Complete Poems

Adeeb Kamal Ad-Deen  That is the poem
Alison Flett  Lovesong
Sanjeev Sethi  Synchromesh
Debasish Lahiri  Afternoon Suicide
Susan Hawthorne  earth's back
Rizwan Akhtar  The dancing courtesans of old Lahore
Sharon Kernot  London - April, 1986
Lane Ashfeldt  Chernobyl Cherries
Kathryn Hummel  Convergence
Robert Lumsden  Wai Li at the Coffee Maker
Claire Gaskin  LiveRecovery
Satendra Nandan  Votualevu Junction
David Adès  Disembarking

Translation

Saba Vasefi  The Forbidden Gender. Translated from the Persian by Sheema Kalbasi.
That is the Poem

1. The long poem is boring.
   Do not write it
   Unless you want to write about the whole journey:
   Gilgamesh’s journey for example.
   And the short poem looks like a matchstick.
   So place your cigarette near it before lighting.

2. The bad poems are like foolish friends.
   Try to delete them from memory
   Before putting them on paper.

3. If you want to write a poem about the rain
   You can only write
   When your soul – before your body –
   has been wetted by the rain.

4. Each poem has a sun.
   (Do you know that?)
   Each poem has an exile.
   (Can you believe in what I say?)
   So murmur the poem of exile
   When you are at home.
   And murmur the poem of home
   When you are on the train of Heaven
   That goes to Hell.

5. On the occasion of mentioning Hell,
   Write as much as you can
   About the Hell-on-Earth
   Because it has extended now
   And has almost stuck with the Hell-on-Sky.

6. If you love the sea
   And you want to write about him,
   Do not take a picture with him
   Wearing formal wear

Adeeb Kamal Ad-Deen. ‘That is the poem’.
Transnational Literature Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.
As the stupid do.
Go to him naked,
Completely naked,
As Abel and Cain.

7.
The ideological poets are funny
Because they write one poem for all lifetime,
One poem uses all the metonymies and the metaphors
To prove that the dictators,
In spite of all the rivers of blood
That has been made by them,
Are just doves of peace.

8.
If you are a poet so be a lover.
Thus, you can get the complete poem of madness.

9.
The mirror looks like the woman.
But the woman does not look like the mirror
Unless you kiss her.
That is the poem.

Adeeb Kamal Ad-Deen
Lovesong

after T.S. Eliot

let us go then, travel

because there

is more

than one

way

one

time

one

you

I

let us
go

question

? let us be

the small of your back

""""""" hands

""""""" eyes

is this what

we have been

waiting for

?
then
let us go

and then

let us talk
with new
language

because
there
is more

if you
I
we
travel

as we will
as we will

o the small of us
o

Alison Flett
Synchromesh

My views don’t need visa to permeate. I’m an expat even without applying. As my ideas migrate I begin to occupy your mental real estate. We aren’t neighbours. I’m your live-in.

You say you desire newness: no-one does. We wish for the same encased in another wrapper. Neoteric unsettles the status quo. It’s rebarbative. Familiarity with frequency erases fear.

Sanjeev Sethi
Afternoon Suicide  
For Vladimir Mayakovsky

“... who would fardels bear to grunt and sweat under a weary life”  
*Hamlet, William Shakespeare, Act III, Scene i*

Scrambling up from one of the Muses’ inkwells  
You are an ink-devil,  
No poet.

Parnassus changes you,  
Inutterably.

You drink in through your pores  
And grow five drunken feet.  
You become an alembic  
And distill the iambic.  
You become a nightmare  
That threatens poets  
By telling them  
That the loss of perfect words  
Is perpetual.  
You feel like a scoundrel with wings,  
Cursed  
To turn pain into pantomime  
Across  
The yellow cobbles of pages.

An idea lodges like a bullet  
In the skull  
That cannot kill  
The soft greyness of memory.  
Will the bullet bloom  
Like the dark heart of a sunflower?  
You no longer fear everything,  
Only the ubiquity of nothing.
Beyond the timid fringe,
Of words
And ink
And blood-salt,
Will you sing with death,
As only your life can?

Debasish Lahiri
earth's back

when the earth's back broke
no human was there to see it
nor the Dioskouroi racing across
steppes on wild horses

only Kybele mother of the gods
lions beside her, tame as Egyptian
Bast, curl purr warming the snowy
ravages of her hair

ants were orienteering spurs
and ridges of earth's rib cage
recently heaved above the sink hole
the Siberian wind was sharp

all earth's heat was burning forests
cities long gone but for skeletons
of concrete and steel, an occasional
heart beat was heard odd footprints

on dusty pavements, along coasts
new cliffs rising out of smashing seas
rough as the west coast of Ireland
Kybele walked and hummed a tune

mountains followed behind like waves
clouds made new silhouettes
a comet passed by streaming hair
as Kybele sang quills of hope

Susan Hawthorne
The Dancing Courtesans of Old Lahore

There are noises in dark rooms
who can build a house without din
wooden stairs without creaking
and a veranda without creepers
crookedly ajar doors scandalize
gahzals escape gramophone
like a royal an ageing raqasa* shows up
on a murky balcony

arabesque alleys continue
under bras messages hibernate
ogling in the The Dancing Girls’ Bazaar
nights reveal in sitar and anklets

hennaed-feet agile dancers
exude intricate bodily expressions
those who lack skills are desires
growing on audience

body encores mystical whirls
asking fresh piece of betel-leaf
poems in courtesans’ hands
endure a legitimate munch

over rickshaws and donkey carts
a dim moon smudges the songs
sung by the concubine Anarkali
planted alive in bricks by the Emperor –

azan form The Royal Mosque tempers
sweating bodies
ablutions flow on white ponds
pigeons land like souls wanting modest bribes.

Rizwan Akhtar

*raqasa is an Urdu word for dancer.

Rizwan Akhtar, ‘The Dancing Courtesans of Old Lahore’.  
*Transnational* Literature Vol.9 no.1, November 2016.  
Spring’s chill air seeps into
the bedsit where the radio announces:
Soviet officials have admitted
that a nuclear accident took place...

In the Ukraine people evacuate
their homes temporarily.
(It is just a precaution –
all is contained.)

In the afternoon, she roasts
spring lamb for their dinner.
Places sprigs of rosemary
into the scored fat of its skin.

He drives to the shops
for carrots and cigarettes
and returns hours later with
beer on his breath.

They learn that Reactor Four
suffered a catastrophic
power increase leading to
an explosion in its core.

Over dinner, she smoulders.
There are no carrots and not enough
colour to balance the greens
and brown gravy. They eat in silence

as a cloud crosses a continent
and a sea and rains down
chemicals that contaminate
next year’s lamb.

Sharon Kernot
chernobyl cherries

you chose not to plan this trip but live it
abandon your package hotel <catch a ferryboat,
run out of drachmas borrow a sleeping bag
from a rockabilly with an old american car
walk to the beach in the dark

sleeping on the beach is not even a thing anymore
the hippies have all found cushy jobs and gone home
plus you never were a hippie anyway still, you try
to get comfy on the dunes it doesn’t go well
but you can’t remember where you left your hotel

night rain makes splash dents on the sand
soaks through the cotton sleeping bag
actually a button close quilt sewn by spyro’s gran
the sun takes forever to pull on her clothes
molten face crowing at your damp bones

at the kafeneion spyro is studying the news
though he doesn’t seem the type a map, huge arrows
aimed from russia at greece you ask why
he waves his hands, pkwaahhh! and, in german, atomkraft
you say, nein danke he looks skyward, and laughs

easter back home is done and dusted you don’t know
of greek easter, puzzled when spyro drives to church
at midnight the churchyard explodes only fireworks
on to a late taverna for the easter soup he swears
is vegetarian, actually for diehard carnivores

skipping your return flight, you stay all summer
‘chernobyl cherries’ are cheap and tasty that year
the irradiated floral quilt, embarrassing then
would now cost more than you can afford, even with your job
from some trendy designer store or online etsy shop

Lane Ashfeldt

Lane Ashfeldt. ‘Chernobyl Cherries’.
Transnational Literature Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.
Convergence

Briefly, but after Thom Sullivan

New place: old home: the smell of pigeon shit evokes: the flatness of rooftops: North as a destination: shuttered green and gold headed: palms: orderly shade trees: one place keeps you from remembering: another keeps you from forgetting: strange hours: thick air and familiar: only the streets: do not confront: this present convergence

Kathryn Hummel
Wai Li at the Coffee Maker

Wai Li leaning against the coffee maker
as though in prayer,
forearm up to fend off
the consequences of her invocation;
a slipped salute;
shard of swastika; Canute’s
oh, no!
facing the tsunami no-one predicted.

Not so much. Someone said
hurry up! that’s all
or she grew impatient
with her life,
fiddling with the iron teats of it.
Machines are so slow,

like prayer,
and sometimes, lately,
as the deep brown hot
liquid hits the cup
with a flat smack
like God’s disfavour,
not even that, either.

Robert Lumsden
LiveRecovery

1.
the suffering angels offered the river’s gaze
I wasn’t to blame
I steadfastly redeem inhabiting my body
as stone melody vindicates my innocent feet
questions of my father open palms
revealing the vulnerability of my inner arms
the medusa gaze of the orchid returns
me to consequence
the unspeakable forces closed my swallow
around his death was a relief
the raking of the leaves
plastic prongs on stone
sounds like the scraping out of the inside of a grave
presence exonerates death’s permanence

2.
summation anomalies offered the river’s genealogies
I wasn’t to blink
I steadfastly redeem inhabiting my body guarded
as stopwatch memory vindicates my insider footholds
questions of my fatherland fatigue open pandemics
revealing the vulnerability of my inner armouries
the medusa gaze of the ordinance returns
me to conspirator
the unspeakable forecasts closed my swallow
around his debt was a rendering
the raking of the leaves
plastic prongs on stoppage
sounds like the scraping out of the inside of gravity
precedent exonerates death’s permanence

3.
waiting in an empty hospital room with his shoes
waiting for him to come back and fill them
his sleep sounds like the sea on the sand in Sandringham
the tide tiredness pulls at my ankles
watching the light change on my choices
traumatised people use strong verbs

Claire Gaskin, 'LiveRecovery',
Transnational Literature Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.
don’t anguish over it he says
the hallways are blocked with length and emptiness
the coffee is not working and my reasons are worn
the river gives rest under bluestone sky
intimacy takes the shape of a star jump orchid
a paper cut heart bleeds coffee stains
cheap scotch tastes like when he left
tea tastes like post-natal depression

4.
waiting in an empty hour glassrotation with his shortages
waiting for him to become backwater and fill them
his sovereignty slights like the sandstorm in Sandringham
the time tiredness pulls at my announcements
watching the likeness change on my choices
traumatised people use strong verdicts
don’t anguish over it he says
the handbooks are blocked with lessons and emptiness
the coincidence is not working and my recasts are worn
the roadblock gives restraint under bluestone sky
invasion takes the shape of a statesman organization
a paradigm cut heartland bleeds coinage stalemate
cheap scotch tastes like when he legislated
taxonomies taste like postgraduate departments

Claire Gaskin
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.
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.

Satendra Nandan. ‘Votualevu Junction’.
Transnational Literature Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.
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.

*  

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 gree-ting 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

Satendra Nandan. ‘Votualevu Junction’.  
Transnational Literature Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.  
When things were burnt into so many embers?

*

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

Satendra Nandan. ‘Votualevu Junction’.
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.
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.
* 

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.

Satendra Nandan. ‘Votualevu Junction’.
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.
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;

Satendra Nandan. ‘Votualevu Junction’.
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.
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.

Satendra Nandan. ‘Votualevu Junction’.
Transnational Literature Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.
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 –
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

Satendra Nandan. ‘Votualevu Junction’.
Transnational Literature Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.
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
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.

* 

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

Satendra Nandan. ‘Votualevu Junction’,
Transnational Literature Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.
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;

Satendra Nandan. ‘Votualevu Junction’.
Transnational Literature Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.
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.

Satendra Nandan. ‘Votualevu Junction’.
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.
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

Satendra Nandan. ‘Votualevu Junction’.
Transnational Literature Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.
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
Disembarking

Disembarking the train near midnight,
the day’s slow map-crawl rolls away,
thunder’s long receding rumble.

A small, contained world cedes to open sky,
stretch of muscles, a surfeit of air.
Five miles from the Yugoslav/Greek border,

I enter the night on foot,
with a just met Cypriot-born New Zealander.
I have no premonition of the war to come.

A full moon is reflected and reflected
by the side of the road, mosquitoes fill the dark,
the shimmering lights of the border crossing

are a bright caterpillar on a ridge.
I recite from The Axion Esti
‘In the beginning the light and the first hour’

and hear the words return in Greek,
hovering in the air,
poetry infusing the night with its presence,

two of us conjuring Odysseus Elytis,
his voice resonating with our footsteps,
oblivious to all borders.

David Adès
The Forbidden Gender

Saba Vasefi
Translated by Sheema Kalbasi

Saba Vasefi is an award winning human rights activist, poet and feminist filmmaker. She is the Director of the Sydney International Women’s Poetry & Arts Festival, Director of the Diaspora Symposium and an Asylum Seekers Centre Ambassador. She was the recipient of the Premier’s Multicultural Medal for Art & Culture, an Edna Ryan Award for making a significant contribution to feminist debate and also a finalist in the Women’s Agenda Leadership Award. She was twice a judge for the Sedigheh Dolatabadi Book Prize for the Best Book on Women’s Literature and Issues. Her articles have been published in media outlets such as the BBC, the Guardian and Daily Life.

The road had potholes,
the school had veils,
and the students
lay dead under their burqas in a well.

When the sirens rang,
silence sat at the back of the classroom
and waited under the stairs
wanting only to harm us,
and suicide pills
were the best hope for ambitious students.

The world was not heavier than a cat
and life was a black market for the men;
and we were the forbidden gender
cudgelled in the back of stores.

In the mornings
in black packages
we went to school
to learn
how to live in tents,
not fear the heat
and be cautious
the eyes wouldn’t swallow us.

Spent cartridges at the foot of the blackboard,
power outages,
water shortages;
but scarves were always on sale
and beatings were low priced.
The veil was a necessary addiction
for our eyes
and the gray sacks we covered our bodies with
were the uniforms that taught us
to forget about life.
Instead, we were free
to die as much as we desired—
at the frontline,
under rockets,
by stones
thrown at us ever since childhood.

In the martyred elementary school
classmates fled their land like shrapnel;
kissing was banned,
happiness an unaccustomed term,
and the only mascara available was tears.

No one knew how to pencil
their eyes
or line around their lips,
and the only line to follow was Imam’s.
All the lines were red:
alarm,
fire,
war,
this is what childhood presented to me.
Starling on a tree, 
the year in evil, 
that child, born in the eighties, 
who is holding her knees 
and exhaling oil exports, 
doesn’t know how to blow out 
smoke from the shockwave of war’s homework. 
Only these days 
no, no, no stinking principle 
is ringing the bell of my release.