

Poetry Series

**Deepa Agarwal**  
**- poems -**

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Deepa Agarwal()

# A Forest Of Narcissus

A forest of narcissus  
she said  
grew behind my house.

My thoughts congealed like the shimmer  
of long ago frost  
transforming the ordinariness of grass blades  
as I inhaled the forgotten perfume  
of small precise blooms  
that scented a winter room once  
within the whiteness of secure walls.

A forest of narcissus  
she said  
grew behind my house.  
So many small heads  
that had loved themselves to death.

This modest seeming woman  
who lost herself  
in that self obsessed forest  
while connecting with a bunch of flowers  
growing out of glass walls  
straining to exude fragrance  
in a room  
secure in its personal clamour.

Deepa Agarwal

# A Tale Of Two Princesses

Once there was a princess who wept pearls,  
and once there was a princess  
who laughed flowers. Both died, I heard.

One of weeping  
and the other of laughter.

But not because one's eyes went dry  
or the other forgot how to laugh.

One died of suffocation  
entombed in pearls. The other choked  
on a surfeit of flowers.

The pearls were sold for a fortune, I heard.  
But the wilted flowers brought no gain at all.

Since then, I have heard  
A woman's tears have become  
far more precious than her laughter.

Deepa Agarwal

# Breaking The Sound Barrier

Naively, poetically  
so many things can be said.  
Unheard of things. Non existent  
tongues emerge, find voice. Words  
spout from sewed-up mouths  
that never possessed articulation  
but now miraculously acquire the  
gift of the gab. And  
you listen astonished as  
gibberish suddenly sorts itself out  
to make almost geometrical  
patterns of sense.

Q.E.D.

Only  
they do not intend to demonstrate  
a point, maybe. Have no logic to prove  
only seek the freedom to let their  
particular brand of sound loose  
from its ancient cage.

Sound that is burgeoning  
shaping its forms with such  
unseemly haste that it cannot  
but distend its receptacle,  
that fragile wall of flesh  
to bursting point. Burst to  
shatter the barrier of sound with  
such a deafening boom  
that everyone is compelled  
to give ear.

Compelled to pay heed  
to the naïve rhythms  
of newly born poetry. Surrender to  
the sorcery of sound  
hibernating for eons.  
But awakening now with  
a yawn of thunder.

Deepa Agarwal

# Cape Of Good Hope

Hope there always is—always should be  
even  
when a ship is being smashed  
against the rocks. There is hope.  
Despite the frailness of the sea tossed plank  
that might possibly bear you  
safe to a rocky beach.  
And hope is always good.

Hope, white as the foam of breakers  
effervescing as they batter rocks  
with amorphous power  
pulverizing them  
into the softness of sand  
yielding, formless but permanent.  
How far can you reduce matter?

Somewhere  
not too far beyond the Cape, colors  
blend and separate  
as alien waters meet. Let go  
and meet again  
in a never-ending embrace.  
While the indifferent waves pound  
the rocks in ceaseless battle.

The lighthouse  
keeps silent, solitary watch.  
Its sweeping eye  
perforating the thickening dark  
with its blinding gleam of hope.  
Hope that is permanently good.

Deepa Agarwal

# Childhood Rain

Rain in childhood  
falls without explanation  
simply pouring out of the sky  
we do not dance in it (like my children will one day)  
but don raincoats and unfurl umbrellas  
stoically set out for our Saturday evening walk.  
hand in hand  
two by two  
a twisting navy blue crocodile  
creeping between two green slopes  
one stretches upwards  
draped with silver sheets which reach down  
like Rapunzel's hair inviting us  
into the castle of the sky  
the other tumbles down  
into a shrouded sea, daring us to  
surrender to its shadowy embrace.  
the navy blue crocodile wriggles on  
postponing the moment of decision  
waiting for the sun to shine and the mist clear.

Deepa Agarwal

# Do Not Weep Lonely Mirror

The mirror in which I sought myself once  
sought me in turn, when spurned,  
its emptiness grew too vast for it to face.  
Emptiness, that black hole into which we must fall  
each one of us. The mirror pursued me  
even as I fled it  
time's wrinkles embedded deep in the  
coils of my being. I fled the truth  
imprinted on its shining glass.  
The truth of countless lies  
that rustled like the fugitive wings of birds  
evading the trapper,  
not knowing how futile my flight. Because  
the world might be large  
but mirrors are everywhere. And truth,  
the chameleon, finds many places to hide itself.  
In the starlit eyes of a lover perhaps...  
the trusting warmth of a child's palm,  
the adrenaline burst of the winning post,  
or the murky pool of failure. Even in  
the flashing pane of a neighbour's window  
or the reckless flow of your pen across a page.

I could not escape, and yet how long is it  
since I have known that the face in the mirror  
is not my own. Not the girl who wept in the dark  
once. Or boarded a train on a winter morning,  
basking in the sun's warmth.  
The woman who found babes in the wood  
under a coverlet of fallen leaves  
or listened to the urgent summons of a conch  
bellowing in the dark behind hidden doors.  
Who knows where it is, the face I would call my own  
if not in the mirror that faces me?  
It is enough that it exists.  
Whether flowing secretly in the veins of a leaf,  
blowing in the dust of a storm,  
or gleaming in a sunset cloud...  
So, do not weep lonely mirror

Nothing is as complete as emptiness  
Nothing as loud as the silence that speaks.

(2004, New Delhi)

Deepa Agarwal

# Forgotten Kaleidoscopes

Cunningly,  
colours will sneak past the corner of your eye  
and stun it into stillness. Arch into hopeful rainbows  
gleam like a palette of gems  
scattered by a scheming jeweller.

Cunningly, they will wipe themselves out  
like a whimsical kaleidoscope  
in a child's hands.

Who broke  
so many glass bangles? And  
poured the shards into a cylinder to  
entertain a child?  
I wondered,  
who planned the glittering patterns  
that shifted before my spellbound eyes.

Were they gathered from frenzied wrists shedding colours?

Because a woman's life must lose colour  
without a man; no matter  
how many indifferent rainbows stain the sky.

Dressing for Papa's funeral  
in a white sari, my Christian mother asks  
what shall I do with these bangles?  
four blue glass bangles  
that absent mindedly adorned her wrists.  
Break them, says her matter-of-fact friend.

Deepa Agarwal

# Losing

Summer means listless days  
struggling to find breath  
in the indolent rhythm of card games.  
Shuffling, dealing,  
the eager grab, the troubled frown  
should I call the trumps?  
And the eventual  
triumphant smack of the winning hand  
on the table.  
The superior smirk on the winner's face

You play with what you have  
What you get  
And if you lose  
it's only a game of cards  
you think.  
But already you are getting  
adept at the art of losing.  
Cultivating the careless shrug  
The helpless self-deprecatory smile  
The sporting surrender.

It's only a game—  
and everyone loves a good loser.  
You are loved  
And you live in the gloating knowledge  
Of toiling for a cause greater than yourself  
Allowing others to win,  
so generously  
when the thunder blast of an unexpected win  
flattens your heart beat

you cower  
the winner's frown feels like a death sentence  
you stare appalled at the treacherous cards  
that betrayed you, turned you traitor  
interrupted the safe rhythm  
of the listless summer days

the afternoon siesta  
is no longer dreamless oblivion  
but a tangle of nightmares  
And  
you can never pick up your hand again  
with the same cheerful indifference  
the confidence of the loser  
Because  
the winner's cross weights you  
and summer  
has lost its meaningless sorcery.

Deepa Agarwal

# Love That Flighty Djinn

I would have liked to live forever within  
the opaque glass walls of your love. Seeing the world  
through misty eyes. The sun's heat  
softly tempered to my back. The rain,  
a distant, soothing patter. Not a drenching torrent  
churning rivers of mud and slime  
to drown in. But  
the mist holds demons. Their cries  
will not be stilled. And glass is fragile  
Even a single stone carelessly flung  
can shatter this sanctuary we built  
You and I;  
out of the power of our dreams  
this vaporous castle  
which can stand;  
only till the magic lasts.

Loving, my faltering steps take root  
reaching, touching  
my heart, a wing, a feather  
caressing you. All night...  
your warmth filling me. Battling  
the shuddering dark  
that waits, a patient hungry dragon

But...  
love, that timid bird  
that flighty djinn. Comes  
to roost only when it wishes  
Not in response to my call  
or yours  
No matter how urgent the need  
No matter how desperate the hour.

Deepa Agarwal

# Mother Dominica's Tranquil Square

In the tranquil square of memory  
I play hopscotch  
and master the art of throwing pebbles  
accurately into the right space.  
one-legged, I negotiate the trickery  
of dividing lines  
and cloister my small defeats  
as deep as the shrapnel  
a pink-faced nun  
has sequestered somewhere.

All has been quiet on the Western front  
for long now  
its silence  
contained in the incomplete square  
whose corners frame  
the tranquil face  
that has interred  
a mammoth  
with such apparent ease  
in a subterranean grotto  
far removed from Mother Mary's  
benign gaze.

Till a friendly conversation about cats  
blasts away the ice  
and another square reveals itself.  
A grave  
tenanted with a  
frozen block of memory  
that unexpectedly vaporizes  
in the heat of a distant land.

How easily a quisling spark  
can insinuate itself  
into innocent talk of cats  
rout the comforting dark.  
How hard to bury  
a brother

who tormented cats once  
grew up  
to be swallowed by Mother Russia  
while fighting for the fatherland.

(This poem was inspired by a phrase 'the tranquil square of memory' from  
Rukmini Bhaya Nair's poem 'Intimations'.)

Deepa Agarwal

# Palm Sunday

You were not unaware  
of the efficacy of the grand gesture.  
The triumphant entry,  
a torrent of palms swirling in the air.

But how did those welcoming fronds  
transform themselves to scourges?  
Heaven alone knows perhaps,  
Heaven, who spawned those Siamese twins  
agony and ecstasy,  
knows that triumph is a crown of thorns  
bloody footprints mark the path  
that leads to the ultimate elevation  
in the company of thieves.

Yet, the grand gesture survived.  
We still wave palms transformed into crosses  
commemorate your death  
and celebrate your rebirth.

Deepa Agarwal

# Robben Island

Another place of the skull  
Another Golgotha  
Clean neat bleached to the bare  
necessities of existence  
belying the flagrant thrust  
of arum lilies  
blooming in random clusters.  
Extravagant trumpets  
large, full blown, secure in their whiteness  
rooting themselves where they will  
unlike the baby penguins  
huddling in bushes  
before our alien onslaught

The wind outlines the bleakness of the sun  
as a silent prison  
willingly unlocks doors  
and secrets flutter free.  
Dues paid  
the toiler in freedom's mill  
is now permitted the luxury  
of endlessly reliving hunger and pain  
anger and hate.  
While courteous hordes  
listen  
wrestling with what and why  
and who and which  
and right and wrong  
wondering how deep  
they might inser their  
delicate probes  
beneath the armour of calluses  
How deep burrow  
before their dentist's drill  
encounters the unguarded nerve

In the end  
one thinks  
he has a tale to tell at least

and eloquently too.  
If not would hasty bank notes pile  
up on the dignified palm  
eager to repay someone else's debt?  
To buy absolution for another's crime?

In the end  
what remains  
but the naked skull of truth  
even a free man needs to eat  
and the heat of youthful rage  
cannot flame far enough  
to disperse the chill of age.

The wind is curiously dry  
as we sidle away from the limestone quarry  
thanking God for the good karma  
that kept us secure in distant climes  
for the screen of designer glasses  
that saves our eyes  
for the watered milk of human kindness  
that did spurt at last from skull dry breasts  
while the black coated penguins  
carefully measure their mincing strides  
earnest as lawyers arguing a case  
lost long before they crawled out of their eggs.

The ocean shimmers all the way to the mainland.  
There are drinks to be sipped on the ferry  
the wonderful wildness of wind on your face  
the curio shops beckon  
and Mandela's smile soothes.

But somewhere we know  
a man waits  
smoking a quiet cigarette  
outside the dispossessed prison  
waits for the next bus load  
for the guilty caress of notes  
on the expressionless palm  
whose lines have bound him to Robben Island.

Deepa Agarwal

# The Graveyard Has Shut Me Out

I cannot be laid to rest  
like Rilke  
in the earth I have chosen  
for my own burial.  
That much is certain, for  
the graveyard has shut me out.  
Not for me the dreamless sleep  
beneath benign deodar trees, which stretch  
tireless arms, sifting  
sunshine and rain.  
Not for me the granite gravestone  
preserving my name,  
modest cenotaph  
an idle stranger might wonder at,  
the way I have mused over Sarah Elizabeth  
and Baby Mickey.  
Sure I will become dust and ashes too,  
but nameless dust flung far from the walls  
of a beloved graveyard,  
walls that shut me out  
growing higher  
each time I attempt the leap.

2003

Deepa Agarwal

# Thoughts On A Ritual

Tracing yellow lines  
On broad banyan leaves  
Winding the fragile thread  
Round and round...  
My thoughts  
Vagrant butterflies  
Take flight...

Savitri...  
Constant wife  
Faithful lover  
Woman of power  
You conquered death  
Yet...  
Your womb was too narrow  
It could only hold  
A hundred sons  
Not a single daughter...

Deepa Agarwal

# Woman On The Road To Lhasa

Beneath the mask  
my face melts  
like a jaggery cake in the sun  
Mercifully,  
I can see  
even  
as I preserve the pink of my skin.

But what's the use?  
my sisters remain strangers  
behind yak skin cheeks  
that cannot exchange smiles  
to lighten  
the tyranny  
of the road to Lhasa. All  
blinding earth and searing sky  
bleached bone and rubble  
hung over a chafing saddle  
feeding fleas.

Only  
when night's black tent  
enfolds the enemy, sun,  
can I breathe. Let  
chilly air soothe broiling skin  
let laughter flow free...  
as I shed the mask.

Hard it is for a woman  
far from home. And  
endless the road to Lhasa  
beneath a mask.

Deepa Agarwal