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Handwork for the Lady of Tatters

Loretta M. Sharp


Loretta M. Sharp established the writing program at the Interlochen Arts Academy, Interlochen, Michigan. In 1986 her poem “The Slow Way Home” was awarded honorable mention in the Copps Poetry Competition sponsored by the *Garfield Review,* and the entire collection was selected as a finalist in the Neruda Poetry Competition.
*Mountain Scene in the North of India*, drawn by William Daniell, engraved by J. C. Armytage, reprinted from Gilbert, *India Illustrated*, facing p. 60.
The Slow Way Home

She leaves the women in her husband’s house
and makes a slow way home
to her own mother, to friends singing
as they bring sweet butter
for the first month, molasses
for the second, radish, the third.
Nine kinds of giftgiving
fill full the life cycle,
and then singing sisters
bracelet her bare arms,

  first a circle of healing nim,
  then elephant hair to match her task
  and bangles of green glass
  because she is fragile and glad.

Taking to themselves a paste
of rice and clarified butter,
the hands of women rub
in slow circles the tight flesh
rising with what will yet be.
At the midwife’s nod, water
is heated, oil warmed,
and she is settled into a bed
rounded out from white sand.

But like Parvati, Devi, like all women
come home
she spreads her legs when the waters
will not be stayed, shapes sand new
each time the pains take hold.
Sinking to places she must go alone,
she rises, revived finally
by the high brine smell of blood,
by the infant held high, its cry
the cry of the mother birthing herself
  again
  and again.
For Phulrenu Guha and All the Old Ones

It must have mattered once,
or seemed to,
the dream that fleshed itself
as family, servants enough, bougainvillea.

But time or maybe Gandhiji
unwrapped it
in layers, rice-paper thin
and dry as locust wings.
Incise. Excise. Until the center seed,
barleywhite but with a sheen
of wedding silk. One thing only then:
the need to teach young women,
to group, work within.

And if such midwifery mean
riding second class from Calcutta
to Delhi each week, then one
nods off the miles in a sleep feeding flame
brighter than those waiting
to dismiss bonebrittle dryness
in the last passage, the one that matters least.
Baoli and Remains of Jehanghir’s Palace, Delhi, drawn by T. C. Dibdin from a sketch by Thomas Bacon, engraved by Capone, reprinted from Thomas Bacon, The Oriental Annual: Containing a Series of Tales, Legends, and Historical Romances (London: Charles Tilt, 1840), facing p. 49.
The Dance

And she is always there,  
more Indian than the Ganges even,  
the woman bent low at the waist and thin,  
sweeping...sweeping.
She keeps her back to you, eyes down,  
not seeing the white-haired, betel-smiled man  
tying garlands of jasmine, not smelling  
the anise, cumin, or clove, not smiling  
at seven pigtailed schoolgirls,  
blue skirts, white blouses, a donkey cart.

And she does not shy from the goat ambling loose  
or try to move the gray cat, each inhalation  
drawing its thin skin bone-tight.  
Dust covers her knot of hair,  
veils her sun-faded sari, but the easy  
move left right left and right  
is what she knows, the woman bent low  
at the waist and thin, sweeping  
her own slow dance.
The Ghat

First light at Benares brings the brush of feet down the stone steps, a dozen, four times, and then the easing in as women yield themselves to Ganga, the mother who wraps herself around and around them, each sari a veil, a scrim, thin as the illusion of the bloated belly floating grey and dim to all but the eyes of a kite that settles and lifts out where river meets sky. And then the slap of bare feet, a dozen, four times, and the waiting day, dusty and hot and heavy again.
Shrine of Raiman Shah Doolah Elchpoor, drawn by William Warren from a sketch by Meadows Taylor, engraved by S. Fisher, reprinted from Bacon, Oriental Annual [1840], facing p. 64.
Billboard Women

Above fortunetellers, temples, and the sellers of crushed sugarcane, rise billboard women, women who join film clubs, play country western tapes, and extol Campa Cola, computers, and condos.

No dowry, no dust touches these women. Not hunger nor sundried dung patties. Their mothers-in-law die young; their husbands (who neither use hookahs nor evetease) live forever.

And should billboard women make puja or draw rice powder rangoli, should they consider the Muslim Women’s Bill or lepers or mutilants, they will find themselves repainted, almond-eyed and smiling above fortunetellers, temples, and the sellers of crushed sugarcane.
Rains between Fatehpore Sikri and Biana, drawn by T. Greswick from a sketch by Thomas Bacon, engraved by E. Finden, reprinted from Bacon, *Oriental Annual* [1839], facing p. 168.
19 November 1917—31 October 1984

Bathed in holy water, forehead readied with sandalwood paste. Then a first draping of silk the color of sun, of love, of blood, a second of saffron, green, and white. Japa beads, rose petals, marigolds.

And the gun carriage pulls through Teen Murti Marg, making its slow way to Dalhousie Road, while at Shantivana a Buddhist priest chants, Christians read from the Psalms. Someone recites the Lord’s Prayer, the carriage at Zafar Marg. Lok Sabha members offer verses from the *Guru Granth*. A maulvi, a Parsi priest, Mother Teresa, each have a say before King Road.

Green leaves, festoonings of white chrysanthemum wait at the platform new-made from brick. And sandalwood logs, heads of state, service chiefs, three grandchildren, two daughters-in-law.

The wreaths are gathered, the flag retrieved. Seven times a son circles the pyre, touching his mother with a lighted torch. The bugles, the salute, the shouts: *Indira Gandhi Amar Hae! Indira Gandhi Amar Hae!*

The chants, *Om Shanti, Shanti, Shanti*, the assemblage standing, hands folded, flames leaping to ghee, honey, incense, freeing the child who set fire to her British doll, the dream of being Joan of Arc.

All that remains then is the Kapal Kriya, that skull breaking that signifies taking leave of the world. And the tinder waiting to ignite a country mantra-seared with:

*India is Indira.*

*Indira is India.*
The Petition

Her eyes lift
no higher than the knees
of the pajama-clad men
carrying temple votives.
Nor does she elevate
her tin bowl
to shake the morning paise.
Only the dark semaphore
of her right arm
bends slightly at the elbow
in a rise and fall
that offers
repeatedly
a fingerless stump
of fresh pink pleadings.
The Sunkul Boorjh and Fort Gate, Penkonda, drawn by H. Warren from a sketch by Meadows Taylor, engraved by E. Finden, reprinted from Bacon, *Oriental Annual* [1840], facing p. v.
Paan

Morning sun stains
the walnut-planed cheekbones
of the girl squatting on a burlap mat.
She seems almost old enough
for the leafgreen patternings
and yellow folds that flow
into an easy oval from head
to haunches and gather up
over her knees, all cotton ellipse
and soft circles.

And when a rickshaw puller comes,
rubbing a few paise
she strips out the stem and ribs
of a heartshaped leaf
and spreads a paste of lime and catechu gum.

Her hands know so well the making of paan,
they move themselves
without rearranging
the still life on burlap.
Only the bluebeat of her thin wrist
betrays the hum of feeding
the firstbud of breasts,
the womb lining itself,
a determined bloodrush
encased in skin drawn taut,
then cotton-draped.

A pinch of cinnamon and betel chips
and then a whole clove
to pin the leaf into a small cone
that will be slowly chewed and slowly spat
in random red splashes which almost mask
the accord that animates a subcontinent.
Women at the Well, drawn by William Daniell, engraved by W. Wetherhead, reprinted from Gilbert, India Illustrated, facing p. 140.
Pounding Gingerroot

If she sits at the doorframe, there is room in her house to pound the day’s gingerroot. At her back, four waterpots stack a squat column against the sunbaked clay wall. And a three-legged bamboo frame bends under a box bundled with clothstuffs. Her sari arcs a leisurely green from head to lap as she leans into the grindstone, smooth at the top as an altar. Each bare foot curves round its beveled edge, toes almost meeting. Only her wrists move as she lifts the round rock just enough to clear the wrinkled root branching out walnut brown. Fingers overlapping, she brings down the round rock again and again until the give of the leathery skin and the crisp shards that pulp a yellow smell, a wet wedding of woman round rock gingerroot.
The Mausoleum of Nizam-ud-Deen Oulea, Delhi, drawn by William Daniell, engraved by T. Higham, reprinted from Caunter, Oriental Annual [1838], facing p. 206.

Tombs of the Bereed Kings, Bidar, drawn by G. Howse from a sketch by Meadows Taylor, engraved by J. Redaway, reprinted from Bacon, Oriental Annual [1840], facing p. 198.
Selling Pictures

She is her own stall,
the white-haired woman
sitting flat on the ground
between a chick-pea seller
and a sweetmeat booth.
Her sari’s no longer
the empyrean blue
of a peacock fan,
but her forehead
is ornamented new red.
One hand is a brace
in the sun-baked dirt,
the other’s at the handle
of the open umbrella
extending her lap from ribs
to rigid instep.

She eyes each passerby,
waiting for a tourist
or schoolboy
to stop at the drawings
of gods and prophets
repeating themselves
in and out the metal stays.

Five images line up
from handle to edge,
then another five.
Foremost is Vishnu
churning the milky sea.
Krishna still dallies
with milkmaids while Gandhi walks
the salt march, Nehru broods,
and Buddha reclines.

Hopeing to attract
a paisa or two,
the old woman with the umbrella lap
gives the handle a quarter-turn.
And Kali, hidden in the center
of the clothy stall, slips out
from her dark place and rearranges,
as is her wont,
the commerce of mortals and gods.
Two Women

The mother
and her daughter-in-law
face each other at a granite mortar,
each with a hardwood pestle, thick
as their forearms and taller
than a woman is high.
The young one pounds five times,
waits, pestle lifted, eyes down.
She sees the mother pound three,
feels her nod,
and the daughter-in-law begins again.
It would be easier with oxen
and a flat threshing floor,
but two women at a mortar
can wrestle a day’s grain
if one is the mother,
the other a daughter-in-law.
Winnowing

Squatting in front of a mud hut, 
the woman with the nose ring 
and ochre scarf 
lifts with a roll of her wrists 
the tray woven from a palm leaf. 
Only her wrists move and the tray of wheat. 
And she lifts and lifts again, 
scattering chaff at her bare feet 
in a sun-baked winnowing.
Jhain Temples, Mooktagherri, drawn by H. Warren from a sketch by Meadows Taylor, engraved by W. and E. Finden, reprinted from Bacon, *Oriental Annual* [1840], facing p. 106.
Woman in Silk

Upstairs, the woman in peacock-green opens the shutters, watches the old man finish the last sari. He bends and nods as the houseboy pays him, then sets his flatiron back on the charcoal stove and rolls his cart to the next house, his sandals slapping the walkway, his own dhoti in need of laundering.

The woman in green thinks of the dinner she must give that night. Chicken and beef for the Americans, rice, and curries for the others. Her husband will wear blue jeans, ask if the cook boiled the water before freezing the ice cubes.

He will not smile until she bends to each guest and nods, talking of Ezekiel’s poems, Ray’s films, her English begun with nuns and finished at Bennington, a modulation varied and rich as the candlelight saying itself again and again on the gold threads in her sari of scarlet silk.
Ghat and Temple at Gokul, drawn by D. Roberts from a sketch by Thomas Bacon, engraved by R. Wallis, reprinted from Bacon, *Oriental Annual* [1839], facing p. 187.
Supplication

The oldest, back from a year’s premed at Duke, tells her friend at the wheel about a student she met. Having read Cormack, the American asked about barren women. Face down in the road, hands holding plantain, coconut, and betel leaves above their heads? Drumming, shouts, until a priest walked on the backs on the backs of the supplicants? And on his head was there really a linga covered with marigolds? Joining her friend’s merriment, the driver wonders what she’ll meet at Barnard next year. Then brakes into silence at the unexpected bend, the banyan, bright with morning threads, coins at its roots and guava, three apples, ripe pleading on a bamboo mat.
Mosque of Ahdeel Reheem Kahn, Boorkhanpoor, drawn by W. Warren from a sketch by Meadows Taylor, engraved by W. and E. Finden, reprinted from Bacon, Oriental Annual [1840], facing p. 126.
Woman Fanning Two Babies

She does not know
she’s backdrop, never heard
of panoply. She could not tell
how it feels to be part of the design
winding to the Ganges as the city shakes off sleep
   in the man stacking green coconuts, hoping
      the leper will find another place
      to display his fingerless hands
   in the boy making floaters from wicks,
      paraffin, and lotus leaves
   in the toothless woman waiting
      her chapati, the girl pleading
      a one-rupee smile when her father sings
      the cobra from the wicker basket
   in the silksellers, sandalmakers, sunshaded
      Brahmins selling blessings.

The squatting woman, thigh muscles tight
against her faded sari knows only
that heat precedes the sun in Varanasi,
that if she quits fanning, black flies
will congregate on her two babies sleeping
naked, each on a page of the *Hindustan Times*. 
Peer Putteh Gate, Gawilghur, painted by T. Creswick from a sketch by Meadows Taylor, engraved by W. and E. Finden, reprinted from Bacon, Oriental Annual [1840], facing p. 97.