away
and be silent. The tongue falters.
The broom is scared to sweep the
crumbs of dream scattered around the bed
The fire refuses to burn.
Air complains of too much work
Stars curse

The upstairs wants to come down
Water is tired of running down stream,
What can one do if the water
wants to climb up?
If the fish go on strike
or the leaves stop breathing?

What can be done?

-3-

She carefully spreads
the cloths on the line.
Remembers he always calls her
the mother earth.
She cannot be angry.

She shivers.

Anything can happen at any time

Translated from Kannada by the poet

Prathibha Nandakumar

Amma's Death

Showing the telegram helped to get a seat in the over crowded train.
Pushing the old gate with one leg and walking in was so
very like old times. But there was a fire in front of the door
One of the death rituals. Eyes stared.

'Youngest daughter' whispers followed
Long strides take me into the hall
and there she was sleeping.
Her moonstone nose ring sparkling.
There was life in her still but the priests
were already chanting mantras.

Elder brother and sister in law
explain in minute detail the last minute
how she looked, asked for water, how by the time
she got it amma had already leaned to the left,
no right, no left, yes right and how when sister in law
shook her shoulders she collapsed and how the doctor.

Now the priests instruct to bath and dress the body.
Amma had never let anyone do that to her and now
they do it in front of three hundred people.
They dressed her and placed her on the chatta
and still no one noticed the moonstone nose ring.

Women are not allowed into the crematorium
stand outside, announced the priest with full authority
There was no question of gender equality, in death you obey
Everyone stood at the gate with folded hands.
This is the last time we will see her, after this.

They closed her with fire wood and doused her with oil
The last ritual of going round the pyre was done
by the eldest son and after that the lighting and just then
amma's moonstone sparkled one last time

I jumped across the gate and reached the pyre and
brushing aside the sandalwood took out the nose ring
What was cremated was only a small bit of her

I had managed to take back her sparkle

The grand daughter is asking today
if I would give her
my diamond nose ring when I die

Translated from Kannada by the poet

Prathibha Nandakumar

And Suddenly A Woman's Wail At Midnight

Its a week since we moved in here
strange place, stranger people
The fear of the unknown
mingle with the lightness of the great escape

The sounds of the latest soaps
drown the cooker's whistle
Even at ten there is laughter next door
Not able to hit a nail to hang the mosquito curtains
we give up and light a coil
Sleep eludes. Tossing and turning
finally when my eyes give in...

Suddenly a woman's wail
Stifling words held tight behind the
end of a sari stuffed into the mouth
Its surely a man's voice coming forth
the clenched teeth
Was it my imagination,
that thud of pushing?

Sleep forgotten
I try to figure out the source
of the wail
Peep out of the window
To be mocked by the dark

Who could it be?
One from the opposite house or
the next door neighbour or
the one upstairs?

Before I could find out
it stopped as abruptly as it had started
Was it a hand that put out the wailing or.....

like me, did she also brush aside the hand
and walk out, never to return?
Did she learn to walk with steps bleeding on this dark night,

to reach a new destination
where she could breathe freely?

I dont know
but the stifled midnight wail of a woman
that stopped abruptly
haunts me to this day.

Translated from Kannada by the poet

(1999)

Prathibha Nandakumar

As We See It

i want to be pretty

I consult the I Ching
the numerologist
the astrologer
the tarot reader
even the street parrot
if you will like what you see
and....

well...
its over
the story is ended

the next day
i was crowned the beauty queen
and i felt like a monster

Prathibha Nandakumar

Ask Me

How do they do it, the ones who make love
without love, wondered Sharon Olds.

How do they love
without making love?

Ask me I shall tell you.

They imagine them to be
The white big owl
That comes out at dark
On the teak tree
And hoot like
The night is never going to end

They no longer know how it is
to touch with their skins and to kiss with their lips
and somewhere during conversation they tell each other
you can always leave and live.

It is since ten thousand years.

Prathibha Nandakumar

Being 1

Contemplating on the drawing board
deconstructing stresses and forms,
pursue the ever-slipping six packs,
run away from seeking souls and grouping hands
Its the time of redefining a square or demystifying
a rectangle, but of course not for directing a sun's course.
Light should come from designated gaps.
The inside out features and the outer median rejects
constructions of other kinds. Cool colors take over.
Warm feels fill the space. Void is no empty air but
a distance not covered by the waiting footsteps.
Descending or ascending stairways lead to the
same destination. You never know what reactions
your action can trigger. Sealed lips inflate.
Waiting is only a picture bought at auction, framed and
hung over the threshold. Pain is a friend, who picks up a fight
on solitary nights, merging the many different shades
into one big splash. Kissing away his wounds

I said build me a castle.
He put me in a plaster cast.

Prathibha Nandakumar

Being 2

I offer you this space to build,

or destroy, demolish, demark,
deconstruct, demystify, design, designate
or simply damn

the curves, the planes, the depths, the uneven 'terrain,
the many-colored, multi-textured interior landscape.

You distrust
and hence you define the thin separating layers

and pick a shovel or a axe and
claim the flesh a means of determining
your decisiveness

and I defy you to disagree.

Prathibha Nandakumar

Being 4

Give me the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth.

You are sworn by whatever you believe in
and are not dismissed until judged.

Condemned to design a cemetery
you turn towards the living.
How would you build a tomb for
the Pharaoh and his queen when they are alive and kicking?
You look to the pet cat for signs and
the mouse is a dead giveaway.

A trap is no trap if it does not trap the trespasser.
You wanted to dig a well and ended up digging a tunnel
which is no tunnel if it cannot get you out.

You knew it
and it let you here to me.

Swear by the hair with the scent of jasmine
and the pale lipstick mark on your collar.
Swear to acknowledge you have designs
on buildings and other things as well.

Prathibha Nandakumar

Being 5

And they award you for deconstruction!

Design theories desert you to tackle
the slopping roof realities without a column support of
decomposition. You wake up to a morning of
steel frames and blinding glass. Paint red,
whispers the colour goddess. You obey.
Plan from the pavement and reach the sanctum sanctorum.
Hidden well within the darkness of the soul
the smooth sand stones carve carnal appetite.
You talk of Neelanjane, the dancer who dies to
give someone Nirvana, lives again to kill an
otherwise exciting evening.

Forbidden to talk of love,
physical, emotional, platonic, puritan,
I resort to the discussion of the redefinig
of squares and rectangles.

Deconstruction be dammed,
who says arousal has a definition?

Prathibha Nandakumar

Between Foreword And Afterword

I don't write foreword to books by women
he said.

Wearing my heart on my sleeve I asked
then may be an after word?

He laughed

Between foreword and after word
the text is not defined by upper or lower caste
nor by prose or poetry but by
whether you are a cursed fairy born a Brahmin
or he a god in the garb of a Dalit

Nothing was predetermined
not even a forewarning of the tempest to come
Foreword or after word follows
the actual text which needs to be created first

He said
there are sub-texts and twists and
metaphors to swim along
whether I am there in it or not but
surely you are not in my dreams

I said
a line in the text says thus
perfect quote for both fore and after word
man is more scared of a woman's love
than her hate

He made a brilliant analysis of that
and I hate myself for loving him so

Translated from Kannada by the poet

Prathibha Nandakumar

Between Yes And No New

Why is it that a yes
is a simple yes
and a no is a life time of
self denial, doubt, regret
and a thesis into itself?

Prathibha Nandakumar

Bull And Self Transcended

The Bull, my master, the bull is whispering
hundred things you never mentioned.

How may a snowflake exist in a raging fire?

The raging fire takes me
yet burn me half.
You speak of unfulfilled desires
Not to fulfil but to curtail
To burn to ashes is my wish
to credit the fire with
it's true nature.

The beauty of my garden is invisible.

It is not for display.
The fence is not big yet
Nothing is seen.
I have the scene, do you have the sight?
The blossom does not cry out
The florist is on a holiday

If he wishes me to submit, he must raise his whip

He has no use of the whip.
Nor does he want me to submit.
To submit and to offer myself
for the whip is a wish mine alone
I am no China shop
And he is no bull.

Hold the nose-ring tight and do not allow even a doubt.

Unless I discriminate, how will
I perceive the true from the untrue?
I wear the nose-ring and he
Is full of doubt
To hold or not is for him to judge
I know to discriminate

And I have no doubt.

The bull, my master, was never lost.
And searching is by not me but you.

Prathibha Nandakumar

Cheers

It was a table for two.
Two beer mugs were filled to the brim
Who called the third cheer?

The crow suffers disturbed sleep
Coconut palm leaves make rustling sound
Shivers run up the spine, not
because of getting high
It was a cold hand on the bare back.

Who kept prompting between the story?
A smile unseen.
Just when the moon moved up
to the centre of the sky
he whispered and

went down the stairs
with a hearty laugh.
The beer was served for two
Three drank, one slept and

The other did not wake up.

Translated from Kannada by the poet.

Prathibha Nandakumar

Coffee House

Slumping on the chair she said
calling out to Vincent for a cigarette
knew I could catch you here.
Lighting her Vincent said
where did you disappear.
Inhaling she said hospital

Not me, him, a pause and then
My fears were true, he is positive
Sipping the strong coffee that Vincent served
with out her asking. Laughing a dry laugh she said
I also went in for a total checkup, and added,
just for assurance. Then exhibited her knowledge of
Window period, precaution, care and all that.

It's not easy being an activist. Especially when
the living in friend turned companion is diagnosed positive
But I will fight it till the end she said staring at the tattoo
on the wrist, remembering how she had insisted on a
new needle washing it in Dettol, and now this.
Countering my hey what's this with a why you too.

It was just last week that she was running around to
organize Parsi cremation as per the last wishes of a
Full blown any-minute-can-be-the-last-minute case
When Femila committed suicide, had fought with the police
for the body and when some one once suggested to
apply for foreign fund started a seminar
at the very minute on the pavement

Very unlike her to sit silent after coffee.
I asked what the matter was.
Fear lurking at the edge of her eyes for the first time
She said I am also positive.

Translated from Kannada by the poet.

Coffee House -2

2-

Was getting ready for another public function,
had to address a bunch of college girls, when
she called want two hundred rupees, can't return

Asking for would not get the right answer hence
I said come quick, got to go. It's no use advising her.

What to speak about globalization to a cola-drinking crowd
Reporting about the drug abuse in the public park in the lonely
afternoons invite calls from police give us a complaint madam
we will take action. Editor wants only lifestyle write ups and

Asked an auto driver why is he taking the girls
into the park and not home straight from the school
he said mind your busyness, even used a four lettered word
with the girls giggling hey look, an activist.

Exactly four days later there was a rape, murder
in the park and media made the most of it, followed by
debates, accusations, suspensions and transfers.

When she came crying, asking not to tell her parents,
Sent her to a doctor friend and now
she is asking for two hundred more
I asked her where was she and she said
near the mini park.

Translated from Kannada by the poet

Prathibha Nandakumar

Collage

The eyebrows are
someone's underarms
Lips are from an ad for
canned something
Eyes are page-ends and
an accident report
A little bit of glint
from a spot on drug addiction.

No cleavages are no pumpkins
from a page on gardening
I got them from photo feature
on rough seas and storms
Hands are a machine
just released in the market
The cloths you'll never guess
are a centre-spread of a
funeral from a foreign magazine.

But the anguish
which you say
has come through
so well
is all my own.

Prathibha Nandakumar

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Death

The Yogini sits cross legged in penance in the midst of fire
Holding her heart and red lips tight in her fist
Like a puppy yearning for the master looking around
And its already ten thousand years since they cremated him

The fire has not yet burned her and there is still time
For her to turn ash and float on river kaveri so that
she can become food to the multicolored fish
Death is no answer they say but the puppy
finds it a question she has to face amidst
Mundane housekeeping bank balance clock
Calendar and all the rest

The last time he left in a flutter the last kiss missed his cheek
Landed on his collar and he told later
that the lipstick mark created a world war of sort at home
Its peace time now. Did anyone imagine
the power would fail and the lights go dark
just when they were beginning to look into each others' eyes?

23 June 1994

Prathibha Nandakumar

Defining Pleasure

If you are searching for that poem written especially for you
you have to remember that writing poems

is like drinking coffee
brewing, filtering, whitening and sweetening
preceeds consuming
which is actually what happens in courting

But then drinking coffee is like making love
hot yet not scalding
sweet but not too much
Enough but not unlimited
to keep going

Now, if you are thinking what I am thinking
lets have some coffee

Prathibha Nandakumar

Erotica

Its his black and white
patchwork quilt matching
his salt and pepper beard
Its his sixty three managing
my still yearning thirty six.
Its his tobacco scented tongue
pressing promises on my wet intimacy
Its his exploring pointer conducting
grand tours on my uneven geography
Its his voluptuous substance fitting
my perfection, measuring both beyond doubt
Its his much kissed lips
calling out some unknown Chinese,
or was it Japanese, name
when his urgency troubling mine
paradise in the dim lit corridor
before SHE returns from shopping vegetables

Its his sitting busy at the study
and asking about a cool drink
when she walks in,
looking like a cat that got the cream,
Thats it.

Prathibha Nandakumar

Fear 1

Fear is no façade
His fear is real

Her love is more fearful than her hate
Fragile is scary
Tough too frightens
Adulation can be terrifying
Meek submission alarming

He fears and hence avoids
She loves and hence seeks

Till weariness catches up with them both

And they meet mid way where she is indifferent
And he tries his hand at senile smile.
They talk of eighth generation computers when

Everything crashes
And they are afraid

Prathibha Nandakumar

Fear 26

Remains of the dream
Hang on to my shoulder

Not touched by his lips
The virgin contours quiver

He is not good at bidding good byes
To kiss or not was never a dilemma

Fear lurks in his mind
I am one of a kind

To let go or hold on
By the hand that once pleased

Suddenly you no longer dread, relieved
by her promise of disappearing into oblivion

21.3.2005

Prathibha Nandakumar

Fear 27

Beyond fear
I hunt the shadows

His ex and current and future
All gore me to bleed

I have been traveling in circles
Seeing you then not seeing you now

Tying a thread with a medal dangling
Gives her all rights over you, you think,

Glance into the mirror, sweet pig,
The collage of images speak a different tongue

Who seduces you, the poet or poetry?
The ink or the juices of the seductress sultry?

Go, get into the frame, where nothing challenges you
And your fears are erased, your prayers answered

I continue to breath, get out and in your fear find
Salvation and resurrection

The feared and the fearful
Both are needed to play the game.

Prathibha Nandakumar

Fear 5

I could listen to him for a life time
and he was scared to talk.

Fear and brave
Love and hate

He hated to love me
And I loved to hate him.

We were both bad at it.

Prathibha Nandakumar

Fear 8

I was the brave one

He is afraid, he said

To get involved

To give in

To take on the mantle

To yield to temptation

I concealed my faith

In hundred queries

In fiddling with shredded tresses

In following him to his door

The puppy from the streets

He is afraid he said

To feed the dog

I got used to hunger

I am the brave one.

Prathibha Nandakumar

For A K Ramanujan-3

You, who say, have no proper sense of body,
do not wonder if I wondered too
if the pulse you stumbled on were yours or mine

You are no fool

In a single day you touched many
in passing, who let you pass
and knew it is never too late for
sin or even for treason.

You know my kind.

You have given me
a houseful of legitimate sons
in the course of a single day.

You speak of a look,
my love, look, your angry hands
are speaking so many emotions that
prove your many states of being.
each knowing exactly who he is.

I belong to all of you.

Prathibha Nandakumar

For Charles Chaim Wax

Darkness

At the appointed hour

Wings

At the specified joint

Fire

Where it is needed

When the tree caught fire

Thank god the birds were in flight

Phoenix

Is not mythological

The fruits appeared the next season

with out a day's delay

Prathibha Nandakumar

Forbidden

To the earth or the skies,
To the waters or the land,
To the wind or to the long lasting feeling
of being pinned to the wall,
Where do I belong? To whom?

The unclaimed baggage defies the new porter.
May be it's an explosive, may be
a forgotten-in-a-hurry pot of gold
sitting for his possession.
May be it belongs to the unsung hero of the
narrow by lanes where superior things get priority
like, for instance, deceitful beauties.
Does it belong to the port or the
platform, to the truck or the shaky shelf,
to the maker or the buyer?

Whoever has heard of the twilight belonging
to the day or night? Shore to the land or water?
They are in a perpetual no man's land where
the middle aged go to feel and not look,
young look and don't feel
and the old-forgotten have a field day
but come back hurt.

I belong to the waters that claim me with open arms,
drowning me into a blissful oblivion.
To the wind that takes all my senses and carry to
merge with the silent fragrance of the hanging Jasmine.
I belong to the worms that decompose my twice burnt body,
into a skeleton of bones and toes.
Nails stretch out of my fingers that reach out
to cuddle or strangle you.

In any case you never offered a hand.

You are not to be blamed
You belong to the elements
And you never despair.

Prathibha Nandakumar

Prathibha Nandakumar

Forbidden 2

If I try to swim
He drowns me

If I stand still
He sends scorpions to sting

God and I speak
Different languages

I say wind
He says water

The tiny boat
Can float or drown

He shrugs away
Forbidden fruit

Prathibha Nandakumar

Forbidden 3

I am not your water
go find another pond
He forbids

This was a beautiful river
With loving fish

Just a minute ago
Just a minute ago

Prathibha Nandakumar

Forbidden 7

I am a grown woman now.
May be too old to love

I know for one thing

that pain takes its birth
from the naval, creeps up
over the tired breasts
reach the face and
go settle into the eyes.

No wonder you don't look in my face
when you talk to me.

Prathibha Nandakumar

Forbidden 9

On this particular night
I shall not trouble you
with trivial

I shall preserve
you for greater things

Like these lines.

Prathibha Nandakumar

Forbidden 10

I shop for him

And gift him the stars
the moon and the constellation

He complains
I spend too much
on inessentials

Hakim Sanai once said
When you arrive at the sea
You do not talk of streams.

Prathibha Nandakumar

Forbidden 11

Homeless

I am home
In your waters.

You are asking me
Not to swim

I can not be
drowned twice

Lord of Blue Waters
Shall not drown his fish.

Prathibha Nandakumar

Forbidden 12

The Lord of Blue Waters
Has no use for
These kisses and hugs

He does not want
Any sweet nothings
Whispered

He expects me to take the hint
And fall like an autumn leaf.

I had climbed
Ten thousand steps
From the steep slippery side
To reach his shrine

It does not please him
To hear offerings of prayer

If it is silence he prefers
I shall forget my speech.

Prathibha Nandakumar

Forbidden 13

Somebody digs a well
Someone else's eyes water

Eels travel miles to
Mate at mid sea

And certain fish
Swim upcurrent

But Lena, the
Champion swimmer

Drowned in
Shallow waters

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Forbidden 15

He always wore
Black and white
And sun shine
On his face

Dreaming
Someone else's dreams
I cut my finger
On the kitchen knife

And paint his
Forehead red.

Prathibha Nandakumar

Forbidden 5

His eyes were swollen
He was gesturing
making a point
Moving his thick fingers
In the air

His teeth grit
Words flash spitting fire
He wants silence
And I am all noise.

I stand mesmerised

His anger
Has more life
Than my love

Prathibha Nandakumar

Forbidden 6

My destiny is contained
In your silence

You prefer absence
I am totally incapable of
using the word

I breath it caress it
Jot it down in the margins
But never utter it

You talk in your sleep
I can not caste away my fears

To be a forbidden fruit
Is such pale metaphor

Prathibha Nandakumar

He Did Not Look The Same

He did not look the same, he had changed
For better or worse I could not make out
Oblivious to the fact that
we were meeting after a million years
he started off with such continuity that
we were never apart.

It was only when he told me about his
girl friend who shared her birth day with me that
I remembered that I was meeting him after exactly
six years, ten months, two weeks and three days.
Apart from a degree and a well paying new job,
he had also gained a new sly grin

that usually comes with sleeping under the stars.

Prathibha Nandakumar

How?

Did I unwind all of my
binding six yards
carefully chosen by him
like a snake uncoiling?

Did I reveal in a careless
or calculated casualness
the unmentionable?

Then how come you know
of all the bruises and black marks
on all my most intimate parts
hidden well under the six yards?

I don't know, but why did you,
didn't you, by the end of the second cup
tremble, remembering a woman in rage?

Prathibha Nandakumar

Prathibha Nandakumar

I Am A Bottomless Pit

Gouging out healthy flesh and creating an open wound. How strange, this "prajna" of his. Just what is it like? "Deep"? "Shallow"? Like river water? Can you tell me, what kind of prajna has deeps and shallows? I'm afraid it's a case of mistaken identity, confusing the pheasant with the phoenix.

- Zen Master Hakuin

Tell me master,
What is it to be hollow and
What is it to be solid?
To be empty of my own being,
following my master,
'Whatever is form, that is emptiness,
whatever is emptiness, that is form.'
The same is true of feelings, perceptions,
impulses and consciousness.

With empty feelings and impulses
I have discovered anger in a saint
And also distaste,
call it intolerance if you wish.
The great are also allowed it to some extent.
'What a shame, when you draw a snake, to add a leg.'
'There's no cold water in a boiling cauldron.'
He knows it, and calls me a bottomless pit.
I am the pot never filled to the brim
I am the water dropp fallen on a furnace
I am the snake with legs and wings
Worshipping you
by the fire and by the cold night.
To be judged hollow
for not passing the tests of mind and emptiness.
The white owl at the tree scowls at the new furniture
condemned for the errors uncorrected.
To err is not human, you say master,
What is it to stay trapped and entangled in a bottomless pit?
Whose eyeless state are we targeting?
When you encounter an emotion you don't understand

You bite and chew it to the pith and spit out
unlike me. I drape it around my body and soul
never to deny it as the great spell,
my master, cast by you.

'To serve a Superior Man is easy,
to please him an impossible task.'
The superior is no superior if he does not
Recognize that the empty form is fearless.
Fearless I move on knowing fully well
that to catch a tiger by the tail
is to realize that
there is no fire without friction.
Seeing Emptiness in the fullness of Form
Is what makes you the master and me
a humble disciple.

I am the bottomless pit, my master,
Fill me with whatever that takes it to get solid.
Remember that Buddha said
in emptiness
'There is neither form, nor reception,
nor perception, nor conception, nor consciousness,
There is no ignorance, no extinction of ignorance,
till we come to, there is no decay and death,
nor extinction of decay and death;
There is no suffering, nor causation, nor cessation, nor path;
there is no cognition, no attainment and no non-attainment.'

I am chained in shackles
and riding a tiger
making all the appropriate noises
which sound hollow
to your divine ears.

18.4.2008

Prathibha Nandakumar

I Am A Poet, I Crawl

I am poet
and I crawl

under your skin
your mind
your sixth sense
your conscious and sub conscious
your awake
and stupor
states
and also
between
your tightly guarded
thighs

I rip you open and
crawl in
and set you on fire
and then

I get stuck for
not knowing how to exit
and i die a tormented death

Prathibha Nandakumar

I Am The Wind

Ah! To leap from a cliff
into an abyss,
marking the graduation from
discipline to a Nagual of knowledge,
to travel on the paths
that have heart, on any path that
may have heart.
To travel when the only worthwhile
challenge is to traverse its full length.
Love, hunger, fever, exhaustion and
inner silence
or through intent of awareness
or through lucid dreaming...

I am the eagle.
The wind takes me through
where your abyss pulls down
the strong and mighty.

I am the wind
that floats the eagle.
Freedom is the Eagle's gift to man
and what am I?
An eagle and you a man?
A woman in love or
a man trapped in a woman's body?

or the Nagual who jumps at your
command?
Will my apprenticeship end
with this incomprehensible act
that you lead me to perform?
Obliterate all my rational fears on
facing actual annihilation?

Awareness, stalking and intent.
A leader, a teacher and a guide.

Blow your palm of love on my upper back.

Shift me into a heightened awareness.

The freedom, the sheer joy
and also a frightening feeling of
sadness and longing.

O..warrior who sees,

You know very well

wisdom without kindness is useless.

So take me,

and I, consumed by a fire from within,
shall vanish from the face of the earth,
free, as if I had never existed.

prathibha nandakumar

19.7.2007

3 am

Prathibha Nandakumar

I Have Died A Million Deaths

I have died a million deaths
in the last ten minutes

I am a tied up sack
And they do not open up
What is kept hidden for the
Rainy days.
I am the pawn played
Only as the last resort.
My womb is taken up by the
Masters who decide to have
Sons or daughters
If they want sons
The daughters have to
Give way

I have died before
But never at the hands
Of unborn children
The sword is heavy
And the poison strong
But what they do not know is that
My life is not in my throat but
in my toes

Prathibha Nandakumar

I Was Born With Several Diseases

I was born with several diseases
And thought that was the normal way

I played the flute with lips
That bled at every hole
And the violin where
The fingers came away

My feet crushed to a pulp
While I danced while
Michael sang blood on the dance floor
I was hard of hearing
As the pus oozed out
Even as I wore the heavy
Diamonds and rubies

The exotic silks that I wore
were the bandages to my body
and as I opened up my thighs
I died a million deaths

And survived thinking
This is life and this is heaven
And this is the true bliss
Of being a woman.

Prathibha Nandakumar

In Silence

because every dumb ass in the colony
thought the poem was written for him the
next day it appeared in the most popular paper
and gave me looks, grinning befitting their status.

and he did not say a thing.

Prathibha Nandakumar

In Silence -2

It wasn't until I stepped in to the elevator that I realised

that nothing was said of the next meeting.

It was ok with me but somehow the casualness of the
silence was not interpreted in the right context and
I was called in again to explain
why I had not demanded another audience.

Prathibha Nandakumar

It Was Time To Meet, To Own Up And Confess

I knew, finally, it was time to meet, to own up and confess.
It's easy to pretend you don't care but to kiss and tell
is a very strange exercise. Some one writes of
one hundred years of solitude as if he knew me that well
All the while I was pitted against
his ex wife and current girl friend.
Low cut blouses never worked with him.

It went on for quiet some time until
one day I asked to meet at the coffee house.
He was writing about the elephant and the pond
he said, describing the divine dark one getting into the waters.
I looked into his eyes. Cataract of thick solitude.
Letting no Stone unturned, I uncross my legs,
No close ups with hidden cameras. Arrest me for
indecent proposal, I was begging now, but he was
already paying the bill with a small tip.
I kissed him on the street before
getting into an autorikshaw.

Once again the meeting had happened
and the virgin was returning home.

Prathibha Nandakumar

It's Been Far Too Long

It's been far too long
to go back now to the
beginning of the journey

lest we miss each other and
start the search all over again.

I wanted a bonsai
but got a full fledged tree
in bloom. Unexpected
but then everything has been so,
so far.

Its for you to edit
I write according to
What my pen tells me to.

Talking of pens
isn't it far too long
since I first mentioned about

the old ink pot wanting some refills?

Prathibha Nandakumar

Jogathi

I walked out, leaving behind
the broken bangles
empty bindi and koel box
comb with fallen teeth

The pleats hindering the brisk steps
peacock in the pallu cackling
fragrant jasmine in the hair
tear dropp hanging at the edge of an eye lash
running down the smooth cheek
the cracking sound of leather footwear
here goes the fluttering bird of the cage

On the old familiar well
flipped aside
the tight hugging embroidered blouse
a tear in the drape, caught in the
shoulder ornament
the checkered scarf
with the intoxicating sweat scent
of the wet body

The dice playing mother
under a pearl lined umbrella
called out to come, drink a glass of cool milk.
After chocking on it, I stepped out,
leaving behind the
lullaby, the cradle
the silver feeding spoon

Unmindful of what I was leaving behind,
searched for something else.
Roaming nomadic covering the distances
going, in and out, through the
moon light and scorching sun.

Finally standing atop the steep cliff
answering the last final call
Jogathi, wearing the

solitary flower and a lone stud,
consumed by the poison
dances the death dance
and from her neck
there tumbles down
the rudraksh.

Jogathi - a nomadic sanyasin
Translated from Kannada by the poet

Prathibha Nandakumar

Looking Into The Mirror

will he, wont he like what he sees
will he switch off the light
prefer the sheet of darkness
will he pretend to caress the
wrinkled skin or not pretend at all
will he make it real or make it
inevitable to fake it
will he bare all or hide behind a
thin veil, will he let me take charge or
take refuge in doctor's advice
will he come without holding back or
will he get up and go answering an
imaginary call

This is a poor quality mirror
bought at gujri sale

Prathibha Nandakumar

Lost

You know every detail.

The black mole on my back
the small scar behind the left ear
the thumb that has lost it's nail

You recognise every single curve
the silky smoothness
even in the dark.

You did not know....

when my sighs burned down the roof
when I crossed the seven seas
buried in your hug
when I just slipped away, vanished
while I kept kissing you.....

You did not know.

Prathibha Nandakumar

Meeting 2

I was split open when he walked in through the
glass door wearing a grin that could say
he had got the cream after all.

The meeting had to happen at that specific
moment of silence, which is my language and
he comes to me with his.

The silent one is easy to understand
His language is preserved in words with out roots
with out the beginning or end

His thoughts rest like birds on
my line where desires hang, fastened with clips.
No wind can fly them away or a strip tease

I raise my glance and take him in
It is at that moment of birth of a new yet familiar
language invoking the gods of meanings that

I rise up and go home.

Prathibha Nandakumar

Mind And Me

People suffer from word sickness, so word medicine is necessary

- Zen Master Seung Sahn

-1-

The mind said to me
All your devotion of ten thousand years
do not get you that one address of endearment
He calls her dear and inquires about her
being one centimeter fatter today
what has your bleeding love got you?

I said

It kept me awake the entire night
to write down these poems
that would grow by meters.

-2-

I can sit in patience
putting these stones to shame.
I believe someday
The tides can move the moon
And the flowers chase the bees
And someday
On entering into my mind
you may actually find it empty
just like you accuse me of today.

-3-

The mind asked me
Why don't you go to the mountain
Or forest or some lonely stretch
to get it out of your system?
To lick your wounds and
get to terms with your pain?
Take a fine blanket against the cold
Or a big umbrella against the sun
hibernate, heal and finally emerge
new, strong and sleek?

I asked
Will he wait till then?
Silence.

-4-

I know exactly what to do.
What I offered him
And he did not accept
has to be destroyed.

I am destroying myself.

-5-

The mind asked me
what more do you want?
I asked
what do I have?
I don't even know
What it is to be called dear by him.

-6-

The mind asked me
do you know why nothing happened between the two of you?
I said
I know.

Prathibha Nandakumar

Missed Moment

Then he pulled me to him and started kissing
which was what I was hoping for and so things
happened and one led to another and finally
we were about to do it and the bell rang.

Have you ever tried to get dressed in one minute
and sit at the table, trying to look like you are deeply
(pun not intended) engrossed in solving the accounts

Bet he has, because when he walked in sheepishly
placing the files on the dresser asked if he should get the coffee
boss and walked out calling out to the nonexistent room boy

and we just sat there breathing deep, a sigh or just a bit of
irony playing its role in our lives and I kept thinking of the perfect
piece of beauty sculpted on his body which could have given me
the heaven and he sat staring at the scattered papers with numbers.

Prathibha Nandakumar

Missing Charles

It was a long journey to the base camp
The peak was a different matter
But the pigeons were there before me
I believe they asked the sage in penance
why cant birds swim, that would be
easier than flying.

I believe he quoted Hakim Sanai, the sufi,
when you reach the sea you do not talk
about the streams.

The pigeons screamed
when the streams look beyond borders
you do not go in search of the sea.

Hakim Sanai smiled
when the birds can swim and
fish can fly you are on the peak
and not base.

Prathibha Nandakumar

Not Chaste At All

If it were really a spiritual deal
I would have made a pot out of dry sand
and filled it with water like the mahasati Renuke
and scrapped dirt off my thighs like Parvathi and made
a Ganesha to stand on guard while I go bathing
like a chaste woman.

Oh they scare you hell with stories of woman who
were sent to hell or died a tragic death eaten by the ants or
punished by the god of virtue for breaking the rule
the chaste does not desire a man other than her husband

They have any number of instances to guide you
Like Savitri who won over death just by her talks
or like Shakku who carried her sick husband in a basket
to his paramour and waited for him to finish.
Have you ever wondered why its always only the
Chaste who are chased by the lusty ruffians?

Listening to all that day in and out one gets very
dirty and I came here to bath in this clear waters
to wash away the sweat and lathering myself in scented
soaps like in the ads and cleaning all my senses
called out `oh come on, you, one and all
come find your nirvana in my valleys and curves'.

The gods went crazy. Couldn't turn me into stone or
curse me to become a flesh eating worm.
They couldnt even stop my pen writing
divine songs in perfect meter and rhyme

And the death penalty?
Well, let's face it when we come to it. Ha.

Translated from Kannada by the poet

Nothing

'If he comes I welcome,
If he goes I do not pursue'

- Zen saying

Take a step back
said the guru.

I stood motionless.
Weren't gurus supposed to
push us further?

Or was a step back
a step further?

'Joshu was asked,
"When a man comes to you with nothing,
what would you say to him? "
Joshu replied, "Throw it away! "'

I was nothing and he threw me away

And that was when I took a step forward.

Prathibha Nandakumar

Nothing Of That Afternoon Was Appropriate.

Nothing of that afternoon was appropriate.

His coming in late and in the casual manner
asking for the truth, the whole truth and nothing but
the truth was an indication of things to come.

Truth he was not really interested in.
He was buying time and slowly, like
one possessed by nightmares, he picked up
something from his bag, may be remains of
some other afternoon in a far away land
and I asked to see its remaining parts and
the typical puritan could never get to
tell me that he had already sold them to the
lady in blue chiffon.

They had warned me that there is no cure to this
Yet I had come to meet him.
He paid for the coffee and walked out
of my life with a bag full of lies that
I had convinced the lady in blue chiffon to sell me.

Prathibha Nandakumar

Now You Tell Me...

Fear of the unknown and known
Fear of receiving too much love
Fear of someone holding a mirror
to your inadequacies.
Now you tell me...

Loosing sleep over hundred years
And daily praying in your name
gave you intolerable migraines
Now you tell me

Every touch and hug and kiss
given, seeking eternal bliss
burned you of mortal fears
Now you tell me

Every morsel made with
ingredients of pure, hopeless
belonging gave you indigestion
Now you tell me.

A time for love and a time
for longing replace the never ending
times of nightmares
Now you tell me

The bird is free to fly away and
return if it wishes, the doors were never locked
And the food and water were an obligation
Now you tell me

To let go was never an issue
with what never belonged.

What I feared you would fear
I must face now fearing

Prathibha Nandakumar

Oh, To Not To Follow Instructions!

Oh, to not to follow instructions!

Remember how you instructed me not to
Follow you to the bus stand?
How you did not want to see me again?
How you made a rule that your mother
Should not invite me for the farewell?

You never wanted a line from me
Or even a phone call
And burnt all things embroidered
Painted, sketched, cooked, smuggled
Into your room.

You advised me to go look
for someone matching my age
that you are too old and destined
not to die in the arms of someone half your age

Just imagine if I had taken you seriously!

Prathibha Nandakumar

Pack Up

Just one more shot and
then pack up

Camera, lights, reflector
all go into the respective boxes
Make up man has already cleaned for the day
Unit van is waiting to drop us all.
The junior artists are counting the money

After washing the dark koel drawn eyes
cream my face remove the grease paint
get rid of the elaborate sharara and the
traditional heavy jewelry and tons of jasmine in the hair
slipping out the glass angles, one or two cracks
continuity man moans

Get into jeans and a halter neck
finally feel free
and tired.

Van full of talks and giggles
some mention cold beer
someone else warns of morning shoot

What happened to all the emotions
caught through out the day?
In reels and made immortal
sitting snug in the boxes
when do they come out in the open again?
Are they real or make believe?
The heart jerking tear at the command,
did glycerin cause it?

Who commands 'action'
when she stands atop the cliff
looking down the deep, long, turbulent river
that she had to swim alone?

The director calls

'This is Um Rao Jaan's best poem,
we will shoot it in the morning,
'in this pretext I saw life'
wonder what she meant? ! '

Translated from Kannada by the poet.

Prathibha Nandakumar

Paradigm

Your fears are my own.

With each step, light gets displaced.
Something travels in our interior landscape.
The external terrain shifts.
I quietly suggest burial of the past.
unaware that it is an echo of the
frightening questions and strange replies
confronted at regular intervals.
Frontiers vanish as suddenly as they appear.
Changing Horizon misleads.
You drive through the forest
cutting between the dense undercover greenery.
Underneath the plain looks,
lie the fiery yearnings.

I invite you into my territory
promising no interrogations.
Pulsating virgin lands beg you for consideration.
I offer my loneliness, defying fury,
in exchange of a spectrum of colours.
Light, you say, can hack one to death,
and pass me through a prism.
It was a decisive threshold into your
Temple of light.

Held by the neck, bruised by the silks,
bandaged body is not much of an offering.
Life survives in my breast.
Overflowing rivers run amok in my veins.
When your arm reaches out to hammer
that one last nail,
I smile at you and open my thighs

and come in a shudder and create
that which can not be. They say
silence and worship go hand in hand.
I sing ardent Sufi songs to please the
Lord of deconstruction who

has no use for this paradigm.
Defining my lines and forms,
he simply designs a plug in the void
and I am content.

Prathibha Nandakumar

Pink

The untimely door bell
brings me hurrying in bare minimum
And he stands there, the god almighty,
all dressed up in expensive silks

It was no wardrobe malfunction
my torn nighty, untidy hair,
does my mouth smell?
did I wash between legs?

Why are we discussing some
godforsaken seminar, goofed up by some
goodfornothing idiot, who should have been kicked out
but given promotion and an award too

The coffee comes to rescue
and the mug is big enough but
allows an unintentional touch and then
everything changed

That carpet, the window sill, the afternoon sun
that blaring music from the next door
cart venders calling out fresh tomatoes

nothing was color pink.
He mouthed an impromptu poem
on my brown lips,
my flat feet and of course
on my thick dark eyelashes.

Translated from Kannada by the poet

Prathibha Nandakumar

Poem

When I was grouping for new poem
for the poetry festival,
poems danced all over the house:
in nooks and corners, in bed,
in boxes, in walls and curtains,
in windows and doors
poems beckoned with their hands.
They simmered on the stove
in the rasam pot, got flattened
under the rolling pins
on the chapati stone
and diced on the knife-stand
they boiled in the cooker
with salt and spices,
sautéed, smelling fragrant.

In the hall they were lying about begging to be picked up.
If I swept them, they asked to be
mopped; if I mopped them,
they wanted to be dressed,
stubborn pests, thorns
in my flesh.
Curtains where little hands
had wiped themselves,
torn books, sandal dropped,
chairs and tables pulled here and there,
cloths strewn on the floor
took on the shapes of poems
and dazzled my eyes.

When I cleared the mess
and sat down to rest,
one of them pestered me
asking me now to wash it,
now to give it a drink,
now to come play with it.

When at last I sat down to write

not one letter got written
and my brain was in a fog.
Late at night, when a sleepy hand
groped and hugged me
'to hell with the poem' I said
and fell asleep.
But it tickled me in a dream,
made me laugh and charmed me.

When I read that
in the poetry festival,
it ran out, refused to come back,
went inside the listeners and sat there.

I let it sit there
and returned home alone.

(Translated from the original Kannada into English by A K Ramanujan)

Prathibha Nandakumar

Reason For Calling

Burnt seasoning, calling bell, son screaming for towel
from bathroom, TV competing with him, neighbour wants
something urgent, its an emergency,
laundrywalah wants to settle the account right away,
reminder alarm goes, poem half posted,
a glimpse of a tired self and hanging breasts in the glass,

forgotten while taking the call,
half an hour into the conversation yet
nothing specific, not definite even after replacing
the receiver, don't know why he had called

a minute to compose the fluttering heart and back to
the seasoning, towel, TV, neighbour, laundry, alarm....

Prathibha Nandakumar

Rich Man

I was the daughter of emptiness
until my rich man startled me
teaching the richness of minimalism,
the richness of not wanting.

I play with the gentle rays of sun at dawn
and he challenges the mid-noon ball of fire
with bare eyes. He says it is energy
and that poverty is voluntary.

My rich man showed me the richness
of now in time and here in space
amidst the abundance.
I backtrack in history.

They say a hungry woman is not free,
poisonous insects do not sting,
and birds of pray do not strike,
Kabir searched for the shop where
the merchant would say
'there is nothing of value here'

He said he found it.
I bid my time waiting.

Presently, my rich man
keeps all the precious hugs and kisses
to himself and hands down these
big green notes, of no value to me.

Prathibha Nandakumar
20 Jan 2014

Prathibha Nandakumar

Samsara

-1-

Samsara is about giving up
what you never had.

Now, what you have is what
You gave up long ago.

There is nothing to add.

-2-

Writing about Samsara
is like writing a death poem.

To finish
kill
matash

He has several words to describe it.
Even to tie in a sack.

Oh, is that why they call it tying the knot?

-3-

I know in my heart
what Samsara is all about

The time between two breaths,
between a blink of the eye

while he sits wondering
how to throw me out
chanting neti, neti.

-4-

I am not that
I said, adamant

He laughed a Buddha laugh.

-5-

I said, be joyful
for you have tasted my love

He suffers indigestion

-6-

Seek, said the spotted owl.

If Zen is drawing water and carrying firewood
he has machines to do it.

My legacy will be
Conquering silence.

Even the owl forbids me to hoot.

-7-

Beyond the barbed wire fence
are both spotted owl and
the pearl in an oyster.

There is no teak tree or
a deep sea.

My wisdom teeth is broken
My wings are clipped.

When he sees Samsara
He gives up the other.

-8-

Samsara is to see inward
Million things have gone
without leaving a trace

I alone think
I have a role to play in your life.

Even a fool is allowed illusions
once in a while.

Prathibha Nandakumar

Sigil

'There are absolutely no absolutes.'

This ends where it begins
I thought but
the subconscious has other designs.
Interpreting the Obvious
is the Key.
I Will my unconscious mind to accomplish
desires of my conscious mind where
even mirror-prism
becomes a blank wall.
The Key, my master,
The key is for me to
become your essence.

I abase myself, plead my pity before you.
Lament my unworthiness.
You are well aware of
My Statement of Intent
Take away my
repeated letters, state of being
physical, virtual, mental or visual
or even aural and tactile

'Appease me.
Adore me.
Seduce me.
Converge with me.
Demand from me.
Fight me
Be Me.'

I defied death
to be your whip.
Burning with
A desire.
A need.
A sincere want.

Make dots and lines of
my interior landscape
the half burnt, multi textured
multi coloured me
Paint me red or
Black and white

Then sigil me
Seal me
Keep Silent

They said
be calm, confident, grateful.
All good things come to those who wait.

Prathibha Nandakumar

Standing In Line

There is a big queue at the well
There are many who want to draw water

Even when the line is broken
And a tussle results
In each wanting to get to the water first
The crowd does not diminish

They are all equipped
Buckets, pots, ropes, pulleys,
And sinuous muscles
Untiring and determined too

I am not.
I stand aside and watch
I am not in competition
Let the able take advantage

When the last one leaves
There may not be any left for me
My thirst unquenched
I peep into the dark abyss
And stretch my hand

And the water will come rising in air
Into my scarred palm.

22.1.2008

Prathibha Nandakumar

Taming The Bull

The whip and rope are necessary,
Else he might stray off down some dusty road.
Being well trained,
he becomes naturally gentle.
Then, unfettered, he obeys his master.

-Chinese master Kakuan

This is the time to use the whip

To lynch and show what it is to
Go stark naked, without even the skin.
Red blood dripping covers the canvas
I am a woman only till I bleed
You have no use of me, when I don't

In fact, to stray off down some dusty road
was not what I was hoping for
Until you brought the rope and the whip
To train me
I do not become gentle, my master
I do not obey you or anybody
I am fettered. They told you to
Hold the nose-ring tight and do not allow even a doubt.
You should know better.

PS All this for the bull
and I am no bull!

Prathibha Nandakumar

Tell Me A Tale

Tell me a tale

Let there be seven seas, thunderstorms,
fire-spitting dragons in it.

Let there be a pearl-eating pet parrot
mocking his demon master

Let there be a trouble at every step
an unending maze of hurdles, no way out
I know all that and I am not scared.

All such tales end with a
living happily ever after.

Tell me a tale

of the breathtaking hugs
under the Neem trees
where dreams turn into his promises

Tell me a tale

that makes me howl and cry
like a wounded animal
at the end of which
they come together
like lost children
finding each other by chance

Once upon a time
there lived a princess
and the washer boy
was in love with her...

such tales are rarely false.

Prathibha Nandakumar

The Big House

Early morning poems

-1-

If one clings to the little boy,
One loses the strong man.
One cannot be with both at once.
Says the old saying

In the big house stay
The big man and the little boy
Both asleep, smiling in their dreams
As I stand here waiting for the morning

-2-

He is asleep somewhere in the big house

Like a pearl hidden in a shell
Like a pea in a pod

But the early morning bird tells me that
He is gone over the clouds into the other world
Where all travelers are lonely
If by mistake he rows his boat
Into an abyss?

A thousand things could cause me distress
The silence is killing.

I am thankful
Even to the shell and the pod
For keeping the pearl and the pea.

-3-

The one asleep in the big house
Takes me on a journey to the land

Of no return.

He alone can give me
Grief and ecstasy
Simultaneously

Is he asleep or
Is he propped against a pillow?
A book in his hand
And a poem on his lips?

I look down into the eyes
Of the watchful dog

Stay away, he says,
The night is turning into day
And he will wake up any minute now.

Again the heart is weeping
Again the heart sings

-4-

The first ray of the sun to fall on the big house
Gives a wry grin
So, once again, you stayed awake
the entire night? It is of no use,
your dream will never come true.

Heavy with sleep, my eyes try to stare at it,
Go away, not so soon,
Let him sleep some more

I did my best to please him
If you cannot make him love me
Let him at least not love you.

-5-

It is too late and I am too old.
Too fat, too ugly, too simple,
Too unwanted, too intruding, too
Tiring, too over bearing...

Everything would be different if
Things were contrary.

It took me time to reach, forgive me.

There were waters to cross, they were wild and tossing;
If I fell, there were dragons and rivermonsters.

Late night poems

-1-

He is still moving about in the big house
He has not yet signed off the day

To squeeze every dropp of the day
To capture every fragrance of the wind
To lend his ears to every decibel
To mouth every word

He stays awake late till
Sleep takes charge

Then starts his durbar
In the other world

Where no questions are asked
No answers need be given.

-2-

This is a hermitage and this the mountain
I climb to see your form

And I beg for love

This distance between
your chair and mine
is ten thousand kilometers away
from your side
and just a hand stretch away from mine.

-3-

The light is out in the big house.
He is asleep

The wind brings with it
His breath, his scent, his faint whimper

I call out to the white owl
In the tall teak tree

Shh... do not disturb
He has had a long tiring day

But the owl points out
To the silhouette in the room.
I like to believe it to be him

-4-

Unto death, I said
Beyond it, you said

I think of heaven and earth,
without limit, without end

The big house smiled at me.

-5-

He lives in the big house

never needing me for a companion.

I am the mad woman
Singing an insane song

The owl comes out late night
I mentioned it to him in the morning

He smiled and said why don't you go home
Once in a while, at least, to keep your sanity?

Prathibha Nandakumar

The Brand Brat

Halting halfway through stripping
the branded brief he cribbs
about the many folds of the foreskin
extra growth on the chest
receding hairline. Goes nasal about
the nose job abandoned at the last minute
worries about the double nipples
and asks if he should get coloured lens.

Dipping into my wetness
mumbling hundred things about the
difficulties he faced while firing
the many different shots gets busy
and comes in a shudder
beautiful beyond
all laws of plastic surgery

Prathibha Nandakumar

The Coffee Table 1

To touch or not
was not the question

Penance will definitely give result.
Gods must descend and grant
As is their habit.

The designer draws plans.
To take form is not their prerogative
As can happen with alarming regularity.

The coffee table tells no secrets
Wiping away very crumb is a reflex
As listening ears absorb every whisper.

Fragrant Jasmine is addictive
A load of it not enough to caress
As a single bud can also arouse

And finally he touched all touchable,
Heart, mind and physique
He had no choice but to wear gloves.

Prathibha Nandakumar

The Coffee Table 2

That was no fabled coffee table
Just an ordinary four legs and a glass top
that he would never take credit for designing.
It became a master piece by his touch
And his head resting on it was too much
to handle even for an inanimate thing.

And he wanted me to restrain.

I talk of distant roads, lanes,
tile roof houses and court yards with
singing birds and the one
playing dice under a sun shade
hoping he would get the hint

He did. He asks to describe
the lamenting girl when her
earthen pot breaks.
Folks are so good at it.

The coffee table stands witness
to the tears of the narrator,
not shed for her.

Prathibha Nandakumar

The Coffee Table 3

Nearer than this, can be death.

My hands lie on the coffee table and yours
next to it and we are not grouping
for each other.

The inexplicable grasped through
sips of coffee washed down the
scorching gullet gives a lurch.
Yet the mind refuses to accept.
Loss is an abstract feeling.
You do not lose what you never owned.
Unrecognised when it comes back
Turn tables at it.
You have finally mastered the art of
waking up to lullabies.

The firefly with burnt wings
commits Harakiri.
They never taught me the safe distance.

The coffee table stands testimony
to the unsaid.

To die for love has been an age old obsession.
To live is the new age discovery.

Prathibha Nandakumar

The Coffee Table 4

For you who visualises
filled and unfilled closets
with remnants of the lost digits
with worn out emotions
is not easy to handle adulations
coming so easy.
You try to curtail
in curt, crisp commands.
I lift up my burnt hand
in anticipation.
Unaware, you bring two cups of scalding
Coffee as if that is all one needs
to survive. The table gets offended
forcing me to respond in monosyllables

Of all the pleasures
most intense is that of wiping away
an unwanted drop
and wondering whether
to kiss or not the trembling lips.

Prathibha Nandakumar

The Meeting

It took me three weeks to get him to agree
for a meeting at the most public coffee house and
He walked in late with a careless
Have you been waiting long?

I could hardly get to say yes, his attention was drawn
towards the slim trim young thing and said he wanted to go and
by the way, I must mind my language, learn some manners and
definitely take care to watch my tongue
and what the hell did I want to talk to him about?

I returned home to a book shelf full of centipedes and
I crushed them all under my thick heels of black shoes
wondering at their thousand legs that looked hand crafted
all most like my burnt thighs resembling the work of an FX guy
that I never dared to let him caress
covered carefully under expensive silks.

Prathibha Nandakumar

The Quantum Leap

I no longer can answer
simple questions like how are you.
You are asking yourself.
I now know you are a part of me,
the body of the world and
you recognise every particle, you own it.
You stream through my body like photon
and you are the master explaining
the collapsing and reappearing wave functions.
I am aware, however, I am a matter but
I don't matter to you.

We rotate at different axis.
The Observer Effect implies
that we are products of consciousness.
Consciously forever yes, from my side
and no, from you.
Yet, we are the energy patterns
dynamic, interconnected and inseparable.
You deny matter can be completely mutable
into other particles or energy.
One minute you believe particles have tendencies to exist
and the next say there is no such thing as part.
Don't you realise we are not separated parts of a whole
but rather we are the Whole?
If all reality is the manifestation of an infinite Singularity
our magical realism hangs in space.
I don't understand wave-particle duality
I am that and the other too.

You, who has a view of the world,
from your drawing room window,
did not prepare me
for the free fall.

I leaped on my own.

The call of the abyss revealed the
The Implicate Order

The notion of unbroken wholeness
The foundation upon which all manifest reality rests.

I know you are a part of it too.
If quanta comes from counting
Count me in, into your inner circles of witches.
I am accountable to none else but you
even if I have to finally disintegrate into the wind.
The end is the beginning, my love,
doesn't relativity define gravity?

prathibha nandakumar
5 march 2013

Prathibha Nandakumar

The Scare Crow

was always scaring me
near the big
tamarind tree
never thought I would
encounter it

at the graduation
I had failed to qualify
and my intellectual abilities
had defeated me

and calling a spade
a spade
can be misleading
when it is actually

a magic carpet.
The scare crow
is a test of
others' courage

where as a Jatayu
is courage himself.

Prathibha Nandakumar

The Scare Crow -2

Always holding on to mother's pallu
someone at the school had said
that the scare crow would come home
to take me away if I was not smart.

I paid for it with my lofty
intellectual abilities
amma's pallu had slipped and
the scare crow got me finally

Jatayu, the gaint bird, paid his life to save Seetha
and a scare crow only stands there with a fixed grin.

Prathibha Nandakumar

The Shadow Of Crow

The shadow in the shopping window shows a crow
The nude mannequin is untouched by the crow's beak
She is not tickled. Nor does she make any effort to pull up the sheet
there is nothing to cover. The artist left out the details.
The displayer boy hugs and dresses her up like she can feel
his erection but sorry, no wetness, she is dry right through.
Its important for him to place the price tag prominently.
Its a sale. Discount is the order of the day. If you don't get a butter fry
piece of meat you only have to pick at

the toes made of the paper mache and
it is at that exact moment that the shadow
of crow disappears and the glass eyed mannequin stares back
with her fixed smile and the crow is not interested any more

Prathibha Nandakumar

The Tigress □

He is the animal trainer
makes even the fiercest of fierce animals
crawl, jump, stand on hind legs
just by the crack of his whip.

He puts his head between
the dangerous teeth of the tiger
pats his appreciation
waits in anticipation
of applause.

This tigress
that roamed the deep jungle,
terror of the forest,
now sits cross-legged in front of him.
Is she a tigress or what?

Someone once asked her about it.
She just smiled and brought out
her long sharp nails
hidden well under her paws
and scratched her head.

Prathibha Nandakumar

The Truth About Charles Chaim Wax (One More)

is that we love ourselves
more than we love charles
so we want him to come tell us
how bad we are
and make us feel
how good we are

and where's he by the way?

Like children lost at a village fair
we keep searching and finally
with out warning we chance upon
each other and shout
and scream and scratch
for giving such a scare.

Prathibha Nandakumar

The Wait

The warrior makes demands
First of all, upon himself.

Kindly wait, you are in a queue.
You are not the first one to arrive
Not the last too

Fall in line
Be still
Wait.

The I Ching said

The footprints run crisscross
The mountain rests upon the earth.
A large fruit is still uneaten.
There is no water in the lake.
One sits oppressed under a bare tree.
That which is bright rises twice.

Predictions are a different matter altogether
You are sincere
Yet you are being obstructed.
When a woman loses the curtain
of her carriage.
do not run after it,
On the seventh day you will get it.
The way is in the middle.

The middle way, how to take it?
Sigil initiated passion.
Its coming is sudden;
It flames up, dies down, is thrown away.
It has nothing that would
cause it to be accepted.

If one is seriously intent

order emerges out of confusion.
If benefaction is not yet seen
focus on the coming together.
To feel caressed without being touched
To be bruised from a distance
To be blessed by the seen god
There are no ulterior motives
In the midst of the greatest
obstructions.

Conflict. It is humiliating.

When you have something to say,
It is not believed.

They say the truth of a warrior
Is accessible, yet dignified.
Acting without prearrangement,
It cannot go backward,
It cannot go forward.
Nothing serves to further.
You do not travel through the air.
You have no feel of the earth
You receive him
in virtue, energetically.

The Power of the Great shows
itself in the fact that one pauses.

He has not stirred from his red chair.

Demand to draw every bit of the inner waters
Before you step out of line and though dismissed

You meet with praise

Hence fall in line
Be still
Wait.

The master will take you in a minute.

22.1.2008

Prathibha Nandakumar

The White Owl Saying - 1

Who anointed him of
his new name?
He called himself fire
And burn he does not

In sleep I cry for him
laugh when he hurts

Yet it is no hurt

I know of Kundalini that converts
a throat into a yoni
and splits apart
the mind.

Every time I stare at the flames
I see the messenger of wind
The white owl, my master,
The owl was actually a mirror image

Ah the joy of being consumed by the fire
The ecstasy of being burnt alive

Remembering that one look
that can give an orgasm
of a life time

I colour my eyes dark
With kajal made of my ashes

What purpose words?
What burns yet cools?
With what absolute perfection
this magical creature was made?
Please do not attempt
to save me from the white owl
sitting on a red chair

He hoots and I try to decipher.

* * *

Prathibha Nandakumar

The White Owl Saying 2

Fire is dangerous

but not if you are the fire
said the white owl

My fire sits on a red chair
and I am not consumed

They say the holy fire requires
sacred mantras, holy pourings

and no ordinary twigs
but the inner most brittle bones

of my lazy body
and an overactive mind

that makes the flames go up
turning me into a heap of grey ash,

like my wings
said the white owl.

* * *

Prathibha Nandakumar

The Yoni Chakra

The three inverted triangles of the Yoni chakra
cuts across the four moving upwards
fourteen lotus petals spread around and
nothing goes out of symmetry or color

As the lines are drawn
fingers tremble and the
central point takes over
its the expectation of the mating now
that churns a storm in the lower pool

and when the churning begins
what precious things emerge
the fish reach the core of the sanctum
sanctorum and the resulting Tantric designs
when ten thousand eyes suddenly
reveal the squares, cross lines and

there you see the, hither to hidden,
two petal bud
crystal clear
opening into
a full fledged flower

Prathibha Nandakumar

Then.....

Scared, the child asked
'amma, amma, will my cat
eat my rat? '

She assured, confidence personified,
'No.. no, its your cat
and your rat'.

'But.. but.. how do they know it? '

'They know because.. because...'

Oh god! why are children's eyes so
large and clear?

'Because the river does not drown its fish
and mountain does not gobble up the young ones
paying in its lap'

The child goes away convinced.

But doesn't that happen?
Doesn't the river drown its fish?
Doesn't mountain gobble the young ones?
Doesn't the flower wipe out
its own fragrance?

The tongue falters.
The broom is scared to sweep
the crumbs of dreams scattered
around the bed.
Fire refuses to burn
Wind complains of too much work.
The stars yawn.
Water wants to flow upwards.

If this happens what can be done?
What if the fish go on strike
and the leaves stop breathing?

Nothing can be done.
The tree is grateful to the bird
that rests on it.

She carefully spreads the wash on the line
and shivers remembering
how he always calls her the `mother earth'

Anything can happen at any time.

Prathibha Nandakumar

This Is What The Fish Said

-1-

How long can the hide and seek go on?
The net is cast everyday and soon
you will be `it'.
A fish's silence says a lot
The one under the oath of Hatha Yoga
called back to say
`Ruthless love breeds contempt'

-2-

This is temple river
These are temple fish
Casting nets is prohibited here
Some fish even wear golden rings

They live on the puffed-rice of silence
They do not always decipher the meaning of dreams
Today they said move on to the big ocean
when the pond gets small

-3-

Eels travel miles to mate at mid sea
Some fish swim up current to
mate, lay eggs and die
Some spread the love scent for miles
with a small flutter of the tail

The laying of eggs is an all together
different matter.
Just a small movement of the body and a
small opening of the secret passage

and millions of tiny wonders slide down
guaranteeing there will be life after all
do not despair.

Touch

He was describing how she held his face between her hands
and how she cried, how she grieved to go away and how
she sat next to him and said sweet things and
how he so wanted to touch her.

To touch him is a dream.
A craving uncontrolled
A desire, a need and a desperation
unattained, unmentionable and even
unthinkable for a simpleton.
I long to be worldly wise so that
he grants me that one attainment

The white owl said
don't be a fool,
its simple

turn into air
he will breath you in
become a liquid
he will drink you
cut yourself into pieces
cook and serve
he will eat you

and if it is only a touch you crave for
be born a child again
he will touch your cheeks
and may be even plant a tender kiss.

ah! to be a woman in love
is so useless!

Prathibha Nandakumar

Vacation

The fish at the pond were a surprise
Didn't expect such abundance
The snake on the lawn brought a hearty laugh
What did it symbolise for the modernist?
The golden sun set was a perfect backdrop

Someone had made a proper bed
Fresh sheets have a way of enticing
God, when was it, the last time?
To get under the shower and get ready

was a pretext. You went for a drink at the bar
and I stepped out into the lawn to speak to the fish

When we finally met in the bed
I didn't notice the lipstick mark on your shirt collar
and you didn't bother about the grass in my dishevelled hair
What an orgy it was.

Freehand translation of a Sonnet in Kannada by the poet

Prathibha Nandakumar

Waiting

The picture on the wall
tells many a tale
of the woman who waited

who could not run away or cease to
because she had stopped living

Prathibha Nandakumar

What Next?

And then he asked, what next? .

We could very well begin with
realising his wildest fantasies,
create new parameters of pleasure,
just lie back and enjoy the nothingness
of being, explore the many different
patterns of passion

Or we could
pretend to be Adam and Eve
and enact the snake-apple-temptation drama
and give him enough evidence to
blame it on her.

What surprised her is that
he asked why?

Because it is the fundamental reason for being
which cannot be explained better than why a blowjob.

Prathibha Nandakumar

What The Mind Said To Me

People suffer from word sickness, so word medicine is necessary

- Zen Master Seung Sahn

-1-

The mind said to me
All your devotion of ten thousand years
do not get you that one address of endearment
He calls her dear and inquires about her
being one centimeter fatter today
what has your bleeding love got you?

I said

It kept me awake the entire night
to write down these poems
that would grow by meters.

-2-

I can sit in patience
putting these stones to shame.
I believe someday
The tides can move the moon
And the flowers chase the bees
And someday
On entering into my mind
you may actually find it empty
just like you accuse me of today.

-3-

The mind asked me
Why don't you go to the mountain
Or forest or some lonely stretch
to get it out of your system?
To lick your wounds and
get to terms with your pain?
Take a fine blanket against the cold
Or a big umbrella against the sun
hibernate, heal and finally emerge
new, strong and sleek?

I asked
Will he wait till then?
Silence.

-4-

I know exactly what to do.
What I offered him
And he did not accept
has to be destroyed.

I am destroying myself.

-5-

The mind asked me
what more do you want?
I asked
what do I have?
I don't even know
What it is to be called dear.

-6-

The mind asked me
do you know why nothing happened between the two of you?
I said
I know.

Prathibha Nandakumar

Wishful Thinking

Oh to fall in and out of love
everyday

to be bare and unmasked
everyday

to celebrate
some woman somewhere
achieving great heights

I love the neighbour woman
who ran away with the milkman
leaving behind the rogue husband

The day my daughter
answered back her father
I prepared a special feast

Translated from Kannada by the poet

Prathibha Nandakumar

Yellow

Today he hates yellow
he says

as if he had loved it all along
when I spilled the turmeric on the threshold
he had a migraine for three days and made me
give away all my saris collection that boasted of
yellow of all shades, chicken yellow, lemon yellow,
mango yellow, marigold yellow, sunflower yellow,
banana yellow, gold yellow, urine yellow,
jaundice yellow, vomit yellow, purge yellow.....
that reminded him of his sick father in the hospital for two years
when they came holding his dark yellow liver

which had made him throw away the bottle.

Prathibha Nandakumar

You Cannot Borrow Someone You Love

he said, forgetting I was borrowing him
from all those who have loved him

And what is borrowed has to be returned

with interest

that sometimes
becomes
compound.

Prathibha Nandakumar

You Know Better

Who says my poems are poems?
These poems are not poems.
When you can understand this,
then we can begin to speak of poetry.

Taigu Ryokan (1758-1831)

I always look at your feet before looking at your face
They could have just been jumping, running,
Lifting, sliding and stretching to give you that
Slim, lithe frame. You could also be sweating and just washed.
Soaping, scrubbing, cleaning the nails and finally applying
Some scented oil or may be some cream.

You have no bow legs or flat feet

But I love your feet,
even if they were dirty, bow and flat,
only because they walked
upon the earth and upon
the wind and upon the waters,
and brought you to me.

Truth be told

The whip and rope are necessary,
Else he might stray off down some dusty road.
Being well trained,
he becomes naturally gentle.
Then, unfettered, he obeys his master.
-Chinese master Kakuan

This is the time to use the whip

To lynch and show what it is to
Go stark naked, without even the skin.
Red blood dripping covers the canvas
I am a woman only till I bleed

You have no use of me, when I don't

In fact, to stray off down some dusty road
was not what I was hoping for
Until you brought the rope and the whip
To train me when I
do not become gentle, my master
or do not obey you or anybody
and when I am fettered, hold the nose-ring tight
and do not allow even a doubt,
they need not have told you,
You know better.

Prathibha Nandakumar