

ALL
POETRY
IS
PROTEST

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Centre for Communication and Development Studies

C-12 Gera Greens, NIBM Road, Kondhwa

Pune 411 048

Email: infochangeindia@dishnetdsl.net

Websites: www.ccds.in / www.infochangeindia.org / www.openspaceindia.org

Tel: 91-020-26852845/25457371

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"Words are the only jewels I possess,
words are the only clothes I wear,
words are the only food that sustains my life,
words are the only wealth I distribute among people."
- Sant Tukaram, 17th century bhakti poet, India

"Poetry is the best means to make clear what we mean by the sacred.
Each of us lives inside a poem which is sacred to us. It could be the
poem of a job. A marriage. We enjoy its myths and legends.
Poetry celebrates experience. It is visual and immediate."
- Les Murray, Australian poet and literary critic

"All Poetry is Protest"
- Dilip Chitre, Indian poet, translator and filmmaker

Edited by Priya Sarukkai Chabria



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Introduction

The saint-poet Tukaram sang about the universal fellowship of bhakti to poor and low-caste villagers. He sang of great love and compassion that enfolded all living things within it, the sweep of its grace so vast that it reached the skies, flooded, and showered down as benediction.

Les Murray, among the most renowned contemporary poets, speaks of the presence of the sacred in the everyday. He speaks of the sacred aspect of the ordinary that escapes most of us, but that is precisely what poetry reinstates.

Dilip Chitre, poet, filmmaker and distinguished translator of Sant Tukaram into English, combines apparently disparate views of poetry with the aphorism: all poetry is protest.

As a poet, I know poetry is the dream-speak of mortals; it is our shared secret of the sacred.

All the poetry in the following pages seeks to share, to interrogate as rigorously as possible a chosen experience through words 'the only jewels... the only wealth' a poet can distribute and share. In this sense, all poetry is, indeed, protest, though not all of it is of the table-thumping variety. For poetry is also the loud whisper through which one hears oneself; through which thought is clarified – which then carries the potential of action. It is beauty; it offers the possibility of alternative visions, as well as understanding.

For poetry, indeed all art, is like a sixth sense; a kind of echolocation, a system of discovering identity and location through ripples of words that travel between the artist and the boundaries of the world, between artist and reader, between the artist's inner ecologies of thoughts and feelings.

The publishing of poetry in print and online remains an area that resists the pervasive embrace of globalisation. For poetry is an act of courage that demands that one think creatively; it answers that change and transformation is still possible. This first mini-anthology has a poem by almost every poet whose work is currently showcased on www.openspaceindia.org, the website of Open Space which hopes to foster social change through the arts and the innovative use of communications.

In these twenty-six poems you will find a range of voices, rhyme schemes, structures and styles. Some poems are jagged with pain and rage while others are reflective, showing the topsy-turvy nature of our societies. Some poets rake myth, folktale and history while others scrutinise the personal with irony and humour. Yet others embed their words in cityscapes, in gardens and alleyways, and others play in the bodies' geography, in sexualised landscapes, in its boundaries and crossings...

I thank CCDS and Open Space for their support to this project. And thank the poets who have so freely shared their work with us and have stood by this project.

Priya Sarukkai Chabria,
Editor, Talking Poetry

The Unknown Soldier

Whenever an ambassador goes to any country,
he takes with him a wreath of flowers for The Unknown Soldier
And if someday an ambassador comes to my land
and asks me:

'Where is the grave of The Unknown Soldier?'

I will tell him:

'Sir,

On the bank of any stream,
In any place in any mosque,
In the shade of any home,
In the nave of any church,
At the mouth of any cave,
In the mountains on any rock,
In the gardens on any treetop,
In my country,
Under any cloud in the sky...
Do not hesitate:
Bow your head
And place your wreath of flowers
anywhere.

- Abdulla Pashew

- Translated by Omid Varzandeh from Kurdish

Hunger

Walking up the gulli
A family of
Mother father two tiny daughters
Noisily making their way
The dog
With a roti in its jaws
looking all around in trepidation
Of someone snatching it away
Sneaked into
An enclosed square of bare land
Lying down on its belly
Munching away
Darting furtive glances
Left and right
In total aloneness
Letting go of the morsel
Snapping at bothering flies
Finishing the meal....
Rolling in the dust
Lying on its back,
Looking at the stars....
The lost look of past births
Casting shadows in its forlorn eyes
Munching away still
The imaginary roti....
Thinking about possibly
The parents it never looked after.
- A J Thomas

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Neighbourhood

On the narrow steps leading to our gate, the pakoriwallah from Bihar is often found kissing an anonymous woman at night.

Amazing act. My parents switch off the sitting-room lights whenever this happens. The car beams show them up one unbroken secret silhouette.

The steps invite other actions. The local fakir sometimes lies there, coloured like a ditch, and passers-by might climb to have a better look at the orange trees.

But this is different. The soft-spoken pakoriwallah smelling of his pakoris, his half hour island of defiant passion on the steps of somebody's house,

while around him everyday: the brash freeloaders, the kick in the groin, the familiar words of abuse spoken in an unfamiliar language.

- Anjum Hasan

Nocturne

Dusk and the ghats were behind us when we reached the river.
Summer had drained it of all motion, but its grey
Surfaces were still cold and clear. I watched you shiver
As we undressed. We swam, and between the algae
The moon swam with us like a silver
Fish, then sank into the silt like a broken plate
As your fingers ruffled the summer-still river.
Reflection made it more distant, and we had no bait
With which to catch the quick inflections of its light
Only the taut insistence of memory.
How long it seemed till the water resettled, and sight
Pieced together again that cracked porcelain moon. We
Swam, bare as ourselves and the river we swam in,
Then deep in the shallows dead still we lay.
You will remember this now though you were looking away:
Us wading ashore through the river's wet skin,
And clouds roll below us like shoals of grey salmon.

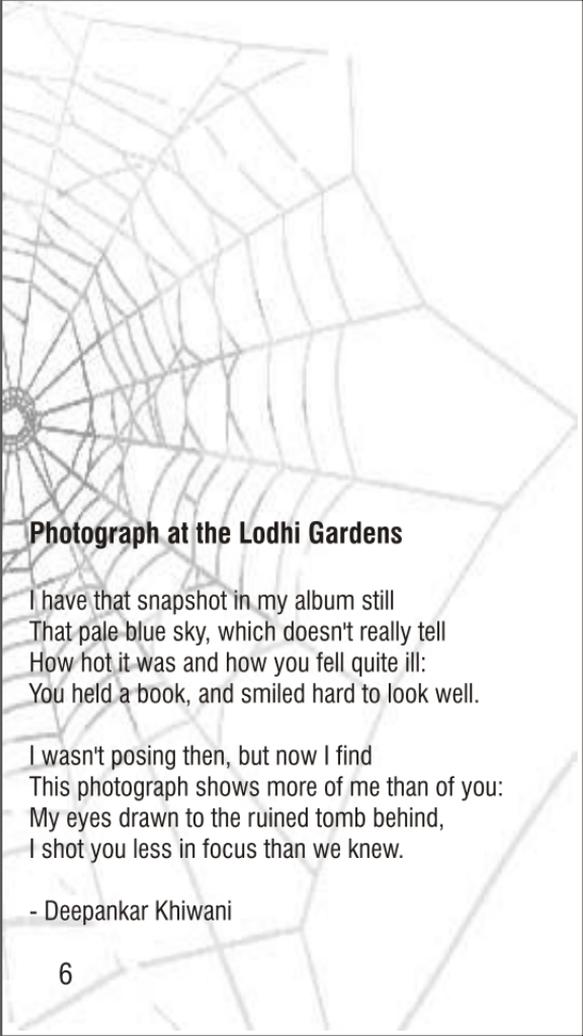
- Anand Thakore

The Cartographer

He would draw
Anything once:
Peninsulas;
Archipelagoes;
Grassless, unsettled,
Jagged-edged islands;
Landlocked countries
Of cold latitudes,
Exposed like bricks
When empires fell.
Time and places
Close to the self-applauding heart.

Not any more.
Now he draws less,
And such features only
As memory in receding shows:
Pit-heads
And coal-veins;
Tributaries that fall short of rivers
That fall short of the sea;
The dots of broken
Cease-fire lines;
The yellow or red
Of internal boundaries.
- Arvind Krishna Mehrotra

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Photograph at the Lodhi Gardens

I have that snapshot in my album still
That pale blue sky, which doesn't really tell
How hot it was and how you fell quite ill:
You held a book, and smiled hard to look well.

I wasn't posing then, but now I find
This photograph shows more of me than of you:
My eyes drawn to the ruined tomb behind,
I shot you less in focus than we knew.

- Deepankar Khiwani

Guide

His face is leaning into the light,
a match struck against darkness,
his nose, his lips distorted
by the waver of the yellow flame.
He is young, sixteen perhaps,
night has washed the dust away.
He talks too much about nothing,
dreams of the city and Eminem,
how good this restaurant is
although there is no menu, no light.
The owner worked at the castle
and now he is starting out.
In his pauses you can hear the hiss
of a single burner,
imagine the turning of a spoon.
This afternoon he took you on a tour
of empty houses where courtesans
and elephants graced the walls,
and someone's washing had not
been unpegged in sixty years.
He strikes another match,
tells you of another town,
where the havelis are painted
in crimson and gold.

He knows the owners of keys,
the fragrances of rooms,
frescoes where lovers fornicate
and gods travel by motor car.
He wants to take you there.
All the time you are wondering
if you should trust someone so young
when what you want to see is so old.
His face is leaning into the light,
there are beads of sweat
on the down above his lips,
his eyes are flares in the night.
Go on, you say, please go on

- Barry Scott

Unrest - I
(Bombay riots - Dec 6, 1992)

I drag myself from bed to study, to kitchen, to bed

Now and then, the lift moves, but no one steps out,

Drop the newspaper and stretch for my coffee
Seventh cup since morning -

Flip channels on the television set
The only thing alive and kicking

I step out on the balcony, and stare across the street

A yellow moon disentangles itself from the bare tree
Moves above the dish antenna
The sky outside my window turns murky

There it comes again, the dreaded evening

Trapped within myself, I sit and pull at
A single loose strand of hair . . .

- Deepti Naval

Day of the Dead, Budapest

Down the main arterials, on ring roads, in alleyways,
The dead stand perpendicular with heads ablaze.
And some of them blow out, while others burn right down
And leave small patches of darkness like footsteps about town.
- George Szirtes

Desperately Seeking India

In Delhi
Without a visa
In Madras
An Aryan spy

Kashmir's no vacation
They tell me it's a nation
And Punjab wants to die

In Bombay
I'm an invader
In Assam

They would throw me
From the hills
Kick me
From the plains

I promise
Never
To mention India again

- GJV Prasad

Limp Lover On Yellow Field

On the bed I have put deep yellow sheets:
Across their splendour lies your body,
Indolent after love, lean and brown.

I want to paint those lax lines, a picture
Called 'Limp Lover, On Yellow Field',
Shiva resplendent amid the turmeric,
Dusted with it, gilded by morning sunlight.

I lay down my brush, and join you.
A new painting begins:
'Two Lovers On A Yellow Field'

- Jane Bhandari



Psalm Secular

When you I taste
God awakes
from a century's
sleep or murder.
I fold my hands,
press your blessings
to my head.

I kneel abed,
mouth small praises
where thy thighs
collide. I bow, arise.
Soon the sun
will do the same,
arise and bow.

I take two pears
from the Gauguin bowl,
shine them with your slip.
We eat sweet and fast.
Juice flecks our lips.
'Gravid!' I shout,
for the poor joy of it.

And you? Laughing,
my name in your eyes,
you cry one word.
The moon that hangs
above the street
on a silver thread
lifts its skirt to dance.
- Jeet Thayil

Scream

A scream never ends. It tries
to be kind, but our hatred keeps
coming between us. The night stands
like a conqueror over it, the spear of darkness
held in her hands, the centre of everything.

Like a dark stubborn child, the scream.
Like its mother, cold, aloof.
It is inside my head all the time,
as days and shadows pass by,
till it wakens me to a different reality,
till it dislikes me for its throne's sake.

Ashes of sobs, the baying of hounds,
the snarling jaws of ceremony, the vomit of iron.
A scream tests warm, small innocences,
divests the long moment of its manhood.

Wild as the Dance, the Winds and Flood,
its deep streets are mortared with bone and blood.
Blindfold your scream again, sweet Mariam,
with the quick blood flowing down your seven-year thighs.

- Jayanta Mahapatra

Gandhi and the Tree

Gandhi was walking in the sun
That had survived Naokhali.

'Come, have some rest.'
Gandhi turned back:
It was a shady tree.
'You? It is not yet time
For me to rest', replied Gandhi.

The tree complained: 'The world
Is in a hurry. I have grown old,
No more do I flower nor bear fruit:
Even birds have abandoned me'
'Don't worry', Gandhi said,
'you are waiting for the axe
and I, for the bullet'.

'Don't say that', the tree was in
agony,
'someone will need that shade'.
The memory of spring escaped the
tree
as a sigh.

'Pray', said Gandhi.

'If you don't stop, I
will have to walk with you',
the tree now began to walk with Gandhi.
A wind blew. A bird
Flew to the tree.

'See, I am in bloom again',
the tree laughed with white flowers.

'You have started walking? Then
I can cease.' Gandhi's blood
Whispered as it gushed out,
like a prayer for every being.

'See, my flowers are growing red', cried out
the emancipated tree.

Three birds that had
dreamt of fruits
came flying from the East.

- K Satchidanandan
- Translated by the poet from the Malayalam

Easy and Difficult Animals (To Khurshid)

You have no problems such as mine.
You do not cower
from your own thoughts.
It doesn't frighten you
the iron edge awaking from its rust
the crawl of oxidised dreams
in lonely hours.
Where do you get your insights from
and your simple words?
Teaching our daughter that day you said
some dreams are animals
some dreams are birds.
The moonface was either
turned towards light
or away from it
dark fruit, incandescent fruit.

Your distinctions were a knife
that went cutting to the root.
You divided in two
this animal delirium that we call 'life'
into 'easy animals', 'difficult animals'.
All that moved on legs
flew on wings
crawled on the belly
inhaled through fins
hedgehog and weasel and polecat
all that went to the taxidermist
marmot and buzzard and bat
you lumped together as 'easy animals'.
And pitched against this menagerie
one solitary cry
the one 'difficult animal'
that was I.

- Keki Daruwalla

Wash your wine in my blood, ripe veins, bruised rivers setting in the sea.
Eat a sponge raw heart with your hands, blood streaming elbows, black rash stain
on vampire tongue.
Sleep with fingers open for new sensations.
Into your glass of red, a cloudspill slashing, tasting your colour.
A crescent fingernail scratches the spyglass, arching its back, exhaling calcium moon.
Wings scatter on waxpool caldera.
- Mani Rao

It Will Be Different

Yesterday, I read
they shot a thousand, unarmed people
dead.
The woman, living just across the street
was burnt...
a dowry death?
And Lakshmi says
her husband's sister's child
was raped.

Today, my son
you curl your tiny fingers
round my breast,
smile up at me, so loving

I forget that things
your hands could one day do.
I understand why Lakshmi
and a thousand, unarmed people
and women, living just across the
street
still keep on waiting, praying,
always hoping,
it will be different
tomorrow.

- Marilyn Noronha

Invocation: Spirit Of Water (written after the Gujarat carnage, 2002)

Make me dew that touches all
without distinction.

Like snow-flakes let my perfect structures
yield to the melt of being.

As an underground river flowing during drought,
make me draw from secret sources.

Sweet and salt, estuarine,
let differences mingle in my blood.

Tidal courage, I call upon you to return after the ebb
Spirit of water, give me hope.

Print on me oceans covered with sky;
when fiery fissures open, remind me of life.

Fill my marrow with glacial ice that cuts
rock to nourish springs.

Add one more wish to this:
Make me a mountain lake,

calm and deep,
that reflects light.

- Priya Sarukkai Chabria

Birthplace

We are the children of the rain
Of the cloud woman,
Brother to the stone and bat
In our cradle of bamboo and vine
In our long houses we slept,
And when morning came
We were refreshed.

There were no strangers
in our valley.
Recognition was instant
as clan by clan we grew,
and destiny was simple
like a green shoot
following direction
like the sun and moon.

The first drop of water
gave birth to man.
From red sheath
to green stem
and the spreading wind:

We descend
from solitude and miracles.
- Mamang Dai

Gulmohur

(Freedom Song in a Minor Key)

On a windy day like this
The rain clouds descend
Rough, tough, male

And the gulmohur
Forgets she is a tree
Rooted to the ground

Everything else thrusts
Upwards, red gold kites
Terriers' pricking ears

Alert to a drum of thunder
Eagles, and stiffish buds
On small, petulant plants

These rise to teasing bait
The short glamour of sex
Then why not the gulmohur?

Why not she?

Today, the sky is a bowl
Each ribbed gulmohur leaf
An imprisoned angel-fish

Swimming round and round
In the cold, grey luccence
Of the hooligan monsoons

But unable to escape, play
Her deft wit off against
A loutish rain cloud

The gulmohur loses heart
Sheds her vivacious fins
Her wild, scarlet flowers

Is this the nature of a tree
To be tied down eternally
Or can the gulmohur be free

Can she?

- Rukmini Bhaya Nair

Conversation

You carry his curse
in those clouded eyes, Dhritarashtra.
Your mother flinched
from him that night.
His breath smelt of roots
and his chest was white.
More demon than lover he seemed.
So your mother did it blind
and shut the darkness in on you.
You woke seeing nothing,
regret eternal in your howl.

But you?
What made you, Gandhari,
put out the light
that was given you, freely?
He could have seen through you,
the pale green of the thin-veined leaf,
the shadow trembling on the palace wall.
He did not ask for this companionship,
harsh as the cloth around your eyes,
grim as your unkissed lips.
Instead of this implacable love,
you should have given him sight.

Or

did he seem more demon than
lover to you,
his mouth slack and spittled,
his hands like dead birds,
his face a graveyard,
reproach crawling
out of his eyes?

Twice doomed to darkness,
he sits beside you now,
husband and father
to your hundred sons.
You are not stone, yet.
You have lived many lives
behind that mocking veil.
Tear it off.
Flinch from the sun one last time.

- Sampurna Chattarji

Mediterranean

1

A bright red boat
Yellow capsicums

Blue fishing nets
Ochre fort walls

2

Sahar's silk blouse
gold and sheer

Her dark black
kohl-lined lashes

3

A street child's
brown fists

holding the rainbow
in his small grasp

4

My lost memory
white and frozen

now melts colour
ready to refract

- Sudeep Sen

Eclipse

A sudden new design of heaven
Put me in configuration
With the mighty one.

He is the great core
Of inexhaustible power
And I
Only a mere satellite
Once removed.

He is the burning star
I am the after-glow
He is the source
I am the flow
He is the giver
I am the borrower.

He is all light
I have my blights
He is ever constant
I am prone to moods.

He plays on centre-stage
I, only on the periphery.
But I am content
With that fraction of
Eternity
When I have my moment

To reduce him
Into a tiny solitaire
Entrapped within the circle
Of my dark desire.
- Temsula Ao

The deserted temple (Sravanabèlagola)

The god is gone. His cave is bare.
In shadow from the sun
The clotted bats hang from the roof.
Below, the scorpions run
And pious folk no longer come
Lest evil should be done.

Ruins of flowers on the floor
Bear imprints of his feet.
They point through the door into
The many-miraged heat.
His voice was heard. His fragrance kept
This prisoned air once sweet.

His voice was heard: It told his tribe
To leave this sun-cursed hill.
They went, and left his dwelling here.
They went; it was his will.
Who piled these stones knows when he comes
And where he stays until.

- Vijay Nambisan

The Tibetan In Mumbai

The Tibetan in Mumbai
is not a foreigner.

He is a cook
at a Chinese takeaway.
They think he is Chinese
run away from Beijing.

He sells sweaters in summer
in the shade of the Parel Bridge.
They think he is some retired Bahadur.

The Tibetan in Mumbai
abuses in Bambaya Hindi,
with a slight Tibetan accent
and during vocabulary emergencies
he naturally runs into Tibetan.
That's when the Parsis laugh.

The Tibetan in Mumbai
likes to flip through the MID-DAY,
loves FM, but doesn't expect
a Tibetan song.

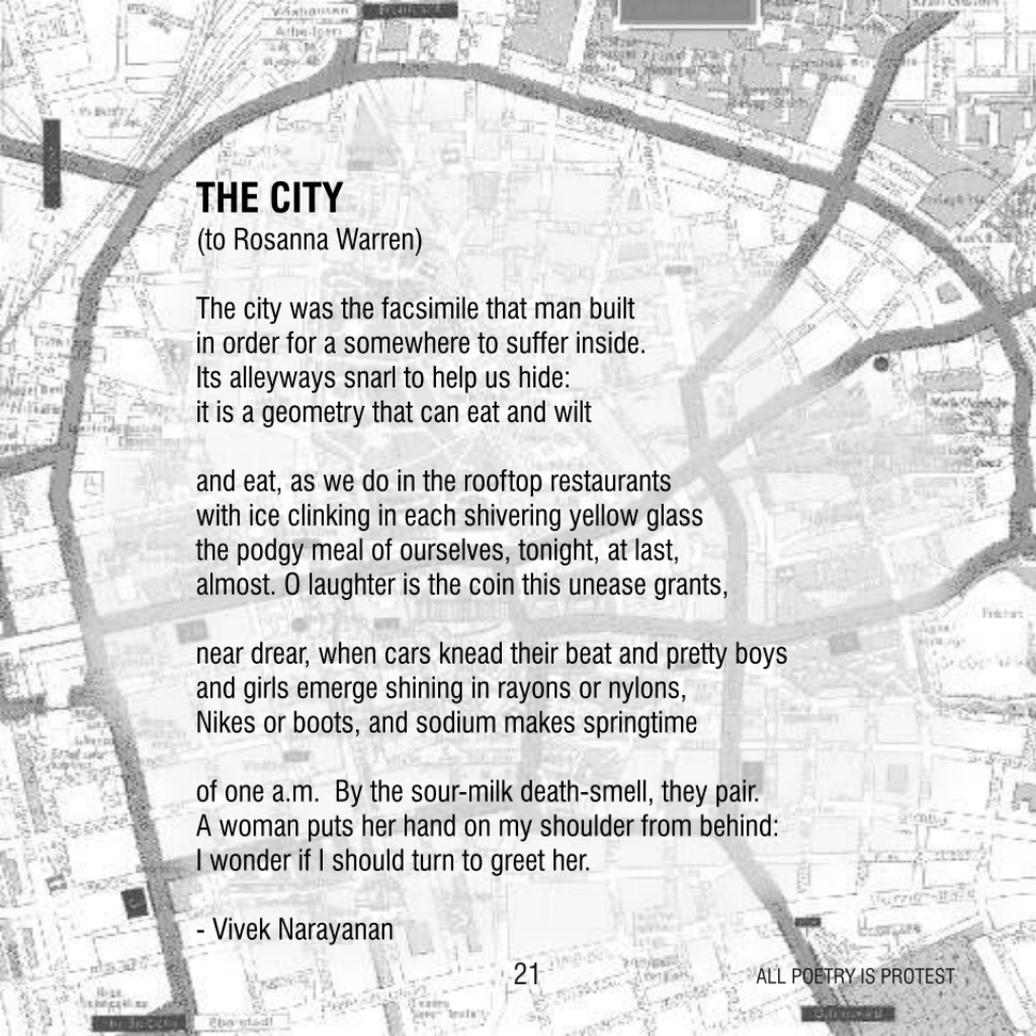
He catches the bus at a signal,
jumps into a running train,
walks into a long dark gully
and nestles in his kholi.



He gets angry
when they laugh at him
'ching-chong-ping-pong'.

The Tibetan in Mumbai
is now tired,
wants some sleep and a dream.
On the 11pm Virar Fast,
he goes to the Himalayas.
The 8.05am Fast Local
brings him back to Churchgate
into the Metro: a New Empire.

- Tenzin Tsundue



THE CITY

(to Rosanna Warren)

The city was the facsimile that man built
in order for a somewhere to suffer inside.
Its alleyways snarl to help us hide:
it is a geometry that can eat and wilt

and eat, as we do in the rooftop restaurants
with ice clinking in each shivering yellow glass
the podgy meal of ourselves, tonight, at last,
almost. O laughter is the coin this unease grants,

near drear, when cars knead their beat and pretty boys
and girls emerge shining in rayons or nylons,
Nikes or boots, and sodium makes springtime

of one a.m. By the sour-milk death-smell, they pair.
A woman puts her hand on my shoulder from behind:
I wonder if I should turn to greet her.

- Vivek Narayanan



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- Priya Sarukkai Chabria
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