Kunapipi

Volume 16 | Issue 1

1994

Poems

Sujata Bhatt

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi

Recommended Citation
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol16/iss1/97

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au
Poems

Abstract
NINNIKU, NOTHING IS BLACK, REALLY NOTHING, SHARDA

This serial is available in Kunapipi: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol16/iss1/97
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.
Ninniku

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 elephantisinum,
   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 elephantisinum
   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?

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 –

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.

Now I keep turning back to you Frida –

Nothing is black
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.