



NABANITA KANUNGO

Feat

after watching Karishma, a six-year-old contortionist and street performer



Words cannot hold a hand-full
of morsels you didn't get to eat.
It's that hot afternoon at the Guwahati station,
under the same blazing sky
where your tattered, oversized frock
hangs half-mast in the sad country of my heart,
swallowing a little more light of the wonder
you will never be in this world.



Words cannot hear breath flowing like a wound
each time you start dancing to the drum
your mother thumps vacantly
near those nose-singeing toilets in the compartment
with the sibling of your fate on her lap;
the drum on which your stomach lies stretched across
a thousand years on the hollowed bone of future,
its air smelling perennially of shit, a destiny
that doesn't recognise the irony of your name,
the taste of the flesh and blood of its reality.

Words cannot re-build the school of starving moons
where your tongue swallowed its alphabets
because it should salivate to perfect the art
of making dreams smell like steaming rice;
words cannot count waves of death
written away in statistics and famines
for which expensive wars are fought
so we may stand at the edge of reason and say,
this is how it is and must not be.

And words cannot strip this amused light
of our nice questions, 'bravos' and claps,
or tell us what we have lost in watching you dance.
Karishma, words can only stand by
watching centuries of feet walk away from rice-fields,
bequeathing you, that immense hope for a meal
in your body that slips through a foot-wide hoop,
releasing hunger's somersaults from your
small cage to our obscene wonder,
firing your tongue's deadly surprise
when someone doles out twenty rupees.



A Road



Anywhere along the purpose
of going somewhere,
is the same distance deep in our bones,
the chipped hope, the tarred dream,
inane milestones
and the weight of a giant leveller
which understands our sad instinct
to begin again.

We did not choose it—
this wrong way,
of loves we must suffer,
beginnings we could not cherish,
the end we cannot reach.

We do not suspect what lies ahead,



for, the past burns brightly in our feet;
as we proceed to darkness's
blinding light.

And somewhere along the way,
our feet begin to word
that prayer of roots:
May our steps be lifted
to the softness of leaves,
may we not remember.

Mad Rain



There was mad rain last night,
eyes seething in the wind.
Trees put on fog's shroud again
in the lost town
and streets didn't wait for anyone to arrive
and startle them with existence.



Before the rain,
a bomb went off in a hovel
and took with it a child, its mother,
and four other faceless hungers.
And it levelled all the mistakes of a man
who had hidden it in his home
to plant it properly somewhere else the next day.

Before the bomb, hunger raided the night
and marked poor doors with the sadness of blood.

And before hunger, there was a forest,
a river, alive in the plateau's
throbbing soul,
rice fields in trance
of wind and dance.

But before this,
before everything perhaps,
there was a dream
growing under some roof,
unaware of what it wanted to embrace
in the sky.

Nabinata Kanungo is from Shillong, Meghalaya. Her poems have appeared in print and online journals such as *Caravan*, *Planet (The Welsh Internationalist)*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Indian Literature*, *The Bombay Review*, *Muse India*, *The Tribe*, *Raiot* and *The Sunflower Collective*. Her work has also been anthologised in *Ten: The New Indian Poets*, (Nirala Publications, 2013), *Gossamer* (Kindle, 2016) and *40 under 40: An Anthology of Post-Globalisation Poetry* (Poetrywala, 2016). *A Map of Ruins*, her first book of poems, was published by the Sahitya Akademi in 2014