

## Turbulent Indigo and the Act of Cautious Reassemblage

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*Brash fields crude crows/ In a scary sky/ In a golden frame/ Roped off/ Tourists guided by<sup>a</sup>*

Standing in the van Gogh room of the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, I find myself in tears. Before me are paintings I have seen so far in books and diaries sent to me by friends who live abroad. Nothing has prepared me for the leap of colour, the vivid, vital violence. And yet there is not only violence, but also a great and tender tranquillity. The twisted trees, the red swirls, the gouged lines are there, incandescent around me, but so also a softness I never knew van Gogh to possess. The 1890 painting of the peasant couple in *Noon: Rest (after Millet)*; shoes, sickles lying next to their supine bodies; transfixes me in a way I cannot explain. I look at the unending yellows, the gold, the blue, the white, the soft light in the shade of the haystack. And I weep for the beauty of *Noon...*, as much as I do for the terror of the dark and glowing apparition across the room, the other painting of house-path-sky-figure, consumed by a great and tangible dread. All I have read about the artist rushes into my throat. I am choked with sorrow for a man who painted his dread.

*You see him with his shotgun there?/ Bloodied in the wheat?/ Oh, what do you know about/ Living in Turbulent Indigo<sup>2</sup>*

The moment, like all moments of intensified feeling, passes. Back in Mumbai, I turn to the same paintings in my book of reproductions, and yearn for the colour that is not there. Leached out in mass-produced glossiness, I see shadow-paintings, inanimate, constrained.

I do not see myself falling headlong into an emotional vortex, propelled by the sheer fact of brush on canvas. I need tactility, to imagine myself into another's skin; I need materiality, proximity.

Or else I need poetry<sup>a</sup>the intense zest which heightens a thing out of the level of prose<sup>3</sup>. I need the hard, absolute, unflinching gaze, "the sunset-conductor, whose wide sweep gathered the scattered flutes of tree-bound birds, the grieving harps of insects, the creak of branches, and the crunch of stones"<sup>4</sup>. I need to be able to look, and not look away.

***"I'm a burning hearth", he said/ "People see the smoke/ But no one comes to warm themselves/ Sloughing off a coat"<sup>f</sup>***<sup>5</sup>

And there is much I have wanted to look away from. Shutting out is so much easier than letting in. "A poem is related to flight", said the Russian poet and theorist Velimir Khlebnikov. But what he meant was not escape, which is merely a willingness to go the greatest possible distance in the shortest possible time. He meant a lift-off into the great unseen turbulence of image and thought. The further you go, the closer you come.

Does that work, in reality?

Reality is a woman clutching a baby, both in rags, faces distorted with grief for the men the sea has swallowed. Reality is a hand sticking out from under the rubble of what was once a school. Reality is cold gnawing at the skin; hunger gnawing at the stomach. Reality is the squelch of mud and blood, the stench of death, the sound of shovel and pyre. Reality is a bloated carcass floating down a flooded road.

Since the 26 December tsunami in 2005, images have piled up, like corpses. Aviation disasters. The London bombing. The Mumbai floods. The Kashmir earthquake. The Delhi blasts. Technology ripping into a freefall of frozen bodies through empty sky. Technology ripping into splintering skin and metal, below ground and above. Who shall we blame when the ground itself turns unstable, rearing up in a cataclysm of crevasses, great wounds of mud and stone? Who shall we blame when the sky itself breaks down in a relentless battering of rain?

We find culprits enough. Reality has a way of coping, far fiercer than words.

But the word leads a double life. The word is caught between sound and sense, between flight and return.

I return to the word.

*Great poems told us that nature  
would never betray us, but that  
really wasn't the point, was it?  
And then the theatre of cruelty  
stopped being shocking.  
We all knew why.<sup>6</sup>*

Why write poetry, in turbulent times? Why, when the seams of meaning come apart, and words reel, exhausted and hoarse with shouting, the same words, used over and over again, printed, spoken, emblazoned into obsolescence? What will we say next?

We will, like Apollinaire, make the tongue "that goldfish in the bowl of your voice". We will, like Rimbaud, "find flowers that are chairs". We will, like Lorca, listen for "a wind, a mental wind blowing relentlessly over the heads of the dead, in search of new landscapes and unknown accents". We will, like Agha Shahid Ali, "let night begin/ without any light".

We will try to see, anew.

Can we?

Perhaps. Because in poetry lies the use of language that attempts nothing more, nothing less, than the tentative. The indirect, dance-mode of going nowhere but towards a sense of troubled epiphany, towards a troubled, and troubling, understanding.

Too much has already been said about poetry as witness, as redress. When language itself turns turbulent, tearing at the tissue, what sanity in neatly ordered lines, in polyphonic, delayed rhymes? Can the poem, that wholly artificial construct, contain and resist the real? Is the imagination the last, and only, refuge? The imagination "pressing back against the pressure of reality"?

I believe it is. Not a marginalised, maligned act of escapism and indifference, but an act of cautious reassemblage. Putting together, word by word, a way of approaching the unapproachable.

*Why?*

*You want to know why?*

*Go down to the shacks then,*

*like shattered staves*

*bound in old wire*

*at the hour when*

*the sun's wrist bleeds in*

*the basin of the sea,*

*and you will sense it.<sup>8</sup>*

I tried it last December. Gleaning through the papers, page after page of heartbreaking reportage, I tried reconstructing a different narrative, where the debris of words washed up by the tragedy would somehow find their way into a careful space of preservation.

I wanted the words of the survivors of the tsunami, misreported, mistranslated as they might have been, to seep into a territory where the poetic statement might act as a spar to the sorrowing one. Truth is, it was I who needed the spar, it was I who felt all the guilt of my own cocooned safety wash over me like a reproach. And so I took down quotes in my little red book, hoping to embed them into a form of recall less transient than the daily news.

I stared at the quotes for days, glassy-eyed with the memory that I had been to the very coast lashed by the tsunami a mere week before it struck. I had driven down with my

husband to Kanyakumari, and watched the dawn. I remembered the viewing tower. I remembered the man from whom I bought an opalescent mother-of-pearl conch, its sound long and clear and sweet. I wondered if he was safe, I wished I had asked his name. And then I found myself writing the following two pieces:

***Kanyakumari I***

*The wind of three seas  
buffets me*

*I lose my breath*

*running to outrun the waves  
'The water took them  
my wife my father my three sisters'  
It wasn't the wind*

*It was grief*

*that made me  
lose my balance  
lose my grip  
lose*

*My sanity  
floats*

***Kanyakumari II***

*Black crow pilgrims  
drop droppings  
on rock*

*Can't you smell it, the stink?*

*Return to the sea  
its sanctity*

*Surf, cry foul  
wind, seethe*

*Five hundred kilometres per hour  
Eight hundred and eight killed*

*'Fish doesn't smell this way,  
only rotting bodies do*

*Can't you smell it, the stink?'*

The first was gentler, the second a more virulent attempt to reframe the touristy within the tragic. Defecation/devastation. Sanctity/hostility. Pilgrim/tourist. Tragedy-tourist. Dualities and conflations. But how would anyone know what I meant? What point in being elliptical? And so I re-wrote:

***Kanyakumari II***

Dec 31, 2004. Eight hundred and eight killed in Kanyakumari district.

*Black-crow pilgrims  
robes gathered for the squat*

*in the pearl-dawn light  
they line the rock*

*their droppings  
litter the air.*

*Clap hands on nose  
Can't you smell it, the stink?'*

*Escape to the viewing tower  
Immerse in surf your gaze.*

*Here where the air is clear the sea  
retains its sanctity*

*The wind is strong and clean  
The waves serene.*

*'It all happened in a flash'.*

*Black rocks wiped bare  
'Fish doesn't smell this way,  
only rotting bodies do.  
Can't you smell it*

*the stink?'*

I had inserted into my poem, apart from the (yet) unidentified quotes, the rituals of the newspaper report. A date, a time, a place, an incident. I, a believer in poetry, had abandoned faith and used a newspaper device to root my poem in reality, to make it make sense. How, then, could I claim the poem's efficacy? Had I not betrayed it, and with it, my own intentions, well-meaning and misplaced? Would I have to add footnotes now to my poem, citing name, age and provenance of the men and women whose words I used to comment on my own? Would this turn from a poem into a monster of mixed allegiances and uncertain truths? Whatever happened to poetry?

What happened was that this poet wasn't up to the task. Writing poetry is as much a matter of the gut as it is of good intentions. Sometimes, silence is better. And so:

***December 26, 2004***

*no poetry in rictus*

*each word a spar to be clung to*

*postponing the moment of*

*drowning*

*in tears*

*listen well*

*it isn't a cliché to mourn*

It may sound clichéd, but distance and time make better poets of us. Immediacy is a reporter's game. For poetry to be what the poet Seamus Heaney calls "a protagonist in the public arena, to answer back with a clear tongue when the world gets muddied and bloodied", the poet has to engage in more than mere response. Immerse in silence, in withdrawal, none of which makes for good copy. So treacherous the realm of negotiating disaster with nothing more (nothing less) than words. And what of language as the ultimate act of violence? What of atrocity getting "flattened into the causally 'atrocious'", or getting "fattened up into that debased form of imagination which is prurience"<sup>10</sup>? What of predicaments so far removed from poetry as to be almost unreachable?

Or was it merely the old proximity that was turning my bones to water, my words to mud? More than two years ago, on 11 March 2004, the Madrid bombings and a call for poems from around the world led me to this poem. I had wrestled then too, but I had not given up. Perhaps my heart was colder then, or perhaps all I needed was distance, agonies many-times removed to find themselves deliquescing on paper. I wrote and rewrote, and this is what finally appeared in the collection *Poems for Madrid* :<sup>11</sup>

***Travel Sickness***

*No rapture can transport me now.  
 Only metal, beaten into place around my heart.  
 I trust it, blindly, as I dive in,  
 a swimmer in mineral dark.*

*Plain toxicity replaces the rush-hour breath  
 in my lungs. I inhale the nervous energy  
 that squeezes my diaphragm and  
 constricts my pupils into shining pricks of fear.*

*I damage my brain. I live.*

*Booby-trapped by an illusion of movement  
 I wait to be delivered. Any moment now  
 will be the last of a series of anticipations.  
 Any moment now will release me into the sun.*

*The next stop is mine. Till then I must carry  
 this backpack this cellphone this plastic bag  
 this paper news this silver amulet this soundless  
 om this coherence of faces hands and feet inside me,*

*intact, blameless, unterrorised.*

How equally could this have been written post- the Delhi bomb blasts, post- any of those insane 'incidents' we are all learning to live with. "It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without", wrote the poet Wallace Stevens in his 1941 essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words". For Stevens, poetry was, above all, a "revelation in words by means of the words"<sup>12</sup>, and poetic truth that which enabled imagination to adhere to reality, rather than escape from it. For him, the pressure of reality was simply "life in a state of violence"<sup>13</sup>, and the "possible poet" one "capable of resisting or evading the pressure of [that] reality"<sup>14</sup>. Only by acts of "extraordinary imagination"<sup>15</sup> could such an overwhelming pressure be cancelled out, and comprehended. Poetry was not escapism, unless it lost all moorings in reality and tended towards the abstract, the ethereal, the unmoored. Rather, poetry was self-preservation, a search for "words to express our thoughts and feelings which, we are sure, are all the truth we shall ever experience"<sup>16</sup>.

Pressure/counter-pressure. Reality/imagination. Contradictions containing and sustaining each other. Then why is it that poetry is still seen as the ultimate pacifist act, political quietism at its worst? Why is it that grappling with words as a means to contain and resist violence is not seen as resistance enough?

Perhaps some poets are activist simply through the act of making words yield more than their tired meanings, through the act of looking for "reality purified, for the 'colour of eternity', in other words, simply for beauty"<sup>17</sup>.

*Ulcer-lacerated the world  
Is still afloat, offer it a fistful  
Of earth a handful of heart ;*

*What, afraid it'll kill you?*<sup>18</sup>

It is fear that kills you in the end. Fear of finding beauty, fear of not finding it. Fear of the failure of language, that "disfigured and disfiguring"<sup>19</sup> word. It is the fear of silence.

What did theoretician Maurice Blanchot mean when he wrote "the crude word is silence"? Perhaps he meant that the crude word is silence waiting to find a shape. Perhaps that shape is poetry. Oral, written. The absence of words, the presence of pauses. The measure of rhyme in each indrawn-exhaled breath. The listening ear. The ability to falter, the inability to escape. The "character of invocation common to both prayer and children's games"<sup>20</sup>, the fear.

***And all my little landscapes/ All my yellow afternoons/ Stack up around this vacancy/ Like dirty cups and spoons/ No mercy Sweet Jesus!/ No mercy from Turbulent Indigo.***<sup>21</sup>

I close my book of van Gogh reproductions. I listen to the song, instead.

## NOTES

1. Joni Mitchell. *Turbulent Indigo*. From the album *Turbulent Indigo* (October 1994).
2. *Ibid.*
3. T. E. Hulme. "Romanticism and Classicism". In (ed.) P. McGuiness, *Selected Writings* (Fyfield Books, Carcanet Press, 1998, Manchester).
4. Filippo Marinetti. "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature". In (ed.) R.W. Flint, (tr.) R.W. Flint and A.W. Coppotelli, *Selected Writings* (Secker & Warburg, 1972, London).
5. Joni Mitchell, *op. cit.*
6. Lawrence Raab. "Cruelty, Vermont (1965)", *The New Yorker*, 3 Jan 2005.
7. Wallace Stevens. "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words". In (ed.) James Scully, *Modern Poets on Modern Poetry* (Collins, 1966, London).
8. Derek Walcott. "The Estranging Sea". In *Another Life* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux/Cape, 1973, New York/London).
9. Christopher Ricks. *The Force of Poetry* (Clarendon Press, 1984, Oxford).
10. *Ibid.*

11. See [www.nthposition.com](http://www.nthposition.com), (ed.) Todd Swift, March 2004.
12. Wallace Stevens, op. cit.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Czeslaw Milosz. "On Hope". In *The Witness of Poetry* (Harvard University Press, 1983, Cambridge).
18. Joy Goswami. *Surjo-Pora Chhai* (Ashen Sun)f (Ananda Publishers, 1999, Kolkata); transl. Sampurna Chattarji (<http://india.poetryinternational.org>).
19. Paul de Man. "The Resistance to Theory". In *The Resistance to Theory* (University of Minnesota Press, 1986, Minneapolis).
20. Robert Creeley. "A Sense of Measure". In *The Collected Essays of Robert Creeley* (University of California Press, 1989, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London).
21. Joni Mitchell, op. cit.