Poems

by

Maurya Simon
The
Golden Labyrinth
I have seen the tiger leap past like an engine,  
and the white peacock unfold a cosmos of stars;  
I've watched flying squirrels startle a leopard,  
and been embraced by a python's Herculean grip.  

Herds of wild elephant ambled near me at dusk,  
and I coaxed an anteater from its earthen tower;  
but nothing, oh nothing, has enraptured me more  
than your tender, human touch, and its power.
The Golden Labyrinth

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Power of the Visible
Want

There are too many names here for suffering, too many faces of want, be they human or not.

A bullock, frothing at the mouth, gets whipped again by his driver; an armless child begs with his feet; a battered wife picks up a knife. Where can this pain flow, but into the heart and back out, grimy, twisted into black knots? I understand Buddha's dharma now, his silent disavowal of a world so laden with our tears it overflows like sludge from a polluted tap.

He joined the forests' maze to meditate for years upon a seamless, carbon void of namelessness, to lose his identity there. For him, despair first engendered loss, then gain of selflessness, and then, at last, an uplifting into sparks—I see him on every road, completely naked but for his decaying loincloth and wormy bowl; I see his matted hair, his lice-infested beard.

He is whole now, holy, yet empty of what drives my hand to write—utterly empty of want.
Tableau Vivant

Morning arouses an orchestra of bells and horns: bicycle, rickshaw, tonga—a mounting cacophony of hooting cars, a brass jangling from pony carts; and, yet, paler noises cross the ear's threshold: the swish-swish of an old woman's twig broom as she sweeps dried mango leaves into the gutter; the splash of urine from a naked toddler squatting over a stale Deccan-Herald; and, on the corner, the quiet negotiating for small change between the tender coconut vendor and the wiry postman. Yesterday's rain has simplified a movie poster on the wall rounding Miller's Road: now, just two angry, disembodied eyes glare streetward, past a parked bullock's head-dress of feathers. A boy, black with filth, hauls his satchel of rags over a bony shoulder, then lets loose such a peal of heartfelt music, in his sweet, somber voice, that the crowded passengers on a stalled city bus break into spontaneous applause.
Mothers of Invention

The beggar-woman near the Muslim cemetery makes her own green shade out of a plantain leaf.

She is selling all she has left of hope: a dirge frail as the wildflowers trembling in the heat.

She is no less lovely than the spangled movie star stepping down heavily from a limousine across the street;

but she is braver and wiser, I think, for such singing that defies her terrible hunger, this heartless weather.

What do I know of a need that brings a woman down to her knees, punished by the world's failures?

I can't chronicle her pain in the name of truth, nor sing alongside her with my tawdry cache of griefs:

I can't know her words, lacquered by sweat and tears; I don't possess her dignity, that humbler of speech.

The blackened cathedrals, crumbling minarets and oil-rank temples: all beckon like girders of the soul,

but they are filled with dull prophets, money-changers, the cosmic yea-sayers, countless generations of believers whose prayers ricochet like bullets off the air. Thus, I'll carry this sad woman's song with me like a storm,

so it agitates my voice, making it strong, plaintive—so it opens my arms, that we may lift each other up.
Russell Market

What I want most is what I deeply fear: loss of self; yet here I stand, a “Memsahib,” all decked out in wonder, and still a stranger amid the harvest, old Gaffar at my side.

Here’s a pundit preaching in the flower stall: he turns funeral wreaths into wheels of rapture. I must shrug off my notion of knowing anything of substance about the world, about the spirit.

Sparrows dart between the columns like music. Huge pupae, bananas split their golden skins; flies moisten their hands in bands of dew. Lepers limp by on crutches, in slow motion.

Where is there order in the world? None, none, I think—no order, only spirals of power. The pyramids of onion, guava, melon—all defy my reason: they shine like galaxy-driven planets.

A balancing scale becomes a barge of plenty, a cornucopia endlessly filling up and emptying. The wages of sin are more sin: virtue’s wages, more virtue—and all such earnings, weightless.

I’ve forgotten my errand; I float now through myself like a howl through a phantom mouth—the world is an illusory marketplace where I must bargain hardest for what I hope I’m worth.
Karma

Whomever you want to be, you can be,
my mother said, year in and out, her vow
a litany of doctor-lawyer-Indian chief.
She was wrong to think only of bright deeds
and lives, of limelight, accolades, fattened days.
For when I see the leper on the road, misshapen,
scabrous, wheeling his gnarled body dark with pain,
I know my own easy health, my unclever luck
for gain are even more ephemeral than self.
Reincarnate, I become what's most loath to me:
palsied whore, brutish pimp, murderer, pariah.
Limitless the roles I could assume, mother,
when my back is spun like a turnstile of fate,
when the appalling strangers I meet are myself.
Monsoon

The river's voice swells with the wailing
of a million reeds slashed by torrents of wind.

The sound travels northward, roving the outskirts,
then sweeps and surges like a howl into downtown,

where wide-eyed vendors take cover under eaves
dangerously close to collapse, where the wind's

charge is a slap in the face, insult of needles.
Bullocks, parked in alleys, hang down their horns,

their low bellows deep as the earth's groans.
Even the jungle crows hover like damaged goods

inside bedraggled branches, silent and still.
Strange, how the weather's violence activates

such stasis, how the murderous light strips bare
all good intentions, obliterates yesterday's heat,

as if what's being played out is Noah's flood; yet
no ark is being scaffolded, mangled, set adrift—

for no one seems to think this frowning world worth
saving—no one drops to his knees to give thanks.

Only a tethered goat butts her head tirelessly
against a stubborn wall, banging and banging out

a rhythm of defiance, morse code for deliverance,
echo of gopher wood and pitch, of a covenant

God made once with flesheed hope, believing that
a great flood could drown what burns our souls.
Street Scene

A boy wags his tongue stump at me, holding up his “official” paper: “Please compensate my speak loss.” I give nothing, knowing some “uncle” long ago cut it off for future profit.

A crippled man on his wooden pallet holds up his poorly bandaged hand. I drop a single rupee in his cup; he rolls off toward Kasturbai Street.

A pai-dog chews at her festered flesh. Stepping over her, I land in a pool of freshly spewed betel juice. My prints bleed exclamation points.


I survey the quaint or ancient coins a worn Tibetan woman has arranged on a dirty handkerchief upon the curb: there’s one of Queen Victoria, and one that bears the turning wheel of life. “Too much,” I say, and move on.
Leah in the Vale of Tears

She hates the way men stare at her, their eyes narrowed by desire, and then the obscene jokes directed toward her breasts, her golden hair. She abhors seeing foot-long rats stretched out sleekly by death, and the steaming piles of human shit we sidestep, and the toothless beggars who smile as they clutch her shirt. Day after day, I see a new horror registered upon her lovely face; a new despair blossoms on her skin. And she has learned an inwardness of pain that bends her tender body like a cupped palm around a flame. And now her seldom-heard laughter sounds bereft of innocence, mirth. At thirteen, she understands so much—hunger, desperation, being voiceless: the burdens each of us must bear.
The Ugly Dog

Because it was sweltering and I was rushing from market to stationer's to bookstore to bank,
because I was tired of noise and my foreign face,
because the diesel-choked streets made me faint
and hungry for my distant mountains, my family,
because I was sick of the world, sick of my spirit
flagging like a flea-bitten sheet behind me—
I was slow to notice your hideous shadow
also trailing my heels—what I took at first sight to be a fallen gargoyle, so unearthly you looked,
so terribly misshapen, your tongue drooling blood,
your pink body covered in blistering, awful sores.

"Shoo!" I said in my sternest, raspiest voice,
"get lost, scram, get out of here, go home!"

But you turned back your battle-scarred ears,
wouldn't budge an inch—I think you sneered—
cast down your one good eye instead,
and stood stock-still by my side:

For hours you haunted my steps like Anubis,
guard dog from Egypt's Otherside, a frescoed-over plaster face, moldy and crumbling, staring past the black grief of kings and queens without
so much as a whine: you wouldn't be turned aside.
You followed me like some perfectly trained stud,
a pedigree who loves his mistress with an iron will—
for hours you escorted me, heeling like a champion,
from Queen's Market to the Bengali Sweet Shop,
from bus stop to the tailor's, and all the while
I hissed "Out!" at you and "Po!" in a hoarse voice,
in my most righteous Anglo-Tamil, to no avail.
I hid forever in an ice cream parlor, but you again
triumphed, wagging your bald tail once as I emerged.
I gave up at last. You'd won. You had something on us
I could only surmise: perhaps we'd been conspirators
in our past lives? My smell (your smell) provocative
perhaps, or repellent, addictive? Maybe, I thought,
you aren't even real: nothing so ugly survives.
I know now how most you shamed and exposed me,
how you made of my biased humanity a paltry thing:
I feared you in your grotesque form for your love
of me, brief as it was, for your seeing in my face
a counterpart to your loneliness, a companion
stranger, another outcast—a creature who needed
your guidance to return from her deadened life.
Commercial Street

Lives up to its name: its gallery of shops and sandwiched alleys horde a gamut of wares, from bronzes to sponges to pliers. Nearby, Jewelers’ Street draws me to linger longer, for here each doorway opens upon a pageant of pleasures: goblets embossed with deities, gold mangalasutras for brides, dozens of anklets hung from nails, toe-ring platters, and glass bangles of every color looped over dowels.

Pushcarts roll by, laden with cucumber slices, green mangoes, papaya, smiling wedges of melon. Their vendors steer clear of platformed beggars, stray calves, hell-bent scooters, dazed buyers. The lane is aswirl with sound and commotion; it’s a cure for staid senses, a stagnant mind. But only for an hour—no more—for by then my brain begins to complain and shut down: too much getting and spending relaxes my will, which would sooner profit from commerce with spirit.
Pride

I'm arguing again with a rickshaw wallah over my return fare from Russell Market. He pretends he can't speak any English, though en route we chatted briefly about the rising cost of petrol and bad weather. "Memsaab," he begins, and then a stream of Urdu oaths, I guess, and invective follow. In the past, I've resigned myself, handing over richly inflated sums, guilty for my good luck, my Western wealth—but now, I shake my head, say "aiee-yo, appa, I won't be robbed blind!" And there we stand, outside my fancy gate, with our clenched fists whitening.

A small crowd gathers like a storm—everyone has something to say, a side to take. There's more at stake here than a few torn rupees: for the cabbie's jaw is so tight now his eyes begin to bulge like veined coals, and he's screaming. The ruckus draws our sleepy-eyed watchman, Ibrahim, from out of the shade to my rescue. He gravely holds up his large, flat hand—and the cluster of passersby grows abruptly silent. Whatever it is that he says in Urdu works, for suddenly the rickshaw driver whirls around and throws my money on the ground, spits on it, then zooms away, leaving me richer in my shame.
Letter from Bangalore

The day blazes in a storm
of sunlight, and two house crows,
their pewter collars puffed out in bibs,
uncrank the hour’s news

like treetop sages.
Their static voices crackle
with stoic dispatches, dry heroics.
If only I could be like them,

so distant from my life
that each throb of remorse for
misspent moments, for small and
looming failures

of faith and heart,
contracts into sudden dust.
But I cannot, and the heat un-
focusses my longing,

obscurig it until,
like a sunburned document,
it’s wholly leached of ardor,
its edges curled.

What I have to do
is recognize this world
for what it boasts: the vapor
undulating now

above the baking road,
a rash of hibiscus wanly dipping
their ruby-tipped tongues
into deep shadows,
the breeze stirring
nothing but its own desires:
the shimmering landscape still
as a held breath,

and each thing visibly
lit and charged to this life
by a single, wickless flame,
bluer than water.

Look to the trees,
I tell myself: they know.
See their heavy lightheartedness,
their constant shedding,

their cool oblivion—
see how they keen and dance
in a single motion: each jagged leaf
shining as it falls.
Dharma

Shortly after dawn they arrive: first, sullen Ramiza, who tilts to the weight of her plastic satchel,
her gap-toothed mouth a down-turned scythe, an unnamed grief tarnishing her gaze.

Daily, Sahib’s marble kitchen awaits her, its pots primly lined up like docile convent girls,
its rainbowed spices richly smouldering in jars: stars of anise, turmeric, cayenne, fenugreek, and cardamom.

Now Ibrahim legs stiffly down Aliasker Road Cross. Thin as a muezzin’s predawn cry, gaunt-cheeked,
he plods to the gate in his pinched, black shoes: an aged man, draft-wary, his right eye gone out.

Yawning, Abdul Gaffar salutes the day watchman—“Salaam alekum,” and “Alekum salaam,” Ibrahim replies,
as he doffs his Musselman cap, then settles down to another day of fitful dozing beneath the tamarind.

And how soon the shrunken “Ayah” bends to her tasks. Her face is a precinct of wrinkles, her tattooed arms
so brittle one would think they’d collapse under the weight of her sodden bundles, trays of brass.

As sweeper, she briskly chases off the lint and dust, squinting, coughing, her small feet splayed out.

She nods to Zuleka, “the stout one,” arriving now an hour late, her bun already slightly unstrung,
her flimsy sari unkempt, her choli riding too high upon her breasts, her voice charged by reprimands.

She stations herself over our granite washing slab, then flails each garment high above her head, slapping it down hard upon the sudsy rock, over and over again. An eon of days stream past as the servants labor, their every act tediously polished, then repeated, then rephrased by season after season—as the tamarind’s pods twirl and drop, as mynahs scream insults at a cat, as the earth spins in circles on its tilted axis.

I watch them from another world, privileged and unspent by the rigors of doing others’ chores, and I see how every ordered gesture of their lives, how their eagerness to serve their wealthy Sahib (whose life shines amid theirs like a distant star), how every step they take, every pot that’s stirred and washed and stored, every bow they make becomes a measure of devotion to Allah’s invisible rewards.
Nothing will grow here but poisonous plants, so said the night chowkidar, pointing out with a crooked, brown finger the empty lot where, day after day, we strolled past weeds waging bitter battle with wandering cows, with drought, plagues of flies, with the piss of a neighborhood of full-bladdered passersby.

Those were bleak weeks and months for me: everywhere I looked I saw despair’s masterplan—the filthy urchins heaving their maggoty sacks, side-stepping disease, hunger, disemboweled cats. Squaring your shoulders, you’d counter my bile with your youthful, not-quite-oblivious smile. “Let’s keep walking,” you’d say. “Count clouds.”

As we crossed the lot in the heat-swelled dusk, you stopped, and slowly tilted your chin up. I don’t know what kind of tree it was, nor why we hadn’t earlier seen a leafy shiver of filigree: for bees swarmed and hummed above, homing us in suddenly on an enormous hive vibrant with life, lodged like a glowing fruit in the high branches.

How could that tree grow amid ruin and the trials weather and wayfarers visited upon it, stripping its bark, its low arms for fuel? And why, I asked, do bees choose it, above the gardener-coddled and soil-enriched giants of Cubbon Park? You spoke up immediately, saying, “Mom, I guess bees can find sweetness and good even in the ugliest places, so they can lead us all on invisible paths to light.”

—for my daughter, Leah Rose Falk
Bangalore Lullaby

The house is dark,
the mats laid out upon
the moatlike floor;
a scent of ratri-rani
floats upon the air,
and all the world's
enfolded into sleep,
or into earth's repair.

How vaguely stars
scout out the night
that hoods the city
in a grief of clouds;
how dimly glows the
curved moon's wick,
its lamp unlit,
yet pooled in oil.

Now, only lovers stir
beneath a wavering sky.
Each turns to each
with golden cries,
their mortal bodies
rising up then falling
back into a shrine
of tangled hair.

So love illumines us
like windows sprung
by swarms of fireflies;
and each soul's light
briefly flickers on and
off until the darkened self
rises aloft the stairways
of night, and disappears.
The Bishop of Mysore

At dusk we follow the empty, twisting road that rises skyward, Rao at the helm, our Ambassador coughing and tacking like an asthmatic sailor. Past one curve, a blur: a pair of wild dogs quickly disappears into a well of underbrush.

I want to stop to see the winking city lights below, where tiny, smoky trails filament the sky. Elene points out the sloping plains' opalescent gem, the Lalitha Mahal Hotel, blazing like an open lotus. Too polite to hurry us, Rao fidgets with his pen.

When we park near the Bull Temple stairs, a man in starched white cassock comes to shake our hands. "I'm the Bishop of Mysore," he happily explains. "How I love America, Americans, hot dogs, and Coke!" Rao is impatient; we must hurry on now to reach the great Chamundeswara Temple for evening puja. Except for a Brahmin priest blessing a motorcycle, the parking lot is ghostly: all the hangers-on and trinket peddlers have wandered home at last—a lone girl sells us an arm's length of jasmine,

then Rao leads us past her to the sanctum sanctorum, where incense interweaves itself with wisps of prayer. Here the air gathers into a stilled fullness that encircles our bodies slowly, so we become awash now in a reverence so resonant it stings our skin.

But too soon the spell is broken; we emerge slowly from the labyrinthine chambers, out into a cobalt night, a spattering of stars flickering overhead, oil lamps scattering their drops above the blackened plains. "Don't forget to write," the smiling Bishop calls out,
as he stiffly climbs back into his chauffeured Cadillac and rolls down his window with a gloved hand so the girl can kiss his satin fingertip. Rao frowns just slightly as he leans against our car, but his gaze is softened by the moon, is gilded by some grace I know I lack, by a holiness that barely grazed our senses, by a spirit so subtle, it embraced and entered him effortlessly. We begin our gradual descent down the hilly slope; Rao stares out beyond the glassy night, a mute calm relaxing his face. Each small world transforms itself.

—for Elene Kallimanis
Village Market

Gone the heirloom brass, the earthenware vessels saried women toted back from distant wells—now, above the carefully taut necks, they bear lightweight, anachronistic, colored-plastic pots. Still, they move with such breathtaking grace, I nearly forgive this century its “progress”—

Twenty years since I first walked the dusty lanes, and though the pan-wallahs still flash red grins, something insidious has elbowed in among them: Madonna posters, pirated videos, pyramids of Coke—who doesn’t love the flash of the newfangled, the sweet aftertaste of forbidden fruit?

Things change and yet remain the same, always this trade-off between tradition and the rites of innovation: the swami’s saffron-dyed robe, flung accidentally open, exposes Fruit-of-the-Loom briefs; a cumulous of jasmine wreathed around a corpse, the artificial, waxen leaves denoting his wealth.

I must revise my notion of aesthetic propriety. Still, I relish the vendors’ neat display of bounty bullock-carted from the farmlands and paddies: burlap sacks brimming with their healthful grains, bins of pineapple and pomegranate, rainbowed rows of powdered kum-kum, mangoes ripe with fragrance.

Beyond the garbage heap of styrofoam cups: a peacock. And beyond the crumbling, red adobe huts, a stretch of emerald fields undulates and expands, as if the land wills itself to bear every compromise of fate, both the worst and the best human hands deliver, for even the fragile soil beneath nurtures the seeds of change.
Pondicherry

Our hotel's inhabited by saints. 
Or so it seems. 
Each hallway sports a holy phrase 
from the Bhagivad-Gitā, 
or else a warning: 
"No Smoking, Absolutely Not."
But the view, the view! 
Curling waves hook themselves 
to that magnetic shore. 
The horizon storehouses clouds 
erupting from the Bay 
of Bengal like sunflowers. 
At dusk, we stroll 
past beached canoes, each 
a patchwork of barks. 
Then we see a huge, white thing 
manhandled by the surf, 
rolled and thumped ashore. 
It's got a carapace five feet 
in girth, a head as big as mine, 
and its flippers, smooth 
as alabaster, quiver just once. 
The sea turtle dies 
in dusk's iridescent glow; 
then hungry boys crowd us out 
to haul it onto dry sand. 
I think we're nowhere 
ourselves in such sad light, but 
here in this moment, 
haunted by arbitrary gifts and 
withdrawals—the crabs 
sidestepping our shadows, 
dark stains made by 
sinner and saint alike.
In this tropical place, only the Kurubas know an animal by its smell, a tree by its shadow.

We pass them on the road: kinky-haired, small, flat-nosed; they move with a leopard's grace, carrying bamboo poles as firmly as spears.

"Who is not a tribal," asks the Resident Guide.

"Are we not, each of us, a member of some tribe?" Yes—tribes of germs, tribes of plants and rocks, tribes of exiled souls, wanderers without maps.

The jungle has its tribes of green—emerald, mint, teal, sea-green, lime, bilious, grassy, patinaed—and its tribes of beasts: hunter and hunted, earth-bound and sky-bent, camouflaged and flamboyant.

We know the earth sings the raindrops' tribal chant.

But what the Kurubas know no one may understand who hasn't stalked the viper and the banded krait, nor climbed one hundred feet into a lofty canopy to gather honey, nor sung the ferns into opening.

Riding in a jeep, we pass their mud-clotted huts, a temple painted green, its lowest eaves strung with brass bells; we pass their naked children, solemn as dusk, and mothers with horizontal saris crossing their breasts, who look starved, used up. Yet I'm hungry for their ears and eyes, for every
thing they know: a “good name” for every leaf, for each bugled note the elephant bellows during musth,

a name for this caterpillar’s many-legged dance,
and one for me, who’s entribed by all the world.
Nagarahole

Where drought once drove burnt offerings
down from cotton-silk stands and teak, now,
all around, the jungle steams with smoke:
rank mists rise from the smouldering floor,
and every gully gleams with burgeoning life—
bustling flies strike mica in the ore.

Our jeep cuts through the muck and sludge,
wending its way back from the watchtower.
There we saw the tungsten-colored lake part
its tumid waters, as herds of elephant
crossed single file, their trunks trumpets
of deliverance, their ears great oars.

Golden woodpeckers swoop past; langurs
leap from branch to branch, and one turns
her black face up—then so do we—skyward,
where we see a huge phalanx of angry clouds
amassing overhead, spiky with lightning.
A sudden downpour drowns the light.

Hunched under a plastic tarp, we're phantoms
of ourselves: our faces blaze, darken, blaze,
as if recharged by a parade of former lives.
Winds flail the sheets of rain unfolding
in our wake: every raindrop's a tiny fire
illuminating itself like a falling star.

I think of Rousseau's jungle odalisque—
the black-haired woman's skin so white
it stops the heart—and somewhere, near
the edge of consciousness, a crouching tiger
waits almost as languidly as she, waits for
that urgent darkness, deeper than any art.
In the Nilgiris

Outside Masanagudi, the steely ridges peak into tabla drums and brahma bull humps; thunderheads thicken above them, motionless, like a shock of egrets, heaven-bent, their wide wings opening to catch a breeze.

Across the near plateau, bamboo plumes dip their fronded tips, as herds of elephant forage the streambed, quiet as mountains. And bright yellow globes, wild aubergine, dot the scrubland flats; flames-of-the-forest ignite the southeast rise with fiery cups.

Last night, wild boars rooted near the house, rutting their tusks deep into the red dirt. Two hyenas circled the moonlit laburnum, their chuckles chasing off a wild dog.

I awoke and fell asleep repeatedly—once, startled by a bull-tusker's trumpet, and later, by a chital's eerie challenge. The jungle breathed and sang and moved within my dreams, bulbuls' calls entangling my visions of teak forests, peacocks, lizards, of flying squirrels, and crocodiles poised languorously on each other—prehistoric lovers—and of the intricate panoply of life here that is disappearing like a dream,

as the slender loris clutches a dying branch—as the poacher oils his barrel . . .
At the Kabini River

Each day is a dimple on the wind,  
a small tuck in the sky’s fabric  
stretched horizon to horizon.  
Neither hours shape us, nor  
the bowers hanging overhead,  
nor the river’s breath rising  
steadily in misty layers.  
Something larger stitches us  
to time, embroiders longing  
like a many-spindled star  
into the morning clouds.  
A cormorant, touching down  
lightly to its own image,  
shimmers on the watery surface.  
Our coracle spins lazy spirals  
across a field of windows.  
Not yet, not yet, the boatman’s  
oar warns our rumpled faces,  
which float like dreams risen  
silently to meet us.
Banded Krait

Thin as a licorice whip
looped with tiny wedding bands,
she slides across our path,
inviting a betrothal with chance.

"Seven-step snake,"
the Tamils call her reverently.
For after she strikes,
it's a short walk to death.

Why the slender fangs curving
into slivers of ice?
Why such numbing venom pouched
in that slight, lovely head?

Caught in the flashlight's glare,
she pauses momentarily in the grass.
I want her body pooled softly
in my open palm,

I want to touch her life
the way a lover kneels in awe
before the mystery of another self,
a covenant with trust.

So much of living
is this grasp for nothingness
clothed in supple beauty.
It takes away my breath.

Dew-spangled and poised
on the ever-after's threshold,
I hear the insects trill
to each of us: let her go.
Periyar Lake

The boat chug-chugs across the green water. It could be dusk or dawn in April, month of the rising mists, of elephant musth, when the fidgety males turn to us from the moving shore, ready to charge. The metallic call of a racket-tailed drongo alerts the hills; its spatula-tipped tail chases it as it flies north toward the dam. Imperceptibly, the leaves balance themselves into layers of canopied shadow and light that are broken here and there by blue sky. Our wake blooms with forget-me-nots, which soon merge with mirrored clouds. And it is dusk, not dawn, we’re sure of it, for the boatman is yawning while counting the day’s take, and the light is falling down on us like the ache of a lover’s touch. Here’s where the world begins and ends—at Eden’s edge, and no further . . .
At Ranganathithu Bird Sanctuary

Meandering in slow circles, our boat rounds the isles until we glide to a halt beneath a heavy-laden tree. It's hung with large, black pouches that open and shut their spindled sleeves when nudged by a gust.

Giant fruit bats, our guide announces with a grin. There's a shimmer of sound in the sky-held branches, for the leafy corridors contain a chorus of dozers—wooly-tongued hummers, hunch-shouldered mumblers.

A sweet twittering of contempt peppers their drone, when one of the bats, aroused from sleep, shudders loose from the throng of hundreds to swoop down, then up—a leathery parachute surged to life.

Elegant and undeadly, a miracle of resurrection, the bat seems snared in an ecstasy of movement, its feverish wheeling and dipping making us dizzy, so that the sky's empty house is reeling around us.

So delirious that dark-hinged explosion of flight, so sinewy and sleekly erratic, it opens up my mouth, makes my blood cringe: I know now, when we return from death, we are forever blinded by this light.
Kodaikanal

Daughter, you’ve grown like a jungle vine, wrapping yourself around your life, and holding fast.

Here, in the midst of the unfamiliar, where macaques swing from a village spire, where forest altars reek of incense and guano, and where the intangible world seems attainable but unsublime, you find yourself in welcome exile from the country we left behind. How strange to find myself here, you say—and yes, the mountain mists move in like ghosts as they steep the terraced hills in blued ink; a score of waterfalls churn out their liquid ragas; even the village idiot seems “off,” trailing his ragged scarf like an oath.

From where you stand, in a dorm courtyard enlivened by girls’ laughter, marigolds—the world seems plausible, charged by hope: you discern an order even in disorder. But you’re not blind. You, too, see the hobbling dog, the lesioned horse, the weak child outside your gate. You know that one plate goes empty to fill yours.

What are we but travelers of our hearts, startled by love’s topography, by hate’s sealed frontiers?

The world will always be a bewilderment of signs, of omens—you must wend your way, alone, into your life, unlearning all I’ve taught you that wasn’t sharpened by pain, honed to clarity by some torment or terror.
Naomi, abandon all my careful roads, clear a path that leads you back to the empty plate you serve yourself.

—for Naomi Mariam Falk
Power of the Invisible
The Flying Swami

—Lodhi Tombs, New Delhi

His feet are firmly planted in thin air;
that’s where he resides during daytime hours.
But if, later, you see him anchored to a bench—
so busy with deliberations of the spirit
that he’s tying his artful limbs into a trance—
he’ll give you a short history of the future.

The rest of us are enlivened by desire:
the world chooses us like marvelous possessions,
turning us this way and that in dark and light,
until we shine like scattered constellations.
He predicts that, in time, we’ll fall; he says
time’s well deepens our lives with shadows.

I admit, what I know of him is speculation.
Still, his weightlessness is eloquent, heroic;
yet when I gaze into the kingdom of his inner eye,
I feel I’m merely window-shopping once again
for paradise’s newest inventions. He rarely blinks.
“Dear Sir,” I’d like to say, “come down to earth”—

I’m so rooted in the real—I like his dreadlocks,
his beatific smile, the crud under his fingernails.
Doesn’t he ever think of sex? Of the rash spreading
a red mist across his thigh? Of his next meal?
I hope that my reluctant awe helps keep him aloft,
and that this work he’s doing lightens all our steps.
The Yogi Speaking

One lotus opens
and one closes like a mouth:
house of dawn, house of dusk.

Hanuman is up to his tricks again.
Can you see his monkey grin?
Be like him, be like him.

The banyan is no metaphor,
yet it tells the story of us all,
a tale with ten thousand endings,
each one rooted in the soil.

Breath becomes you.
Your body blushes, pauses, pales.
You do not choose a posture;
each moment poises you into yourself.

The veena and nagaswaram sing.
I beat out the tala with my palm.
This is the heart's raga.

Doing nothing? Impossible.
Mind balances on its swing;
blood counts its coins.
Open your eyes slowly.
What do you see?
Possibility, the void?
It's only your soul,
that foundling, going home.
Karma Again

You can hang your wishes out on a tree, like devotees at Meenakshee Temple who tie tin effigies to deodar buds, hoping faith will be its own reward.

Green budgies will perch like candles on the lower branches, wavering there. They know wind is as fickle as water; it unknots the most difficult prayers.

Blind dog, smiling gecko, an old man wearing a red feather in his turban—all arrive together: they bask in shade, where every shadow wades in eternity.

Barefoot Brahmins inside the great temple chant mantras in its inner sanctum, where incense billows: they know our goodness lives after us, tying itself to our souls.
Some god must have once
played make-believe within these walls—
magnolia-colored, enlodged with coral,
lapis, jade, and onyx.

Surely he haunted this house
of death as a honeyed fragrance will
an empty hive, finding it perfectly
flawless, chilled with loss.

Could he have foreseen that
two centuries hence a fungal stain
would spread its dark, floral designs
across the marble screen,

underground vault and steps,
that ten thousand daily voices would invest
a filigree of cracks into its domes
and graffitied minarets?

He’s gone, moved on to some
new monument, a sparser continent.
Haunting the roads of Agra now:
packs of stray white dogs.
I understand nothing here
but my own impermanence, the way
my shadow narrows and flushes out
as the sun crosses over.

My life is compromise,
step and counterstep, fall and rise
of breath, mind and mindlessness.
My life is an edge

I skim, like a snail
traveling a razor, armored under-
neath by viscous skirts of slime,
and above by time.

Time keeps me going
on its tank of emptiness, its
gear trembling with oiled gears,
spitting out sparks.

I need a little myth
of daylight, an interval of night,
a sky lit by fifty tiny lamps,
and the moon’s furrows

into which I toss
the seeds of knowing and of loss,
my urgent, wordless prayers
for a life

I cannot own—
my years crumbling into poems,
my moments vanished into air
before they’re even spent.
Radha Addresses Krishna

Like a lotus pond full of crocodiles,
or a golden ship engulfed by flames,

like a wishing tree barren of leaves,
or a banquet hall of empty chairs,

like a chariot formed by dark clouds,
or a white elephant chained to a temple,

like a peacock perched on a tent of skulls,
or a haystack infested with snakes,

like a sacred river flooding its banks,
or a prayer inscribed in spilled blood,

like a dagger soaked in honey, or
a proffered hand thinned by want—

so am I blessed and afflicted,
delivered, condemned in one breath—

for you are gone, and your absence
breeds a fever of longings inside me . . .
Shiva's Prowess

There are ecstatic rituals every do-good deity knows; there are myriad ways to flout, grin, and pose,

so that even virgins undulate like struck water—but no one, states the Purānas, will ever master

a fraction of the multimillion postures Shiva savors. His sacred prowess is cause for my wonder—

coming from a god who smells like burnt grass, who wears two cobras coiled around his biceps—

what strange fires must smoulder beneath his skin, and what an appetite to quench, when he is smitten;

for he's a being whose gaze unleashes rivers, an ocean of desire, a lover whose smile is a danger zone,

whose touch awakens sunken leviathans to rise up like fountains from their former lives.

Eight million ways to move, make love, to take a woman out of her body and soul, and bring her back—

postures whirling like tornados, brief as eclipses, ceremonial as a rain dance; movements slick

as oiled arias; kisses inspiring drugged trances: his tongue a glistening shrine, his teeth avalanches,

his mouth hewn from the deepest hole in space, his breath a meadow of mint, a web of spindrift,

his wide neck taut with cords of rolling muscles, his chest an orchestra, his heart a ship's hull,
his arms huge sea nets, opposing shores,
his belly an island forested in ripe mangoes,

his penis a gourd into which the universe flows,
and his entry like the moment of death—
Elegy in a Snowstorm

I.
There are those who believe
a banyan tree links heaven to earth,
that angels slide off its patient limbs,
dream wanderers drifting down like water
from the helm of a radiant ship,
to mingle freely with women and men.

But I have seen the king cobra
untangle itself from the branches
to lie coiled and bracelet ed with dew,
its wide hood flared into a spoon
that wags back and forth and back,
stirring the air with death.

II.
Tonight the fertile jungles
are a secret chamber
housed in a vacant thought.
Where the bee prowled for pollen,
where bee-eaters perched on dahlias,
and peacocks wailed like widows,

there is only the tick of snow—
glittering, blowing, chill—

it disguises a garbage can as a nun;
it will inherit our shadows.
III.
The heart thickens like a storm.  
You are gone for good,

and I have spent weeks, months
trying to know what it's like
to be dead.  
The snow understands

nothing except itself:  
a skull of ice, melting . . .

IV.
When you died, I felt
for the first time like a bride

left standing at the altar,  
my shoes full of blood,

the small bones of my fingers
dazzled by pain, the bald rabbi

screaming Hebrew in my ear.  
And your touch truly lost forever.

V.
You taught me how to dance.  
We were sixteen then, and our bed rose

like a cloudbank or a rare carpet woven
right out of the Arabian Nights.

Soon we fell together into adulthood:  
the heavens turned threadbare, strange.
And now you've fallen into the ground,
where turbaned men in moustaches

kiss your golden lips closed,
as your spirit splashes itself with dust.

VI.

Alex, it has been snowing wildly
for more than a month.

It is sweltering in the house.
My breath is a kind of wake,

my sighs immense and empty.
Is the dark a doorway? Or the light?

I would hold you in my arms, here,
in this Valley-of-Bewildered-Windows,

if only you would slide back down
the long, white branch of your going,

and astonish us with your voice.

—in memory of Alex Londres, 1950–1988
Alex in Hindustan

Talmudic men, you'd call them—
those ancient sadhus in peach
who daven to the tame wind.

Submit, you'd tell me, to all
that bewilders you, or be
revamped as the Jagannāth,

juggernaut, lord of the world,
master of the word, and bow
to no one, with a smileless smile.

Be extreme as that poor man
whose sustenance is a hope
suspended upon nothing.

Your face is your bowl:
go begging with it full
of the soft grains of love.

And you dance before me
as you talk, a ghostly man
laughing with white teeth.

But there is no one here,
Alex, and the Indian sun
raises a cruel blister

on my heart, and when
the dumb night descends,
and the moon like a sponge
dampens my forehead,
I must ask you again—
return, return from the dead.
Meditation at Twilight

Near a small village, not far from Bangalore, 
I saw a king cobra flattened by a truck, 
and left to fatten the rush of red ants.

A baby cobra slid out from the wayside grasses. 
It ran its delicate body up and down the corpse, 
as if trying to coax it back to life.

All the world seemed stilled upon its axis. 
Even the cicadas held their wings 
in willed suspended animation.

Dust settled like a void.

Like a prism, each life reflects itself 
in the dew's microscopic mirrors.

Every death records the silence 
of a single, amazed mourner.
Ars Femina

Widowhood breeds a kind of living death for Lakshmi, whose husband's final breath issued from him like an ancient curse. There is no need now for futile words; she simply smashes her glass bangles, wrist to wrist, unscrews her earrings, tali necklace, pulls off the silver toe-rings from Amma, wipes away the perfect, red tilak-dot gracing her forehead, and slowly unplaits her waist-long black hair, still wetted with Tata's rose-scented coconut oil, still strung with white jasmine and coral. Carefully, she unwinds the fuchsia sari, a gift from her own sister's scanty dowry, puts it away forever, and dons her weeds of white cotton, so coarse against her knees. Without being told, she bathes his cold flesh, gazing angrily, shamefacedly at his lips which only hours earlier had touched hers with such tenderness she'd blushed. "Why have you done this to me?" she cries silently, seeing before her a long life of refusals, her impurity, joylessness. Above their bed hangs a photo, facing west,
an image of his startling smile, framed
in ebony and rosewood; a woven garland made
of sandalwood dangles from it in a wreath.
She moves to dust it off, but suddenly,
a throng of mosquitoes comes shaken loose
from it, and she recoils, as another truth
unleashes itself before her drying eyes:
she is one of them now, all drone and sting.
Veerappan

"Notorious elephant poacher and sandalwood smuggler, Veerappan, and his men have once again eluded the police."
—Deccan-Herald headline

Alligators aren't known for intelligence, nor is rainwater praised for its color. A corpse must forfeit all pretense.

But Veerappan is a Solomon of stealth, and as fluid as a rainbow's torch; not even death can outwit this fellow,

who, on a whimsy, transforms himself into a jujube tree or a backward curse, who dons transparency like a cloak.

Some say he owns bejeweled mansions in Madras and Bangalore, that his arms are as thick as an elephant's trunk,

that his sister dacoits are ebony-skinned, glossy as saplings, ripe as pomegranates, their lips red chilies.

Some say he's immortal, a wily deity of greed, who lives on air and riddles, who sleeps entwined in snakes, his body so fragrant with power it can stop mid-air the axe aimed for his hundred ribs.

Some say he's killed an army of cops, he's slaughtered a nation of tuskers, he's felled ten crore worth or more of sandalwood forests—this brother
of the poor, jungle-loving murderer,
this teakwood and ivory hoarder, this
terrorist-idol, crowd pleaser, devil-god.

And who has not stopped by a roadside
on the edge of nowhere, suddenly chilled
by the gutted wind, and reluctantly bowed
to the fear of him, to Veerappan—
who knows every poison of the heart,
every leaf's name, every seed and sin?
Maya

Crows’ shadows stipple the trees.  
Sequins of sweat bead the eyebrows  
of Muslim, Hindu, Christian, and Jain.  
Oh salt of our sleep, deliver us  
soon from this furnace of dreams.

Promise of dusk’s turning slakes me.  
Soon the temple’s pitted bell will clang,  
and the reverent will pitch themselves  
into the goddess’s arms like swords,  
severing the threads that bind.

Summer mocks us one and all.  
It bears down its weight of gold,  
flattening each shadow’s welt  
into the finest residue of ash.  
The ground is a patchwork of loss.

I seek refuge in evening’s harmony  
sung by veena and nagaswaram.  
And when the shruti box drones out  
infinity’s chord, I concur: time  
is a continuum that slurs the notes  
and blurs the vision like a drug.  
We are the slow smoke that ascends  
from a nonexistent fire: neither  
dirt nor water can put us out.  
The soul is irreducible as doubt.
"Want": Holy men and women in India usually spend their later years as wandering mendicants whose sole possessions are a begging bowl, a walking stick, and the clothes they wear upon their backs.

"Russell Market": Gaffar served as my household’s watchman, or chowkidar, at night, and Ibrahim was our day watchman.

"Street Scene": Kasturbai Street is named in honor of Mohandas Gandhi’s wife. Amma means “mother.”

"Pride": The kind of rickshaw I’m referring to in the poem is a three-wheeled motorcycle taxi. They abound throughout Bangalore.

"Dharma": Salaam alekum, alekum salaam is a common Urdu greeting and response.

"Bangalore Lullaby": Ratri-rani is the fragrant “Queen-of-the-night” jasmine.

"The Bishop of Mysore": A puja is a Hindu devotional rite; an Ambassador is an Indian-made car.

"Village Market": Pan is a flavorful masticatory composed of bits of areca nut mixed with lime and enclosed in a betel-nut leaf.

"Tribals": The Kurubas are a tribal people who live in the Nilgiri Mountains (literally, the “Blue Mountains”), a range in Tamil Nadu, a South Indian state. When elephants are in musth, a kind of male heat, they’re often aggressive and highly unpredictable.

"In the Nilgiris": The chital is the spotted, or axis, deer; bulbuls are sober-colored, elegant birds from the Pycnonotidae family.

"The Flying Swami": My young friend, Shome Chowdhury, first told me about the “flying swami,” and one day, while speeding by in a taxi, I caught a glimpse of him levitating near the Lodhi Tombs.

"The Yogi Speaking": Hanuman (lit. “the one with big jaws”), in Hindu mythology, is a semidivine monkey king, renowned as the warrior companion of Rama. A veena is a stringed South Indian instrument, similar to the sitar; a nagaswaram is a wooden, double-reed flute; the tala, in Indian music, is a series of metrical patterns.

"Taj Mahal": It’s tragic but true: indifferent legislators have allowed an oil refinery to be built near the Taj Mahal, and this magnificent landmark has been vandalized and defaced by graffiti.

"Alex in Hindustan": Sadhus are holy men and women.

"Ars Femina": A tali is a marriage pendant.

"Veerappan": Veerappan’s name, and word of his daring and illegal exploits, have taken on, over the past decade, a certain mythic authority throughout India. Dacoits are armed bandits; a crore represents the quantity of ten millions.

"Maya": Maya is a Sanskrit word meaning “illusion.” A shruti box is a harmonium that is equipped with four keys. Indian musicians say that its drone represents the sound of eternity (or time’s continuum).
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*BOOKS MAY BE RECALLED BEFORE THEIR DUE DATES*
"Maurya Simon's *The Golden Labyrinth* is a delight and more than a book of 'travel' poems about her extended residency in India. It is a lyric poet's consideration of the problem of human misery, globalized literary identities, and the place of pity and compassion in privileged circumstances. In delicacy of expression and preciseness of vision, Simon's work can easily be seen as an extension of the powers given to contemporary American poetry through the contributions of Elizabeth Bishop and May Swenson. Simon's poetry stands with theirs, as accessible and lucid as anyone's, yet holds to a level of thought and seriousness beyond any current issues of reputation. Overall, the project is to accomplish what Rainer Maria Rilke said *should* be the ambition of each poet who writes—that we share 'a tenderness towards existence.'" —*Garrett Hongo*

"Maurya Simon’s poems have always been luminous and beautiful. Now, in *The Golden Labyrinth*, her vision has deepened, her spirituality become more all embracing. The soul’s darkness is never obscured, but light triumphs in 'dark-hinged explosions of flight.' This is a wise and satisfying book, one the reader will return to, time after time, for pleasure and understanding." —*Susan Ludvigson*

The poems in Simon's captivating fourth volume describe the labyrinth of India, an overwhelming, difficult place for a foreigner to explore, but a country that seems to offer a transcendent good at its core for those who can learn to find it. From a ragged boy spontaneously bursting into song on a street corner to a beggar-woman whose offering of all she has left—a frail dirge—"defies her terrible hunger," Simon's images remind us again and again of what she learned in India: that "each small world transforms itself."

*About the Author*

Maurya Simon is the author of three previous collections of poetry, *The Enchanted Room*, *Days of Awe*, and *Speaking in Tongues*. The recipient of several awards, including a Fulbright Fellowship, Simon teaches Creative Writing at the University of California, Riverside.

Photos by Robert Falk