

ROAD/MAP/CANVAS

A THESIS IN
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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

by
SAMEER JOSHI

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ROAD/MAP/CANVAS

Sameer Joshi, Candidate for the Master of Fine Arts Degree

University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2015

ABSTRACT

The poems in this thesis explore the connection between imagination, space and belonging. Actual landscapes provoke imaginative responses. A small town in South Peru becomes the focus of desire, belonging and nostalgia. The landscape of South India becomes an imaginary home, while more familiar cities are seen through lenses of loss, regret, doubt and reconciliation. A section in the thesis focuses on the purely imaginative spaces depicted in paintings. These spaces evoke humor, promise and fear. The title “Road/Map/Canvas” unites the concept of places that are real and perceived, constructed and imagined.

Apprehending real and imagined places alike through an artist’s eye, this thesis makes the case that places are not immutable

givens. They are instead loci of potential that the imaginative perception can unlock and re-create; they are “homes” that are “yet unknown.”

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences have examined a thesis titled “Itenerarium,” presented by Sameer Joshi, candidate for the Master of Fine Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

Supervisory Committee

Michelle Boisseau, Ph.D., Committee Chair
Department of English

Daniel Mahala, Ph.D.
Department of English

Robert Stewart, M.A.
Department of English

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ix
INTRODUCTION.....	1
FAR.....	13
Seraquilla 1	14
Seraquilla 2	15
Seraquilla 3.....	16
Seraquilla 4.....	17
Seraquilla 5.....	19
Seraquilla 6.....	21
Seraquilla 7.....	23
Seraquilla 8.....	24
Seraquilla 9.....	25
Night in Santa Marta.....	26
Seraquilla 10.....	28
HERE.....	29
The Moon.....	30

Morandi.....	31
Thiebaud.....	33
Mohamedi.....	34
Richter.....	35
deChirico (<i>Piazza d'Italia</i> , 1969).....	38
NEAR.....	40
While Surfing the Web.....	41
Nasik –.....	42
London Thumakda.....	44
Kerala: Train, Northbound 1.....	47
Kerala: Train, Northbound 2.....	50
Kerala: Backwaters 1.....	51
Kerala: Backwaters 2.....	53
Kerala: Wayanad 1.....	55
Kerala: Wayanad 2.....	56
Kerala: Wayanad 3.....	59
Kerala: Wayanad 4.....	62
Kerala: Wayanad 5.....	64

Getting off a Bus in Pune.....	65
An Afternoon Exchange.....	67
VITA.....	69

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For

V. M. Jain

INTRODUCTION

Throughout my writing of this thesis, I have struggled with the issue of sentimentality. *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines sentimentality thus:

While *sentimentality* may simply refer to the quality of possessing emotion or feeling, in calling poetry *sentimental*, a reader may mean to identify and condemn an emotional treatment in excess of its object, a false or contrived response that is not convincingly suited to an occasion (Sentimentality).

Basically, sentimentality refers to expression of emotion in a way that is not authentic. The *Encyclopedia*, however, also discusses scholars whose definition of sentimentality is not so negative:

Pinch argues that sentimentality in poetry renders legible the ways that emotions are both external and internal to the individual. Sentimental poetry exposes the way that feeling "constructs and

mediates between the categories of literary convention and personal experience... . [T]he concept of sentimentality may be defined precisely as a confrontation between the personal and the conventional" (Sentimentality).

But if emotions are both internal and external to the individual, how can one distinguish between the personal and the conventional? How can the poet avoid being fooled by her facility with the conventional which makes her believe that the emotions she expresses are the product of her own self, not of her adherence to convention? The issue of sentimentality is connected to the earlier movement towards "Sensibility." According to the *Encyclopedia*,

Sensibility, with its focus on subjective experience, contributed to the redefinition of poetry as something other than metrical writing: it was becoming linked to particular acts of heightened perception (Sensibility).

But how is a poet to extricate her heightened perception from the quagmire of conventional ways of thinking and writing? The following pages describe my struggles in this area. I have discovered that the struggle against sentimentality in my poems isn't simply a matter of an aesthetic opportunity missed. To use form and sound to counter a sentimental impulse does more than salvage a poem, but actually enhances its core qualities.

I begin with the ekphrastic poem "Richter," where I examine carefully the painter Gerhard Richter's mode of working where he paints large canvases and scrapes them off with a large metal squeegee. In ostensibly erasing or obscuring his own intention, including any impulse towards sentimentality, Richter's work appears to be a record of violence. Yet his work is reminiscent of conceptual artists and procedural poets who place primacy on plan and procedure over artistic whimsy, romantic or otherwise. The intention is borne by the plan and process, not by the artist's impulse or emotion. This brutal, yet liberating act of self-effacement is echoed in the form of the poem, which is also

“scraped” down so that the lines are as short as possible,
sometimes breaking mid-word:

until we,
con-
fronted

with ap-
parent
ugli-

ness,
stand
and give

a chance
to bruised
pat-

ches of
raw
color,

The form replicates the brutality of the painter’s technique.

Another ekphrastic poem “de Chirico” confronts the problem of sentimentality also. The poem, describing a cityscape painted by a proto-surrealist painter, ends with a note of paranoia and resignation; the phrase “These shadows won’t lengthen” signaled resignation and paranoia, a feeling of being trapped in the

moment. The first draft of the poem ends with an image of maternal image of sentimentality that was defusing the paranoia of the ending, by referring to the feminized sky:

This overcast sky, ocean-green,
green as the deeps.
The sky has drunk of the sea.
She is pregnant with the sea.
She is heavy with seaweed and salt.
Poised above the plaza, she waits.
We came from the sea. Foundlings.
The foam flung us on the beaches.
The universe held us, suckled us
on sweet milk and sea-brine.
All cities are deserted,
come to think of it.
All moments can be infinite.
These shadows won't lengthen.

While trying to eliminate the sentimentality, I noticed that I had ignored a part of the painting while describing it – the image of a second city on the horizon. Believing that there was some charge I felt in relation to the second city that I was concealing through sentimentality, I replaced the maternal material with a description of the city. This not only connected the rest of the poem to the ending by removing the sentimental obstruction, it also

emphasized the paranoid nature of the ending by matching the truncated rhythm of end-stopped lines.

Behind the train and the smoke,
the men, the street and the tower,
a distant city beckons like a mirage,
or a mirror image of our own.
The sky holds back a deluge.
The sun teeters, invisible.
The tower's eye mocks.
We are trapped in stillness.
These shadows won't lengthen.
The train approaches endlessly.

The clutch of end-stopped lines at the end now read like breathless pronouncements that are appropriately irrational (because paranoia is not rational). In this way, the elimination of sentimentality automatically brought the sonic qualities of the poem into unity of feeling.

The foregoing example brought out how sentimentality, while appearing to be an excess of feeling, also provides an unfortunately expedient method of deferring the real feeling. If a poem appears sentimental, it is easy to discard, which helps me to avoid confronting its real motivations. The original ending of the poem "Seraquilla 4" was as sentimental as possible. Describing an

erotic reverie where the narrator is the focus of others' gazes as he walks down the street, the poem originally ended with

and I walk on
and blush

so hard,
I die

The death of the narrator, overtly dramatic, was a way of shrugging off, or dismissing the uncomfortable emotion of desire.

As an experiment, I changed the 4-line ending to

And I walk on,
and blush, and walk on.

The blushing remains, but the dying is replaced by the narrator walking on, not denying or dismissing the desire, but being with it and its discomfort. The lingering echo of the repeated phrase "walk on," and the longer last line "and blush, and walk on" create a more stable ending for the poem, one that suggests continuity of action where the narrator takes the emotion "in his stride," in comparison to the unsatisfying, responsibility-escaping sonic collapse of "I die."

To sum up, sentimentality and unsatisfactory sonic effects are basically symptoms of reluctance to deal with discomfort.

What the revision process has taught me is to use these as opportunities, by not rejecting what is unsatisfactory but by transforming it by “dealing with it.”

The impulse to sentimentality is an impulse towards premature closure. The issue of metrical form becomes relevant here because habitual ways of listening and speaking gravitate towards formulae, and the use of these can unfortunately promote sentimentality. The consequences of what Fussell calls “the reader’s lust for rhythm” (16) might be avoided through a conscious rejection of metrical regularity. As an example, I offer one poem by Ron Padgett (62-63) that I encountered during my study. The poem flirts dangerously with Hallmark-style mawkishness, and escapes sentimentality by a hair’s breadth with the use of formal jaggedness – stanzas with uneven numbers of lines and the lack of metrical regularity:

The Best Thing I Did

The best thing I did
for my mother
was to outlive her

for which I deserve
no credit

though it makes me glad
that she didn't have
to see me die

Like most people
(I suppose)
I feel I should
have done more
for her

Like what?
I wasn't such a bad son

I would have wanted
to have loved her as much
as she loved me
but I couldn't
I had a life a son of my own
a wife and my youth that kept going on
maybe too long

And now I love her more
and more

so that perhaps
when I die
our love will be the same

though I seriously doubt
my heart can ever be
as big as hers

Metrically indefensible lines like “no credit” or “and more” or “for her” direct the reader so far from sentimentality that the ending’s possible sentimentality is neutralized. In my final poem, “An Afternoon Exchange,” there is an impulse towards rhyme (and therefore towards form); pairings like box/lost, gaze/decades/rages, intricacies/Japanese provide some semblance of formal unity. However, the treasures mentioned in the poem are hardly examples of perfect prosody:

A palm-sized marble tile
I purloined from
the Dahiyas’ home-
construction site
at nine. The red-blue
parrot I’d painted on it
in Camel poster color
is bright-hued as ever.
On another tile,
a hummingbird; also
a small board on which
I’d glued on a flower
of seashells in a circle,
next to which is fixed
a butterfly with two

oyster-shell wings.

But since the exchange between father and son comes close to being sentimental, a balance had to be achieved. The all too easy descent into sentimentality is balanced out by the metrical amorphousness of the list of objects. In this way, this thesis contains my struggles involving sentimentality and form, and the struggle will continue beyond the completion of my studies.

According to the *Encyclopedia*, “Crucially, the idea of the poet as a person of heightened sensibility has never quite been lost” (Sensibility). If this is the case, then the poet is seen as someone who can enrich culture with her heightened sensibility. This places a responsibility on the poet. The struggle between adherence to convention, which is a heightened form of self-deceit, and authentic expression, is a continuing one. For a writer, it is hard to immediately realize which side of the boundary she is on. The path for the poet is therefore one of blunders, where the poet stumbles more often than succeeding, and doesn’t know if she has succeeded or not as she stumbles through the fog of uncertainty.

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FAR

Seraquilla 1

In the shoe-shop
by Plaza Grau
you spot him. Him!

His smile.
Buying shoes, he says,
for his *niña* –

a black-eyed doll
in a frilly blue frock.
You smile back

as would be polite
and walk on.
A day ago,

you took his *colectivo*
from another small town
on a long, dusty road.

You hide your elation
at running into him
again, this lad

with dancing eyes
and slender body, one
you paid only a few *soles*,

yet who
remembered you,
with smiling eyes.

Seraquilla 2

In the Plaza Grau
with shoe-polishers,

hawkers,
loiterers,

from a park bench
nearby,

a man notices
me noticing

the tuk-tuk boys,
and leers.

Seraquilla 3

A town built on
a spit of land
jutting into the Rio Pampa –
Seraquilla.

At La Balsa
people wash tuk-tuks
right in the river
where it braids among rocks.

Where it flows clear,
a boy and a girl
float by on innertubes
and wave.

The Rio Pampa curls
about the hillside
and marches to the Amazon
somewhere, out there.

Shops open and close.
Fruit fills the markets.
Buyers flock to stalls.
People are living.

Seraquilla 4

With books and detritus
in my room

I make an enclosure
for a tree

with broad leaves
like the ones in Seraquilla.

And I plant a tree
and it grows. What's

a tree without wedges
of sky in the branches?

I add the sky,
stick in a white Andean peak,

and there is now a street
from the peak to the tree

and the street is an avenue
in Seraquilla.

And I wear my striped sweater
and walk up the street

and I am nineteen again,
firm of body.

And the burly man who sells sweaters
off Plaza Grau,

notices me.
And the slender boy

driving the tuk-tuk
notices me.

And I walk on,
and blush, and walk on.

Seraquilla 5

A tattered shade
of shale –

my sun-wet
roof;

my red square
of house

on a dust-heaped
hill –

I walk the dust
that says:

Dust returns
to dust –

as will you.
On a dusty track

I walk to the town
of thin-thighed boys,

in whose pupils
satisfaction has spilled

and rolled like yolks:
Seraquilla.

Seraquilla:

give me a place –

a yellow wall,
half a roof,

room to stand.
I'll stay in days,

and come out nights
like women who

sell incense by
cathedral doors.

Seraquilla 6

One may
ride a

tuk-tuk in
Seraquilla,

a metal egg
that hurtles off

so years slow
down, or do

they speed up?
In the rattling metal

capsule, feel free
to think

of anything, even
home, as

the polite boy
hoists you through

sputtering streets,
think of homes –

the ones
you left

and some
unknown.

Seraquilla 7

“How like home”
was your first thought

in Seraquilla.
The tuk-tuks

are no-frills metal
with a familiar name:

Bajaj. From *mi pais*,
you tell the driver-boy

pointing to
the Hindi writing.

He asks what it means.
You know no *español*.

You offered yourself.
You’ve been read.

Seraquilla 8

If you ask the girls
selling DVDs

by Plaza Grau:
“*Tiene Hindu?*”

They’ll hand you
rubber-banded stacks

of pirated movies
with Shahrukh Khan.

Would she understand,
this unsmiling pedlar

that she’s selling you threads
that tie you to home –

or something close,
here, in the Andes?

Seraquilla 9

For two *soles*
one might enter this zoo
the guidebooks describe
as pathetic –

a small maze
of small cages
surrounded by moat,
filled with Amazoniana-

forgettable fowl,
disheveled monkeys,
a sleeping jaguar.
Was there a turtle? All

in unmanned coops,
just barely fastened.
Outside, a deserted
swimming pool,

trees, bamboos,
rocks, the braided
Rio Pampa. If

all one needs
is nothing much,
one may find it here,
here in Seraquilla.

Night in Santa Marta

The hot springs
and zip-lining done

you now sit
on a bench in the plaza

of a one-horse town
in the middle of the Andes.

You see a mere two lights
on every street

that radiates off the square.
Around you, in shops

people buy and sell
in complete darkness.

Light comes from the church
as does a melody

sung by the priest.
A man walks by

with a wilted cabbage,
and a bottle of oil:

supper supplies.
A girl plays hopscotch

alone, on the pavement.

A man sits on a bench
staring into the dark,
mirroring you.

Seraquilla 10

What guidebooks call
a “jungle town”
is no forest camp,

and yet, in the hills
that surround
gather clouds

like a veil, afternoons,
to feed mossy peaks
that drip by drip

give up what flows
later as the Amazon.
The clouds

reach low
sometimes and rain
on the town

where women sell
chocolate and fruit
at the bus stop,

but I don’t buy,
promising to return
to delve more deeply

into the clouds,
cascades, orchards,
hills of moss.

HERE

The Moon

The blue
moon

shines on
through gaps

in the gristle
of the frozen

sky's torn
canvas.

Morandi

In the paintings of Giorgio Morandi,
bottles, bowls and blocks
line up, as if on parade.

No tableaux of fruit here,
or flowers catching the sun,
strewn in fetching arrangements.

The bowls are empty, gaping mouths.
The bottles, too skinny to serve
as containers, wavering, vertical.

Side by side, they stand
at attention, huddled prisoners
at a concentration camp.

Even the colors are muted, uniform.
A limited palette, pallor over all.
The blue of the bottles matches the rims of bowls.

The color of the background
is not too far from that of the objects;
the palette imprisons the objects.

The sources of light, unspecified.
The light an unnatural gray.
Grayer shadows on barren expanse.

The painter's hand is visible
in quivering asymmetry, and yet
it insists on discipline, not whimsy –

bottles and blocks arrayed for order,
not beauty—cowering, compact,
contours approaching flat silhouettes,

like the occasional, beaked oilcan
towering like an unfinished cathedral
over a desolate town.

Thiebaud

The upward sweep
of skyscraper, the upward
swipe of street; the only
way is up, in the cityscapes
of Wayne Thiebaud.

The congeries of buildings
and highways, resolved
into pastel toy-shapes
revealing what they were
conceived to be –

dreams of faith in order,
geometry as God,
vertical cubes and stripes,
nightmares of discipline

speeding through space
to recruit one's reluctant
gaze, until Thiebaud
arrays them in candied shapes,

reveals cubes as cubes
streets as stripes,
folds vertigo into origami,
glazes order with order.

Mohamedi

Nasreen Mohamedi
gave us not completion
but its components;
told us how all form
is composed of fragments,
corners, lines –

how form is born when line
agrees with line. Or when
it differs. Yet it is wrong
to call this weaving, for
lines here don't flow
on or through one another

but hold their own, each line
stands alone, or races
into infinity. No structure
here, for nothing
is enclosed. What remains
is the promise of every-
thing unraveled, unbuilt.

The confusion of planes
and horizons isn't sleight
of hand, for all form
is provisional, all
structure illusion. All
is grandeur of the line,
mad, devoted, repeated.

Richter

In the
scraped
paintings of
Gerhard
Richter
we find
insistent
violence –

the
assertion
of material
over
message,

of brute
gesture
over
design,

of proce-
dure over
plan,

of deed
over
beauty,

of speed
over
intention

of act
over
will

until we,
con-
fronted

with ap-
parent
ugli-

ness,
stand
and give

a chance
to bruised
pat-

ches of
raw
color,

regard
as we
only can

when
what inter-
venes

is crushed,
scraped,
rammed

against
the
grain.

de Chirico (*Piazza d'Italia*, 1969)

This much is true:
that we are born, and strut awhile
on the trapezoid of the world-stage;
and sometimes, being well-mannered,
even shake hands and how-do-you-do
like these two men.
In Giorgio de Chirico's Piazza,
a giant statue blocks the street
precisely where a statue can't be,
blocking the traffic
of which there isn't any.
The sun, of course,
according to these long shadows,
is heaving its yellow across the square,
in a tired push of late afternoon.
The arches on each side
lead into not doors, but walls.
Why an arch if no door behind?
Why a building if no door?
Why a city if no people?
What does the watchtower watch
through its single opening?
All that moves is the train
approaching like a neglected thought.
With a toot-toot she emits
a single puff of cartoonish smoke.
What business has she in a deserted town?
How long is this moment of her approach?
The two lines of arches
exemplify the single-point perspective,
their lines converging to a single point

somewhere near the watchtower
to give the impression
that we watch everything.
Watching through our eye, our I,
we go where our eye goes,
even into strange cities
that only toot-toot trains can reach
and live our bumbling lives
while someone in the watchtower
watches us through its single eye.
The parallel shadows of the two men
pierce the plaza like needles.
But whose is the third, the one unseen?
Who is in the watchtower,
that guardian of nothing?
Whose flag flutters, cryptic wisp,
in the cold wind from the sky?
This is an overcast sky, ocean-green.
The sky has drunk of the sea.
Behind the train and the smoke,
the men, the street and the tower,
a distant city beckons like a mirage,
or a mirror image of our own.
The sky holds back a deluge.
The sun teeters, invisible.
The tower's eye mocks.
We are trapped in stillness.
These shadows won't lengthen.
The train approaches endlessly.

NEAR

While Surfing the Web

Who is alive
still? Does
your dead mother's

lover recall her
with any feeling?
What about the lake

where they held
their trysts, with you
as accomplice?

What brimmed with shame
is a dry bed now,
a field of acacia.

At forty, you stare
at the photo on the web
with childish glee.

Nasik –

a town with dry
ground

with shadows
of circling

leaves,
and longer

arcs of vulture
wings

dark on brown,
and farther

still, the
arc of river.

A town may
sprout

here, rise,
fall,

just a circ-
ling shadow

of leaves
in flight; a canvas

with a circling

brush-

stroke of vulture-
wing.

London Thumakda

(In the Hindi film *Queen*, Kangana Ranaut plays a Punjabi girl who, after being stood up at her festive wedding, undertakes a world tour resulting in self-transformation)

They
don't know
it yet

but
here
you are

at your
own
wedding,

a stranger.
How strange,
the henna

on
your palms,
the song,

the dance.
Why do
you don

that tatty
sweater

midst spark-
ling
sarees?

You catch
your mother's
tear-

ful eye, mid-
dance, to say
goodbye.

Both
bride and vaga-
bond,

your danc-
ing self
is poised

on the
cusp of
a split.

Your smile
falls in-
to your

hennaed
hands,
and spills

through

fingers.
The bowl

of
the world
rolls

to receive
you,
Queen.

Kerala : Train, Northbound 1

From Kollam to Kannur
is a long
train-ride

over lands
that are
wet and green –

rice-fields
lagoons,
forests.

You have
the wrong
ticket.

A kindly man
forces you
to occupy his seat

while he stands.
Your foreign clothes,
your lighter skin,

will cause people
to ask,
“What country?”

This one,
you say,
even if

you haven't been
to this place
before.

These fields
and forests
are where you're from.

It isn't easy,
you want to say,
to have a "country"

or to be
from "somewhere."
Some of us

have to take
the long route
before we can claim

a beginning,
a base,
a point of origin.

It is like always
standing next
to yourself

for years, saying
"not yet."
Until

one day
you find
your footing.

Or perhaps,
when a stranger
forces you to sit

in his seat
while he stands,
feeds you his mother's

Kottayam cooking,
wrenching out
your answer –

mindless,
trusting,
truthful –

This one.

(For Deepu Varghese).

Kerala : Train, Northbound 2

Night train to Kannur.
View through darkened monsoon fronds.
Tube-lit porch. Two chairs.

Kerala: Backwaters 1

Even in the summer,
it is cool in the shadows
of the backwaters.

A water-snake gleams
at the side of your canoe.
A kingfisher preens.

Footbridges cross
the narrow canal.
You lie back to duck

and see the blue sky,
the overhang of leaves
backlit by sun.

The canal gets wider –
a gentle avenue
wending through palms

in a city of water.
A gaggle of ducks
ruffles the tranquil.

The thickness of foliage
almost hides houses
or signs of humans

that peek through the leaves –
half-hidden roofs,
stacks of dry fronds.

Suddenly, the open
vistas of long bunds
separating fish-ponds

and then green tunnels
of bamboo and yam
shaded by palms.

On a log bridge
two smiling children
regard you with wonder –

making you a creature,
of these paths of water,
no more a stranger.

Kerala : Backwaters 2

My boat
makes a halt
at Sambaran Kodi.

My guide
walks me up
the hillside

to a village
smothered
in vines:

A shop,
a schoolgirl,
the late

sun shining
on palms,
green-choked yards.

On the narrow
street, we dodge
the rattling

smoke-spewing
bus, the last
one into town.

A library. A poster
for
the Communist Party.

By the palms at
the lagoon's edge,
we sit on a log

to watch the sun
mark a shiny track
on its ruffled mirror.

This is a place,
complete,
compact,

rooted, real,
to which I,
for the span

of a boat-stop
may
completely belong.

Kerala : Wayanad 1

The needle-prick
of sap-green leaves
bulbous with juice
at the tips of conical trees
reaches up to pierce the clouds.

Leaves shiny as windows
of ever-rising turrets
gather into globes
until windows –
all-seeing eyes,
bob in the wind –

until the turrets are all windows
and all the houses
have no walls, only windows
aching, open to the light.

Kerala : Wayanad 2

Broad tongues
of stubbly
green

snaking
down-
hill,

converging:
Rice
paddies.

Terraces
of stubble,
some wet,

sometimes
the rare
boulder.

Edged by
orderly
queues

of areca. Raised
flat-
topped

pyramids
of earth,
mounted by

spiky leaves
of ginger.
The horizon –

a solid
green
stripe

of forest
through which
the spears

of palms
rise
and jab

the sky. Hard to
square
this idyll

with dogged
labor, for rice,
areca,

pepper;
my aging
body feels

its looming
wane. The sun
dips lower

to rising
spires
of trees,

curled vines,
heavy
with sap

of spice,
green juice,
looming,

fecund
under the
dry

clouds
of failed
monsoons.

Kerala : Wayanad 3

My guide,
a lad of twenty,
points out that

the teams
of workers
bent

at labor
in the paddy
are tribals

“who work
for Christians.”
Edged out

by farms,
they live in houses
by the river,

“which floods
every year.”
The jackfruit trees

bear green ovoid
fruit
on trunks

that elephants
can shake.
Indeed,

elephants come.
He points
to the ditch

with wire-fence
electrified by night
against marauders.

A lily-
pond,
white buds,

some open;
some leaves
upended

by stronger
ripples,
rotting brown

but mostly
green,
piled heavy.

A sign for a church
to Alphonsa,
first saint

from India.
“Many girls
became nuns

to be like her.”
The fence
turns live

at five.
Herders
race to retrieve

their cows
they pushed into
the elephant reserve

through the space
where the fence
crosses a ditch.

Like a lily pad,
I float, rippling,
moored, in Wayanad,

yet claimed
by tall,
indifferent
skies.

Kerala : Wayanad 4

In Wayanad,
the trees
are

silver oak,
with lopped
off bran-

ches. The top-
s alone
intact

while round
them
curl the ris-

-ing vines
of pepper.
In the under-

storey stand
coffee-
bushes

stunted
at the tip.
All

is green,
a fine
sleight

of hand
making
this place

seem a
forest.
The works

of man
blend
into what

preceded
and will
remain.

My father,
distant,
old and frail,

laughs
when I call
from Wayanad.

Kerala : Wayanad 5

The Kabbini
is swollen
at Kuruva,

the monsoon
being ample
upstream.

The island
unreachable,
I walk awhile

on the shore
on uncertain
paths.

Getting off a Bus in Pune

at four in the morning
is setting yourself up

for a gyp. Because
the crooked tuk-tuk driver
yelled into the bus,

misled you into alighting.
You've figured that out.
No, you won't ride with him

even as he tails you
for the longest time,
pestering, pestering.

The next one you encounter
asks you for directions.
You only have an address.

Vague replies from watchmen
and half-remembered directions
land you at a building

and the tuk-tuk driver
gyps you for the change
and leaves you at a dark

corner in the strange city.
The night-watchman arrives.
You tell him your father's name.

He follows you to the door.
No one answers the bell.
Your sleepy half-brother,

who was a baby when you left,
but is now a youth, opens the door.
Your father is asleep.

You tell your half-brother to sleep,
while you take off your backpack,
lie down on the sofa,

quiet, in the dark.
Two decades after
you left your father's side,

you're back in this country
in this silent house,
enwombed in dawn.

An Afternoon Exchange

They've been sitting
in the metal candy box
in the Godrej cupboard
in my father's bedroom
for over thirty years.
In the living room,
this summer afternoon,
my father presents them
to my surprised gaze.
I'd thought them lost –
to the years, to moves
from Haryana to Maharashtra,
to bonfires
my stepmother started
in one of her rages.
But he's saved them
for decades, nestled
in the cool metal box:
A palm-sized marble tile
I purloined from
the Dahiya's home-
construction site
at nine. The red-blue
parrot I painted on it
in Camel poster color
is bright-hued as ever.
On another tile,
a hummingbird; also
a small board on which
I'd glued on a flower

of seashells in a circle,
next to which is fixed
a butterfly with two
oyster-shell wings.
He's saved them
under lock and key.
I close the lid and place
the box on the table.
My father sits back,
lights a cigarette.
His eyes light up,
as he talks of his years
at the Honda plant.
Smiling, hands in the air,
he describes his handiwork –
the robots, the assembly lines,
the loading docks,
the paint shop, his craft
and its intricacies, the praise
from visiting Japanese.
I click a photo. This
is how I want to remember
him: lit up, alive.
I let him talk.
I honor our deal –
he saves my treasures
and I receive his
in the metal candy box
of listening.

VITA

Sameer Joshi was born in Indore, Madhya Pradesh, India, in 1972. He was educated in Nasik, Faridabad, Sonapat, New Delhi and Indore. While earning a Bachelor's degree in Journalism from University of Delhi, he worked as an advertising copywriter at Contract JWT in New Delhi, winning *Advertising & Marketing* magazine's bronze award for a poster campaign.

Sameer came to the US to study advertising, and graduated with an M. A. in Mass Communication from University of South Dakota in 1996. He then shifted his attention to Film Studies, and attended University of Kansas, where he graduated with a doctorate in that discipline in 2004. His peer-reviewed publications in Film Studies have appeared in the journals *South Asian Popular Culture*, *Sexualities*, *Education about Asia*, *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* and *Journal of Creative Work*.

Seeking to engage in creative activity, Sameer started taking poetry workshops at UMKC in 2010. His poetry has appeared in *I-70 Review* and *Number One Magazine*, while his fiction is forthcoming in *Lalitamba*.

Sameer is a visual artist and has shown his work at the Kansas City Art Institute Continuing Students Exhibition. Sameer is also a certified leader of Interplay, a system of practices to unlock the wisdom of the body using creative storytelling, song, movement, stillness and dance (interplay.org). At UMKC, Sameer has worked for two years as a tutor at the Writing Studio, and as an evaluator for RooWriter, the college-wide writing test.