

**Votualevu Junction**

*for Gitanjali on her birthday*

*after Yevgeny Alexandrovich Yevtushenko's 'Zima Junction'*

At the roundabout, the road's forked  
Like a human tongue,  
There are coups within coups,  
Dark clouds upon black clouds circling  
Like the black dogs of depression:  
Lightning rents the sky with barbed wires.

In the luminescent green of the landscape  
Old Lali, like Nani, lies buried in peace.  
Two sunflowers shine as human expression.

Yet the circle grows bigger  
And the slogans are many:  
Let's grow together –  
Let's live together –  
Are you prepared for a disaster? –  
We eat Fijian grown, do you?

The golden circle is larger  
Pineapple plantations are no more.  
Sugar, that slave crop, is the diabetic king.

The sweltering humidity – its intensity –  
Saps my inner vitality – an emptiness fills the air.  
We walk in shattered lives, a shared destiny  
In the shadows of mundane laughter  
Of things that once appeared so sublime:  
All stories began with once upon a time...  
History comes in waves and wild winds  
In cyclones, coups and heart attacks.  
And the wordless whirlpools of hereafter.  
We are bound by griefs of a womb  
Like leafless trees on an island tomb.

Debasish Lahiri. 'Votualevu Junction'.  
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The sunburned tourists come and go  
Chanting: This is one hell of a paradiso.

While Airways, Airlinks, fly above  
Where I'd known so much love  
Rode on brown Charlie's bare back  
And grazed Lali, among the holy cows  
Every morning we did our vows,  
Bowed to the solitary sun so resplendent,  
Rising like a single pineapple slice  
O'er blue hills, rippling in blue waves  
On naked women and nibbling mice.

In the Nandi, Nisan Ali sat on his horse,  
Fishing.  
Baba asked him: How many fish caught?  
None, the hatmaan, muttered:  
My kismet Babajaan  
Is scribbled with the horse's thing!  
The stud's pen is like a gun.  
All fate is written in water, Babua.  
Fook the fish: the bait hides the hook;  
I'm going home, on the hill,  
To eat bhauji's baigan ke chokha  
Until my tumtum is fully-fill.

Are Bhagwaan, uttered the old man,  
And slipped into the gleaming river  
Of glinting dreams and distant sorrows  
On an island without any tomorrows.

My grandmother gossiped about yesterday:  
Nisan's mother had three husbands  
She came from a mountain terrain  
When Mother India was one – One was all,  
We were fed by the same breasts.  
She married Lahari, then Ramzan,  
Died in pundit Mohan Ram's arms.  
Fat and forbidding, formidable too,  
The plass was made extra big for her.

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She tossed and turned on Matalita's mat:  
To bury or cremate was the question.  
They dumped her burnt bones in the sea  
From where she'd arrived in a sailing ship  
With stitched sails of hessian paals,  
To the islands across the seven seas,  
While pundit Lalla read the scriptures  
Amid many friends and a few foes,  
As sand sea-waves slithered on my toes.

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I've landed in the rainbow evening:  
Welcome Home is boldly proclaimed.  
I walked to the immigration officer  
Uniformed in blue, without a smile,  
More used to greeting tourists, perhaps.  
Inside I couldn't see a familiar face  
On the murals, painted in mobile hues,  
Nevertheless I strode boldly through  
Customs and the kindness of a man.  
The queue was lengthening, two cops  
Sat and coughed: I left the duty-free shops.

A kind of music was in the evening air  
Heavy with the smell of hibiscus;  
The bougainvillea were brightly lit  
Petals of frangipani bloomed in ears.  
The red flowers grew on green trees.  
Below them yellow taxis, standing.  
It was humid and the sun was sinking  
In the blue waves below a mutilated sky  
Bleeding many colours, old memories:  
Suddenly I could see so many scars  
Of my youth in those distant stars.

Fifty-Six Knives was nowhere to be seen  
Once the tawdry town's undisputed queen  
Until that bald Mussolini, Caliban's cousin,  
Kept imprisoned the freedom's symbol –  
Fifty-six obscene nights: now who remembers

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When things were burnt into so many embers?

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The world changes: for the better or worse –  
It was too early to tell: a blessing or a curse?  
And I'd become a visiting stranger  
On the land I'd walked barefooted:  
Sole to soul you may belong  
Is a very ancient unsung song.  
The country is going through changes  
With concrete buildings, coloured lights.  
In the twilight we crossed the river twice  
Where years ago I was born once  
And arrived under the mango tree.  
In the foliage a single mango glimmered  
In the blue moonlight; the wind was quiet.  
There were flowers in black plastic pots  
Blood-red bougainvillea were reaching out.  
The food was good, made with love.  
A shower scampered on the tin roof  
At midnight the cocks crowed  
An old neighbour's dog did bark  
Open the world a bit more for me;  
The cat jumped over the low moon...  
I could see it all from a barred window.  
Was it all that I saw in the dark?

\*

For me all stories begin at my birth  
When dreams flowed in many streams  
The palms grew tall like my brothers,  
Where my cut umbilical cord was buried  
Under the mango tree with fruitful boughs  
That I thought was my piece of earth.

Miscarriages then were common:  
Not of justice but of a woman bleeding  
Feeding her child with her beautiful breasts;  
Every man's brutality of loving

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Made a woman into a wife, a widow.  
They loved and lived, and made us;  
When they died, we, too, were old  
But they'd known no other world.

There wasn't much inside our head:  
We swept the cobwebs from corners  
And the mud floors made of dung;  
We grazed our cows and goats  
As ducks waddled, birds flew overhead,  
And dark hawks circled the empty sky.  
We swam in the river with dogs, frogs,  
Holding Lali's and Charlie's tails:  
Do not trust the teller, trust the tail,  
Of Pundit Rajbali's Bajarangbali:  
They set it on fire in their madness  
He burnt an ancient city on his way  
Where they remember him today:  
That old story with monkeys in red:  
Do you want a hole in your head  
To hear what I'm saying?

I'm not talking about the dead.

In those ancient evenings promises were kept  
And brothers for a brother often wept.

We grew with flowers and did belong  
Our flesh was weak but bones strong  
Flesh and fish, fruits and fowls,  
Gave us the strength to swim  
In the rising flood, the howling wind,  
We saw no evil: all was simply good.

We grew staring at the sun, waiting.  
Yet men were kept behind iron bars.  
They'd killed with sharpened knives  
We lost so many young, nameless lives.  
Among strangers we'd learned to dwell  
But still we saw stars from inside a well.

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Mornings I walked to the school  
Circling the burning, a brighter sun,  
They called me a bloody fool  
Shaking his head like his tool.  
I learnt the alphabet of knowledge  
Not of body or its dark human stain  
And began reading big books  
About sinners and the real crooks  
With pains that break your heart  
Like chicken joints when torn apart.

You might say it was my good luck  
And you'll be quite right:  
Some kindly grocer paid my fees  
I crossed one river many times  
And so many rivers in a single life.

I grew up but returned to my soil.  
My old home now has new tenants  
My blood relations are gone.  
They have built bigger, better houses  
Which don't fall in hurricanes –  
Everything is now solid, substantial.  
Where's their home? Here? There?  
It's no more safe anywhere.  
But the winds of change blow  
The sea-waves dissolve the shore  
Even if the depression is miles away  
My blood pressure gets rather high  
My consciousness is falling in fragments  
A fatal stroke is a distinct possibility.  
A storm screaming on a faraway island?

So I sleep and dream of grizzled ghosts:  
Of farms, and my childhood friends:  
It was in the hills we met, slept,  
And cooked our meals on the open fire  
On the mystic rocks, volcanic and black,  
We dozed like lizards dazzling the sun.

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Our teeth shone with gravel and desire  
Eyes were blood red with swimming  
Face marked with tears – streaming.

Then we returned to the leaking bures  
And lay like logs between cousins  
While on the oldest mango tree  
The blind bats hung upside down,  
The owl hooted, cats prowled in the night,  
As fowl-filchers were busy stealing;  
The dogs carried on with their doggy life.  
Men and women clung together  
Rivers into seas: the ocean was never full.  
Children were born, one too many,  
While some died, many survived.  
And we thought we'd now arrived.

One became a colonel, rather well-fed.  
He made us into a nation of strangers  
Arrivals, Departures, and Deportuers,  
To many unknown Christian mangers:  
Goodness was wasted fighting evil  
Are we the children of god and the devil?  
The voices in the beloved river are lost  
Kini, Laisa, Lesu gone without a ghost.  
The colonel killed the minah-mocking bird  
Desolation remained in our hearts unheard.

The new tourists come and come and go  
Listening to the tunes of our lost paradiso.

\*

We fly in and out, morning and night,  
Searching for that touch of grace –  
We'd walked on the round hot stones  
We'd walked on water, swam the river  
But the tears of things are no more.  
Ashes, dust and ghostly memories  
Seep into my old mildewed soul  
Dampness, virus of cold, dry coughing;

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Once broken, nothing is ever whole:  
Let Nothingness now in my body sleep.  
The heart has a small blocked artery  
I'm ready for surgery, no need to weep.

My blood pressure rises  
Like the morning's shadowless sun  
The dew on marigolds is gone:  
How we've lost our paradises  
By the power of a foreign gun.

\*

At the Votualevu Junction, I turn left:  
Here there are the big hotels  
In the fields bereft of grazing cows,  
Nor are there cocks fighting in half-light  
Those cheating, groggy card players  
Of cheated hopes have taken their flight.  
The winners and the losers, one and all?  
But I keep going beyond the rugged hill  
At the corner is one-eyed Kanwa's shop  
Where Ramdas's buses used to stop;  
After many years, the shopkeeper kept  
My father, his farming son in his debt.  
One moonlit night the old shopkeeper died  
Under the concrete bridge, below the ridge;  
At the beach funeral only my father cried.

Beyond is the Ramlila's holy ground  
The grandeur of the old drama  
The story of lonely Sita and Rama  
Echoes in my island's exilic mind  
As children walk to the learned school.  
Mad Sagar doesn't block your road  
With Bachoolal's half-forgotten mantras  
That made Parsu's burn his hoary ass  
With Birbal's wisdom in Bhondu's class.  
But we walked on the stony path:  
Look, Listen and Learn, the teacher wrote  
On a big blackboard which now I quote.

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To tell lies is one thing. To know  
The truth and not speak it quite another:  
It's the greater crime, against life itself.  
One had read this among the old.  
Sacred scriptures are full of truths, lies,  
Between such words and your breath  
Lies the inevitability of a single death.

We carried on looking backwards  
As if our burdens could be relieved  
By others; but no horses' hooves were heard  
Just the cheeping of many a roadside bird  
And we kept walking, working on the land  
As the girmityas did, a lathi in one hand.

You walk and die alone  
You dream and die again.

\*

Uncle Joji had two eloped wives  
Attached to him like sheathed knives  
And when the first ran away  
He got another one, the clown,  
From across another nearby town:  
A pundit's daughter – he became a priest.  
Recited the mantras from a detective story  
Written by an anonymous author  
Whose novel were like grand epics  
Replete with ruins of wars and relics.  
Good and evil were easy to define  
And all things were made divine.  
Then came the colonel, a bogus brigadier?  
A man drunk on myths of methylated spirit  
His coups were like a tropical squall  
They soon evaporated into the thin air  
The bombast and belligerence in vain  
The story of Abel and that of Cain.  
Power without glory, the same bloody story:  
A nation's heart was broken, betrayed –

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But there's no beauty like this body:  
And it grew like goodness in evil  
We learnt about god and the devil.  
Remembering Ram and Lakshman:  
When brothers together played, prayed.  
And children's castles, the waves destroyed.

So when a brother from a brother went  
My heart was saddened and deeply rent  
His home was an empty shell, a small hut  
The battered door and a window forever shut.  
Nobody sat under the tamarind tree.  
No ducks quacked, no women at the well  
The colonel crowed on his own dunghill  
He had so many prophetic pages to fill.

Lightning-struck: we were blinded, illuminated,  
Our neighbour's cow was struck and killed.  
In my mind there was neither love nor hate  
Just the endless desolation of the human fate.

Then the rains came  
And swept all to the river and the ocean.  
I became restless: my myriad thoughts  
Were like craggy mountains, full of trees,  
My feelings were deeper than the seven seas.

I knew something was lost  
More than the ideas of a paradise,  
Between a sunset and a sunrise;  
But what did we really lose?  
Count it on your calloused finger-tips  
Touch your twisted toes, read my lips:  
Something bigger than ourselves: the trust  
Of each other, the warmth of a meal together  
Or a handshake clasped without racial rust;  
Or of things passing and past into the dust:  
In the cities only the bust survived  
You had seen it among the rain – trees  
In the misty mountain's morning rays  
Glinting cobwebs in a glittering net

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Where you floated fish-tin boats,  
And grazed your kids and goats.  
Sugar-cane rippled on the hills  
Seagulls flew against the wind.  
Old men were sent into homes:  
You could touch human grief  
In the trembling of a cane leaf.  
It was not exile that killed  
It was really the betrayal  
That broke those trusting hearts  
And yours and mine on the shore  
And more, oh, ah so much more.

\*

Things are closer in your rearview mirror  
Than you think: appearance and reality.  
And near horizons seem far away  
In a strange land with strangers.  
But a bird builds anew a nest and sings  
From fallen feathers, broken wings.

First they buried their many dead  
Praying to gods they had known  
But now no rescue would take place  
Here alone was their final resting grace.

They had played their games;  
Sardars changed their names.  
They dug the virgin soil as birds flew  
Where once only wild berries grew.  
New gardens were created and born  
From the giving earth so brutally torn.

There were no elephants here  
Nor gods, goddesses and all that  
But cows grazed, horses galloped  
While they trudged barefoot  
In the evening dust and white sands  
Holding all they had in their folded hands  
For some jahajibhai like poor Sudama

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Visiting an old remembered friend  
With a gift of dhal and grains of rice  
Hoping this was their journey's end,  
After all we had paid all the price.

\*

But miracles were not uncommon  
And the songs came back  
And they began to sing  
Bird-songs in many a bush  
And slept in the hollows of trees  
Built their huts on bamboo boughs  
To keep their promised vows  
Without the fear of swords  
On the solace of hollow words.

And in their soiled laps  
We were raised as their children.  
We walked to Votualevu school  
And when the river was in spate  
And reached places it had been –  
Flooding was a memory – various,  
Primordial, precarious, precocious,  
We crossed the river holding, in between,  
Our Father's shoulders, or Charlie's tail,  
Believing in the new but distant queen.  
We played in the rain, the mud was thick,  
With wild girls and wanton boys  
And stole Gosai's mahajan's oranges:  
Such a rascal – he'd rather let the fruit rot.  
Then in one flood his orchard, house, the lot,  
An illegitimate daughter were swept to the sea.  
He survived and became generous.  
Death had been so close to his bone  
He felt the loneliness of a river-stone.

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My mausi called us home for many a meal  
And lived until ninety on the river's bank;

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Then when I heard of her death, aged ninety,  
In another country, my literate mind went blank:  
I wept sitting by the edge of a man-made lake  
Where the sedge had withered like her face.

For things that were gone, taken, abandoned,  
I knew my veins had grown old, hands shaken,  
And arteries had narrowed, blocked, stiffened,  
But my restless mind remembered more  
Than I could bear like that tear  
In my old clothes I couldn't repair  
The patches others had sewn for me.

So many of my companions had vanished  
To other shores carrying the sadness of things,  
As if the birds had taken wings and died  
In the evening shadows, when a child cried.

You may not understand now, my child,  
But one day, as you lie in your bed,  
Looking at the ceiling, dreaming,  
It will crack open, and breathe afresh  
You'll see the millions of brightening stars  
In the infinity above like a mother's love  
And still feel in the wintery drops of rain  
From your childhood's heartaches, pain  
On your beautiful, beloved skin  
And think of many a human sin:  
The love of a woman, a running river,  
Who died with a wistful smile  
In the corners of her loved lips  
She'd come to a paradise – 87 ships.  
As your eyelids close, you'll feel,  
In the spinning world, a silence –  
Then wounds of the heart will heal.

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So I had grown, floating in the river,  
Listening to the sounds of distant voices  
And eating stolen sugarcane;

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I'd come to love the small patches  
Of green vegetables, watermelons,  
And saw a half-naked woman  
Tilling the green fields in summer  
In the midday sun; I was her son.  
I grew on her kisses, sweat and smell:  
You're tall, handsome, my dearest one,  
My mother said: All will be well.

I flew to other shores, fell in love,  
Was exiled by a gun, but still beloved  
Of those who knew me in my childhood.  
When I returned, the world had changed  
Or was it me?

It's difficult to tell from such a distance.  
My mind had read, my eyes travelled.  
Now that my bones ache, my mind roams  
I can only imagine the pain of those men  
Who fathered us in their storm-tossed homes.

The affections of the mind  
The afflictions of the heart  
Are everywhere though worlds apart  
Like birds buffeting the wind.

\*

At Votualevu Junction when it rains  
The place has a haze of a special kind  
For you it's only an obscure name  
It's the very source of my joys and pains.

It's not the immortality of one's soul  
But of friendships, love, quarrels  
That are the days' and nights' remains  
And when the body is buried or burnt  
Or bones thrown into the blue ocean  
They grow again in water, in emotion.  
You may think it's never easy to live;  
It's more difficult to learn to forgive.

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Let the winds blow over the fields of cane  
Into the blue hills where the giant sleeps  
Over small bures and rock-splendored valleys,  
Across the old rain-trees and palms  
Swaying like my siblings: a mother weeps  
For those of many generations past  
Whose footprints are carved in stones;  
The coral reef is made of their bones.  
On grass graves, in ashes of grief,  
They live in my heart's rhythm  
In our daily bread, our spirits' anthem.

As the hills thunder  
Lightning splinters the clouds,  
And the sea is wild with joy —  
Rain's coming — my mother's voice:  
We rushed into the kitchen  
Warm with smoke and food  
And the embers glowing  
How we sat and ate —  
All things are always good  
When you are well-fed.  
The wet soil can be so beautiful.  
The raindrops remember it all.  
And things begin to grow again  
And there's brightness all around  
Fluttering butterflies after the rain.

Knowledge rolls slowly like stones  
Wisdom grows like trees in our bones  
Through the sting and hum of honeybees  
And fragments of boughs, broken trees.

And so I was there  
Breathing the streets' polluted air —  
Even at my dead brother's home  
The water flowed in the taps

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The light came with the flick of a switch  
The river was smothered in the tall grass  
The hens, the cat, the dog tethered;  
Something was missing in the twilight.  
Was it freedom or some other world  
In which others had lived? Days of old?  
The valley in the village was green  
And the courtyard was really clean.

It was hot, humid, and the rain  
In the mountains filled the dark clouds.  
I thought I should now leave  
And come again, another time –  
The village seemed content, why grieve?  
I'm told there's no serious crime  
Now all's well and the flight's on time,  
The airport is being renovated...  
I must to the other home return.  
But this heart within me will burn  
With fields of fire, in the falling rain,  
Votualevu Junction's hidden pain:  
As some brooding maelstrom of a cyclone  
Brewing: a mongrel gnawing at the bone.

Sun-burned tourists come, some never return,  
Whispering: This was such a paradise, all gone?

*Satendra Nandan*