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Poems

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Poems

Abstract

NINNIKU, NOTHING IS BLACK, REALLY NOTHING, SHARDA

Sujata Bhatt

NINNIKU

1.

Ninniku, ninniku
 the Japanese said
 as they examined the Buddhist
 monks. *To hear insults*
with patience on the way to Nirvana.

The Buddhist mind
 is strengthened by the sharp
 light of garlic.

White... White... is the flame of garlic
 the heat of garlic.

Then Queen Maya, Siddhartha's mother
 dreamt that a white elephant
 entered her womb.

White -

And that was the colour of the swan
 Siddhartha rushed to save.

White -

And that was the colour
 of Kanthak, the horse he once rode.

White -

And that was the colour
 of the elephant he once rode.

The Japanese met Buddhism
 and *ninniku* sprouted
 along with the lotus.

om mani padma hum
 the monks whispered
 ever sleepless, ever vigilant,
 every day they walked for miles –

for the body must be able
 to bear the Truth,
 for without the body the mind cannot
 climb the steep path of right mindfulness.

om mani padma hum
 the monks whispered
 with garlic on their breath.

2.
Ninniku:
 To bear insults with patience.
 That's what they have to do,
 those immigrants
 from the garlic-eating regions.
 Some travel north
 and some travel west
 but they all learn to keep their distance.

Sometimes the women
 in desperation
 douse themselves with perfume –
 musky jasmine
 husky rose –
 later on the bus, humid
 vapours mingle with garlic
 on their skin and clothes; only sharpen
 the luminous
 homesickness
 in the whites of their eyes.

Note: When Buddhism came to Japan in the 6th century AD, the Japanese adopted a new word for garlic, *ninniku* the characters for which mean 'to bear insults with patience'. Buddhist monks are permitted to use garlic for its medicinal properties. The Japanese have never been enthusiastic garlic eaters. This information from: *Garlic: Nature's Original Remedy* by Stephen Fulder and John Blackwood, Healing Arts Press, Vermont, U.S.A., 1991.

NOTHING IS BLACK, REALLY NOTHING

1.

nada es negro, realmente nada

So Frida Kahlo wrote
one day in her diary.

But Frida, how black you could paint
your pulled-back hair, your braids,
and the little dark hairs above your lips –
How black your eyes
your eyebrows;
how black the hairs of your monkey
especially in *Fulang-Chang and I*.

But nothing is black.
True black that breathes
must shine with blue light,
green shadows – some say
a reddish glow means
the colour isn't black enough.

2.

Then there was *elephantinum*,
elephant-tusk-black.
For Plinius records the tale
of Appelles, born around 350 BC he was
Alexander the Great's blue-blooded court painter –
he was the first
to create the colour black called *elephantinum*
from fired ivory.

Dry distilled from tusks,
the fat fired out
from the elephant tusks...
and in the end black powder extracted,
distilled,
dry, dry...

And you can extract black
out of grape seeds.

And you can extract black
out of wood or gas
or out of that oil hidden deep within
the earth.

How black do you want
your paint?

3.

I do not want
to consult the dictionary
for words about black.
I know those one-sided words
already: a black heart, a black mood,
a black day, a blunt blackjack –

I keep brooding instead
over my daughter's love for black –

How when she was not quite three
and the blond children teased her
for having brown hair,
she was only angered by their inaccuracy.
'This is not brown!' she screamed,
holding up a fistful of her hair.
It's black!
My hair is black, black –
Not brown!

As if to say
she knew her colours well.
She no longer confused orange with red,
indigo with violet,
or brown with black.
She could understand light green, dark green,
yellow, blue, she learned
the names so quickly.

4.

Now I keep turning back to you Frida –
Nothing is black

SHARDA

After all these years
my mother has forgotten her name –
the name of the girl
she most admired –
the girl who lived across the street
when my mother was little

So I tell her
it must've been Sharda.
Sharda:

A mature name, full of dignity.
Sharda, who is the later Verma –
light sun-rose (laksh)
transparent across blood-dark
heavy tones – Sharda who is both
Saraswati and Durga –
dragonfly wings
slimmer, curlier above the crown
How can one name
contain so much?

Sharda, Sharda! I can see
her mother calling her.

Sharda was a serious girl.
She wore silk churru choli.
There is a long full skirt and a tight
bodice-plate – she sparkled.
She was nine-years-old.
She knew many prayers.

She sat alone
in the puja room –
she was doing well

but how you loved your black hair
 that's not really black
 and how many different black strokes
 you found (when nothing is black)
 to pull out every shade
 of blackness
 from your hair, your self –

SHARDA

After all these years
 my mother has forgotten her name –
 the name of the girl
 she most admired –
 the girl who lived across the street
 when my mother was little.

So I tell her

it must've been Sharda.

Sharda:

A mature name, full of dignity.
 Sharda, who is the lute: Veena –
 light sun-notes flicker
 transparent across blood-dark
 heavy tones – Sharda who is both
 Sarasvati and Durga –
 dragonfly wings
 shimmer, curious above the drowned squirrel –
 How can one name
 contain so much?

'Sharda, Sharda!' I can see
 her mother calling her.

Sharda was a serious girl.
 She wore silk *chanya choli*:
 that is, a long full skirt and a tight
 bodice-blouse – she sparkled.
 She was nine-years-old.
 She knew many prayers.
 She sat alone
 in the *puja* room –
 she was doing *arti*

she was ringing the small brass
prayer bell with one hand
and holding a small flame
also brass cupped in her other
hand – when she slipped
and the *ghee* spilled across
her silk clothes and the wick
spit fire over her fingertips.

Maybe there was a gust of wind –
something fluky
so even the huge crows fled
with their elbow-wings.

Why was there nobody
at home that day?
Why was there no one
who heard her cry?

'Such things happen.'
My mother says.
I suspect Sharda's elders.
Did she have too many sisters?
'No, no! It wasn't like that.'
My mother shakes her head.

Still, we can agree about how
she spun, hopping around
and around
trying to escape the flames.

Then she was sucked in –
it was like a sudden wave
a wall
with a sharp undertow –
A fire-wave
almost silent
compared to water.

'Sharda, Sharda!'
My mother must have called
for a long time
even after they found her.