

Poetics of Dislocation

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I

On a recent visit to Dharamsala, in the temple in the Dalai Lama's compound I saw a painting of a great kalachakra mandala. Elsewhere I had spent time watching monks pour out colored sand, making an intricate mandala.

I will close with an evocation of this, a few thoughts on poetry and time; but at the start, a little bit of autobiography.

People sometimes ask me, "Did you always want to be a poet?" Is that what you really wanted? I reply, as truthfully as I can. First of all I wanted to be circus performer — not just any performer but a tightrope artiste. I knew the word *'artiste'* and felt it was very grand, and that was precisely what I wanted to be. My grandfather had taken me to see the Gemini Circus in Kerala when I was six. I was so struck by the skinny girls in their tinsel costumes, amazed at their balancing feats. Neither the fact that they were obviously shivering on the ground in their skimpy outfits — for it was monsoon time and chilly — nor the fact that I had no head at all for heights, deterred me from what I longed for.

Back home, I tried to balance on the bamboo pole that someone had forgotten and left behind — it ran between the rabbit hutch and the hen house, both low concrete structures. I fell off, skinned my knees. Grown nervous at the wobbly pole, and my inability to walk a straight line, I tried to practice on the sandy courtyard.

With a twig I drew lines in the sand and tried to walk along. I shut my eyes, feeling that was the best way to get a feel for heights and understand, with some measure of safety the dizziness that comes with impossible balancing acts. I understood very quickly what I still know — whether in life or in art, it is very hard for me to walk an utterly straight line.

My next thought of how to live was an ambition that was instilled in me, by my grandfather and aided and abetted by my mother — I should be a medical doctor, I

was told, and do some good in the world. After all, India needed doctors. Which country needs poets? My father kept himself clear of this particular discussion. He was a scientist and had studied physics at university before turning to meteorology and he felt that the methods of scientific inquiry were the closest we could come, through our conscious minds, to truth. Might the study of physics be the way forward, for me, as well? But I was lousy at math and found the computations of physics impossible, and as for chemistry, what I loved best were the colors in the test tubes. I kept staring at the bubbling multicolored liquids rather than at the hypotheses I was supposed to deal with.

Then poetry happened. That is the only way I can put. I started writing poetry young, when I was eleven or twelve. The reason why I keep writing is still the same. For me, it is the music of survival. There is an inner voice that speaks to me, makes music out of words, makes notes out of syllables, makes rhythms out of what words cannot reach.

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Each year of my life, from the age of five to the age of eighteen, I traveled across continents, from India to Sudan and back again. Sometimes the journey back involved a detour to Europe, or to Egypt or Lebanon. At the Bandung Conference Nehru, the prime minister of India, had met Azhari, the president of Sudan, and it was decided between them that technical assistance would be sent from India to the newly independent African country. Doctors, lawyers, judges, scientists, teachers — all traveled across the Indian Ocean. My father, a young man at that time, and working as a meteorologist for the government of India, decided to try his luck. He was "seconded abroad," as the phrase had it, to work in that other country.

I wonder what it was that made my father want to move for a few years. Perhaps that spirit of adventure that never left him, a need to see glimpse another horizon, with all its attendant difficulties. With his decision my young life was altered forever. I turned five on the steamer as my mother and I traveled from Bombay to Port Sudan, to meet him. I still think that birthday on the deep waters of the Indian Ocean has marked me in ways utterly beyond my ken. And it has left me with the sense that home is always a little bit beyond the realm of the possible, that a real place in which to be, though continually longed for can never be reached and stands brightly lit at the edge of vanishing. I think of Mallarmé who evoked the image of – *l'absente de tous bouquets* - the quintessential flower absent from all bouquets. For me, that is what home is. And our migrations become the music, wave after wave of it, that gives it a fragile and precarious shape.

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Can one find a home in language? I feel so. At least, that is what I have tried to do. I left India too young to attain literacy in my mother tongue, Malayalam, a great Dravidian language with proud traditions of literary culture. I speak it fluently and the rise and pour of that language has shaped the kind of poet I am. I had Hindi as a child, and as I grew older English took its place in my mind, and became for me a language of crossing and of delivery.

The English I use bends and flows to many other languages. For me it is the language of Donne and Wordsworth as well as a postcolonial tongue and it exerts an intimate violence, even as I use it, make it mine. Yet surely each language, each script, exerts its pressure. It seems to me that a poet works with words as a painter works with color – as matter she cannot do without, living material into which she must translate what would otherwise remain inchoate.

My earliest poems which I wrote at the ages of ten and eleven, were composed in French. It seemed to me having been made to learn a few lines by Verlaine, by heart in school – I refer to Unity High School in Khartoum, Sudan – that French was surely the only language fit for the lyric. Mercifully none of my earliest French poems survived. Soon enough my affections shifted and I found in English a more capacious instrument for my longing. But those earliest longings as they found expression in poetry, were flattened out, imitations of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu, cut and pasted as it were, onto white paper. Indeed I found in those early Indian women composers of poetry in English something of the circuitry of sense that a

colonial childhood had instilled in me. And there was Verlaine whose subdued, yet febrile lines, spoke very directly to me. And Rabindranath Tagore, whose poems in English translation from *Gitanjali*, *The Gardener* and *Fireflies*. But it was the play *The Post Office*, telling as it did of the death of a young boy, that haunted me, and indeed haunts me still. Someday I said to myself I will make a poem and evoke the way in which as children in India, my cousins and I put on the play for our immediate family. A Bengali play, translated into English and acted out in the courtyard of a Kerala house, in the constant presence of Malayalam, our mother tongue. Yet we spoke the words in Tagore's own English translation, in our lisping Indian English.

In the Sudan where I spent a good part of each year, in the north of the country the language was Arabic. As a teenager I had a group of poet friends who wrote in Arabic and it was my friends who translated a few of my English poems and submitted them to the local newspaper. My very first publications were in Arabic, the language of the place in which I lived, but a language which I could not read or write, though I could indeed speak it with a certain fluency. People would come up to me and say 'I saw your poem in the newspaper.' And then add, something like 'I really liked it' or 'I didn't really get it. What was it about?' And all I could do was shake my head and smile wistfully, making it clear that while I read and wrote English, I could not lay claim to the same talent in Arabic. So it was that my life as a poet began in translation, that connection to a reading public which alone could allow me a 'real' existence. So it was that a translated life held sway.

II

As a girl child I wrote in secret, in the bathroom so no one would see. I have written about this in my memoir *Fault Lines*. I hid my scribbles in the folds of my knickers. I felt a sense of shame at what was so intimate to me, felt that what I had made could never measure up to what the world believed in. So in some sort of fear and panic I set up the world and its measurements as forever inimical to what I might write. At the very same time I held onto the belief that the things I made were fierce and pure and needed to exist. For I thought and still think of my poems as made objects.

It seems to me as I think back that right at the start I did not feel the need to share what I had written with others. It was enough that I had written the poem, that the poem existed. The need to share, to publish, to have others acknowledge what I had written, that desire, that

longing came later. And perhaps that longing is also part of needing to belong, needing to be in place.

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There are many different ways of thinking about place, and even in the life of a single poet the sense that she or he makes of the hold of place can change quite sharply.

In his essay "The Place of Writing," Seamus Heaney evokes the way in which poets have traditionally been thought to embody the spirit of the place so that place seems to find voice through its poet.

One thinks of Rabindranath Tagore in Shantiniketan, Yeats in Ballylee, and Robinson Jeffers in Carmel, all poets whose work might be said to incarnate the spirit of place. But to think of the bond between poetry and place as inevitable would be to naturalize what is in effect a poetic strategy, a deliberate reaching out, ways in which a poet might draw on structures and details of landscape, custom, and ceremony that a place affords.

And what of poets whose lives have taken difficult routes where the return to a loved place long held in memory is difficult or even impossible, where place itself has altered beyond recognition such that to return, even in memory, involves a certain violence, a disturbance not easily endured?

In such cases one needs to reflect on a poet who is cast out of place rather than securely in place, a poet who must reckon with dislocation, whose roots are as imaginary as the routes she or he has traveled are actual and visceral. And in saying this I do not in any way mean to say that the roots such a poet might claim exist only in the mind as pure fabrication. Rather that they too, like much else in the working life of a poet, even while drawing on the body and its expressive powers, on the mind and memory, have to be precariously invented.

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In *Kadambari*, a classic of seventh century Sanskrit literature, a melancholy king asks a caged parrot: "Who are you? How did you come here? How were you caught in this cage?" The parrot's narrative turns on the question of his own metamorphic identity. To be a person is to be subject to change, to endure changes in places around you and changes in one's own substance. We are born in a place and so too we die. Mortality lies at the end, the final knot that prevents us from slipping off the rope of commonsense.

In a new century there are ways of being and knowing

that the seventh century parrot would have had to use his magical intuitive powers to experience.

But how does memory work with and through these shifting valencies of time and place? The question is important for those who are concerned with the reading and writing of poems.

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The composition of poetry cannot be cleft from the complex density of place, and the sights and sounds and smells the sensorium of the body makes us heir to. For place bears the mark of history. It is the wound that memory returns us to so that in poetry we can commemorate, we can remember. This elegaic function of poetry is of great importance, part of its ability to store the voices that otherwise would vanish. No I am not confusing the poem with what we think of as oral history, rather that within the poem the shadows cleft from their bodies, the rack, the wound, the violation all still live.

Poetry and place are bound up together. If poetry is the music of survival, place is the instrument on which that music is played, the gourd, the strings, the fret. I have sensed the truth of this, but certain difficulties befell me. To be a real writer – and I underlined the word *real* in red ink, in my own head, – it seemed to me that I had to have grown up in one place, "one dear perpetual place." Even if I did not have Yeats's poignant phrase in mind, I did have a vivid sense that each great writer I knew had a language and a place to which he or she was wedded. And the language bubbled out of place as water from underground streams the earth concealed. In this way, it was an outcrop of the region, *desha-bhasha*.

There was Kumaran Asan, who lived in Kerala and wrote in Malayalam; Tagore, who lived in Santiniketan and wrote in Bengali; Verlaine, who lived in France and wrote in French; Shakespeare, who wrote in English and lived somewhere in England, that tiny island floating on a map that I had seen several times in school but could never quite make head or tail of. Lacking just one single place to call my home and shorn of a single language I could take to be mine, and mine alone I felt stranded in the multiplicity that marked my life, its rich coruscating depths drew me, or so I felt, into grave danger.

It took me quite awhile to realize that I did not have to feel strung out and lost in the swarm of syllables. Rather, the hive of language could allow me to make a strange and sweet honey, the pickings of dislocation. I also understood dimly that I was not alone in this predicament and that I could gain a great freedom and indeed find

sustenance for my art by flowing as well as I could into the sea of migrant memory. Now I realize that writing makes an unquiet border to what I cannot ever fully put words to, nor ever completely leave behind.

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A few years ago the poet Allen Ginsberg passed away. The week that he lay dying I read his *Indian Journals* with great care. I was struck by the clarity of place in his writing even as the Rajasthan of his imagination splintered into brilliant surreal fragments. Each day I took the book with me on the subway and getting off at Columbus circle I pulled it out of my bag as I walked the few blocks uptown, by Central Park. Once or twice on my way to catch the cross town bus at 65th, I sat on my favorite rock in the park, close to the street. I spread out my things, book bag, pen, paper, water bottle and I read his journals again. I was near the park when I got news of Ginsberg's death.

I shut my eyes. I saw him in Rajasthan. He was walking with Mirabai in the heat. It was Rajasthan and it was not, it was Central Park and it was not. I saw Mira approach him by the black rock. Together they walked towards the lake.

I like my favorite people to meet, even if they are separated by thousands of miles and several centuries. So it was with these two poets. In 'Indian April' an elegy for Ginsberg, I draw them together in the shining space of the imaginary – Mirabai and Allen Ginsberg and then, in the great silence of the invisible world, I hear them talk to each other.

Indian April

I.

Allen Ginsberg on a spring day you stopped
naked in a doorway in Rajasthan.

You were preparing to wash, someone took a snapshot:
I see your left hand bent back
cigarette in your mouth

Metal basin set at your ankles
heat simmering at the edges of your skin
in Indian air, in water.

Rinsed clean you squatted at the threshold again,
struck a bhajan on a tin can.

Watched Mira approach, her hair a black mass
so taut it could knock over a lamppost,
skin on her fists raw from rubbing chipped honeypots.

In the middle distance,

like a common bridegroom
Lord Krishna rides a painted swing.

You ponder this, not sure
if an overdose of poetry
might crash a princess.

Later in the alley way you note
a zither leapt from a blind baul's fist.

William Blake's death mask,
plaster cast with the insignia of miracles.
In a burning ghat the sensorium's ruin:
a man's spine and head poked with a stick

so bone might crisp into ash, vapors spilt
into terrible light where the Ganga pours.

II.

I was born at the Ganga's edge.
My mother wrapped me in a bleached sari,
laid me in stiff reeds, in hard water.

I tried to keep my nostrils above mud,
learnt how to use my limbs, how to float.

This earth is filled with black water,
small islands with bristling vines afford us some hold.
Tired out with your journals you watch
Mira crouch by the rough stones of the alley.
Her feet are bare, they hurt her.

So much flight for a poet, so much persistence.
Allen Ginsberg, where are you now?

Engine of flesh, hot sunflower of Mathura,
Teach us to glide into life,

teach us when not to flee,
when to rejoice, when to weep,

teach us to clear our throats.

III.

Kaddish, Kaddish I hear you cry
in the fields of Central Park.

He brought me into his tent
and his banner over me was love.

I learn from you that the tabernacles of grace
are lodged in the prickly pear,

the tents of heaven torn by sharp vines,
running blackberry,
iron from the hummingbird's claw.

He brought me into his tent
and his banner over me was love

Yet now he turns his face from me.
Krishna you are my noose, I your knife.

And who shall draw apart
 from the misericordia of attachment?

IV.
 Holy the cord of death, the sensual palaces
 of our feasting and excrement.

Holy, the waters of the Ganga, Hudson, Nile,
 Pamba, Mississippi, Mahanadi.

Holy the lake in Central Park, bruised eye of earth,
 mirror of heaven

where you leap beard first
 this April morning, resolute, impenitent,

not minding the pointed reeds, spent syringes,
 pale, uncoiled condoms.

You understood the kingdom of the quotidian,
 groundhogs in heat, the arrhythmia of desire.

I see you young again
 teeth stained with betel and bhang,

nostrils tense with the smoke of Manhattan,
 ankles taut in a yogic asana, prickly with desire.

You who sang America are flush now with death,
 your poems — bits of your spine and skull —

ablaze in black water drawing you on.
 Allen Ginsberg your flesh is indigo,

the color of Krishna's face, Mira's bitter grace.
 Into hard water you leap, drawing me on

hear you call : *Govinda, aaou, aaou!*

(From *Illiterate Heart*)

III

For those who write poetry there is nothing quite like the particular species of energy the activity brings, a very special pleasure — a whole world of thought and feeling that could not otherwise exist. Poetry is knowledge, a first knowledge that allows us to crystallize the chaotic press of experience, illuminate if only for a moment, the dark horizon of our lives.

The shape of the world keeps shifting and it is into and out of the world that the poem works its sense. Time

becomes us and the poems that we compose are part of the fragile compact we make with history, part of the precarious balance of our interior lives. To compose a poem in this manner of reckoning makes the act intrinsic portion of a phenomenology of the real.

I wrote a poem 'Muse' as part of a cycle called 'Notebook', poetic reflections on the act of composition which I published in *Illiterate Heart*. In a note I wrote — 'In this cycle of poems I have tried to catch something of the internal architecture of sense, the objects of our metamorphic life — a trajectory from the pitch of memory to the possibility of a shared existence. Yet I am haunted by what my words can barely mark, what for want of a better term I invoke as muse, that invisible space where meaning is made and unmade.'

Now it is quite true that I meant what I said, but it is also true that the muse I write of, comes to me not as nothingness, but as an Indian school girl, dressed in a dark blue pinafore with shoes and socks. A girl child who must learn. There is something utterly simple about her appearance. She is just there. She has nowhere else to go. She carries her pencil box and book in hand. She learns words that turn for her into a dictionary of desire, single words, girl, book, tree. She learns them both in Malayalam and in English.

When I said she has nowhere to go, I meant it for it is only through being thrown into the world, of being there that she is able to fulfill her task. I think the lines she whispers in my ear 'Write in the light/ Of all the languages/ you know the earth contains' came to me by themselves, came first and stayed with me as a haunting melody. And the rest of the poem came and wrapped itself around. Then too the child who speaks these lines to me is also my sole self, cast back in the mirror of time. She comes as a school girl who traveled long and hard, across continents. She has swum through many languages, several of which she could scarcely understand. Yet the light of the sentences she reads marks her for life. Even now, as I write, it is as if I swim in an English into which many other streams pour their waters.

There are two earlier poems I have called 'Muse'. They appear side by side in the volume of poems *River and Bridge*. In each poem the female figure is unhoused, quite marginal to the world she comes from. In the first poem 'Muse' she is glimpsed as a grown woman, 'a form of fire.' She kneels by a river and on a bald stone, cuts glyphs. In the second poem 'Muse 2' the muse is furious. She has nowhere to be. Her sari spills off her flesh. Her flesh is burnt with words. Her language is in ruins.

Here is the first poem of the cycle

Muse

She walks towards me, whispering
Dried petals in her hair
A form of fire

But her skin,
like finest Dacca cotton
drawn through a gold ring, spills

Over bristling water.
Something has hurt her.
Can a circlet of syllables

Summon her from the Vagai river?
She kneels by a bald stone
cuts glyphs on its side, waves to me.

Our language is in ruins —
vowels impossibly sharp,
broken consonants of bone.

She has no home.

Why gossip about her
shamelessly — you household gods,
raucous, impenitent ?

(From *River and Bridge*)

Somehow I had to wait many years to make another poem called 'Muse', to make reparation. Another poem, a third poem if you will, that allows the traumatized figure of the woman to metamorphose into a child, a child who shines in an interior space where meaning is made. The words the child gives me are first words, the beginning of things, not their ending.

Muse

I was young when you came to me.
Each thing rings its turn,
you sang in my ear, a slip of a thing
dressed like a convent girl—
white socks, shoes,
dark blue pinafore, white blouse.

A pencil box in hand: *girl, book, tree* —
those were the words you gave me.
Girl was *penne*, hair drawn back,
gleaming on the scalp,
the self in a mirror in a rosewood room
the sky at monsoon time, pearl slits,

in cloud cover, a jagged music pours:
gash of sense, raw covenant
clasped still in a gold bound book,
pusthakam pages parted,
ink rubbed with mist,

a bird might have dreamt its shadow there

spreading fire in a tree *maram*.
You murmured the word, sliding it on your tongue,
trying to get how a girl could turn
into a molten thing and not burn.
Centuries later worn out from travel
I rest under a tree.

You come to me
a bird shedding gold feathers,
each one a quill scraping my tympanum.
You set a book to my ribs.
Night after night I unclasp it
at the mirror's edge

alphabets flicker and soar.
Write in the light
of all the languages
you know the earth contains,
you murmur in my ear.
This is pure transport.

(From *Illiterate Heart*)

IV

The zone of the poem is where dreams cross language. And with the rhythms of composition the invisible enters. The here and now was never something I could take for granted. To be somewhere, was also to not be somewhere else. I now think that each rock, each root, even in the garden of my earliest childhood, carried its own shadow. In the poem, the visible and the invisible are entwined and place becomes a living palimpsest.

I was with my mother on the S.S. Jehangir, crossing the Indian Ocean. Midway on the journey I turned five. Bombay was far behind and Port Sudan still to come. It was my first sea voyage.

Until then I had lived on solid land, on the Indian subcontinent and all my journeys had been by train or car or on small wooden boats on the canals and waterways of the coastal region I come from.

The sea cast me loose. The sea tore away from me all that I had. In doing so, it gave me an interior life far sooner than I would have had otherwise, but at great cost.

I was forced to enter another life, the life of the imagination. But it was not as yet the life of language. I had few words at my disposal, and those I had came from several languages that cohabited within my head. What I felt as a child and held deep within myself quite exceeded the store of words within my reach.

This is something that I feel, even now as an adult. The struggle for words, the struggle to be human, is coexistent for me with the craft of poetry.

On my fifth birthday I was plunged into a world with no before and no after. A child can fall into the sea, never to reappear. A mother can appear out of the waves, only to vanish, reappear, and then vanish again.

The sea has no custom, no ceremony. It allows a theater for poetry, for a voice that cries out, that splits into one, two, three or more, chanting the figurations of the soul, marking a migrant memory.

The day I turned five, I stuck my head out through the porthole of our cabin and saw ceaseless water. On and on, until my eyes and neck hurt, I kept watch.

When I pulled my head back in I knew the sea was painted on the inside of my eyelids, would never leave me.

Sometimes the syllables of poetry well up, waves on the surface of the sea, and they burst as flying fish might, struck by light.

Sometimes I feel this is how I began, a wordless poet, a child on the surface of wide water with all that she loved torn from her, cast into ceaseless suspension.

The page on which I write, or so it seems to me now, is a live restless thing, soul-sister to the unselving sea.

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In conclusion a few thoughts on poetry and time.

Time works in us the way water works at the edge of the sea: there are ripples and eddies and the slow sedimentation of earth rounded off by water, sudden slips and plunges where waves crash, and sometimes underwater faults that suck the sea water out and send it soaring into a wall that comes crashing down on small human habitations built by the shore.

Time sucks and blows through us and sends us reeling.

Our bodies become living markers of time. Memory makes us hop and race and dance and flee.

Still, the present is always with us, and our poems transfigure place by marking time.

We write in order to live. We live in order to write.

Poetry marks a threshold, a dream state, by casting time into relief. In this way it spares us and permits our residence on earth. Ontology can be understood as threshold.

The question of being, of openness to time, is the province of poetry.

Poetry is music that our bodies etch on the provisional solidities housing us, as ground is marked by the shadow of clouds, as unstable ground is constantly etched by

water.

The threshold is a city, layer upon layer of brick and stone and painted wood, metal, semi-precious stones, a shield for our impediments, a buckler in the face of death, which is what the city hosts, even as life swarms and spills through it.

Allahabad, Khartoum, Delhi, Hyderabad, New York, cities I have lived in, which set up thresholds constantly overcome, inconstantly wrought as speed manufactures sites for contestation.

The body is a threshold, loved and scarred by other bodies.

We race through cities, past barbed wire, through transit lounges, across borders where memory of the sea dissolves as clouds in a mirror edged with guilt, touched by invisible hands.

Poetry is a threshold inscribing memory. Memory tunes and untunes us. It sings the visible and the invisible. The nervous knowledge of the body is raised as sung chords through lungs, throat, vocal chords, palate, tongue, teeth and lips, out into the blue air.

Poetry is a threshold inscribing mortality.

Once completed, the poem is borne to the edges of public space, of history. And there it survives, if it can.

At times the poem is hidden under a pillow, at times trumpeted abroad, at times burnt, at times cast into water.

I think of the *Kalachakra Mandala* created by Tibetan monks. Once the painstaking work is completed, the mandala – made of hundreds and thousands of grains of sand – is borne aloft, cast into running water.

When the poem is done, its metrical consonances, its rhythmic images and sharp bounding lines cut loose, leaving us in penury.

We start all over again, searching out the zone where the body's skin and the stones of the city meet, feverish threshold constantly renewed.

Our lines mark out unquiet borders, our words figure a palimpsest of desire, inklings of dark gold in poems of our season.

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