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Writing Sample

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Includes "A World in Itself," "The Bond of Blood," "The Dog on the Terrace," "Intermittent Melody," "Insatiable Hunger," "Normal Life!," "The Iowa River," and "Hands."

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Amma Raj JOSHI

Stories and Poems

A World in Itself

Anamol finally makes it. After six months of relentless search for a suitable job, he gets the position of chief administrative officer at Banepa IT Park—a state owned software production organization. He is not very hopeful about the Park's future given to its nature of being government owned, and the rampant call of the Maoists to close down or completely demolish and ravage any government run wing just to create instability.

It could happen any moment. It could happen just today when he reached office to start his first job in his life after eighteen years of education financed by his parents who awaited eagerly for their toil to pay back, not so much in material term as much in the form of the happiness of their only son, Anamol, who was *anamol*—beyond any monetary calculation and price-- for them. Half awake on his bed, he was shrouded in the reveries and excitement of the first job experience in his life when Sumati's lovingly rolling voice made a way through his ears.

“*E bajur, jaane haina bhanya?*” – aren't you going, dear? she asked.

“Where?”

“Didn't I tell you last night that we would go to Pashupati. I had made a *bhakat*—a promise—that I would light a hundred and eight oil lamps and would give a *dugdhasnan*—a milk bath-- to Pashupati the day you got a job. How do think of joining the job without Pashupati *darshan*—a homage to Pashupati?”

Anamol had forgotten all they had promised. Had it not been Sumati, his whole life would have been a total mess. She had endured every little folly that Anamol had knowing fully well that he simply loved her though he overlooked her ideas.

With fair demeanor, sweet voice, positive thinking and fittingly made for a right person, Sumati is true to her name. But she is at times a little more religious, a little more superstitious, a little bit more docile, slightly moody and volatile and a little susceptible to a little bit of flattery as of her complexion, dress and overall beauty, which Anamol thinks every woman is. Anamol is lucky to have her as his wife.

Running in the fourth year of their married life, Anamol now knows what pleases and irritates her. He hardly does anything that angers her and makes her drop her fat lower lip and lie on the bed making an excuse of some pain in the right humorous bone or a pounding headache which even Brufin would fail to relieve or some burning fever which her body would not evidently justify. She would even take a couple of Citamol tablets to get rid of her feigned fever and ache.

Anamol knows what to do to keep her away from all her ailment. He knows she will not always demand expensive meals at some posh restaurants in the town which he cannot afford, or a theatre show for which she is not made, or an overnight stay in a resort in Nagarkot for which she has no taste. What is enough to please her is a word of appreciation

of her look, her dress, her etiquette, her gait or just a mention of any other tiny human property. Knowing fully well that negating her request to go to the temple would result into her physical illness on the very first day of his new career, he accepts with all docility her proposal to go to the temple of Pashupati unaware of what is important for his further career -- the pleasure and displeasure of god and man, or his own devoted, timely and insightful toil.

“Why don’t you get up and take a bath? What are you thinking of? It will be late for your office if you delay any more,” Sumati’s voice rings in his ear from the kitchen.

He does not even ask for a cup of tea because Sumati will not offer him any before the *darshan* of Pashupati. She believes that one should go to the temple without eating anything. To abstain from food and luxury, she maintains, is a necessary regimen to please god.

It is five thirty in the morning, early enough for Anamol to think of getting up when he was unemployed. Now he is a different man from today. He gets up, dashes to the bathroom to make himself ready to follow Sumati.

She has finished doing a number of things getting up much earlier: she has swept and mopped the house, worshipped the gods at home, cooked a special dish for all of them, instructed the maid to feed her son when he gets up. There is an inexplicable agility in her body today. When Anamol is still grappling with his shoes, Sumati roars from the kitchen, “aren’t you ready yet?”

“I am ready. What time are we leaving?”

She immediately comes out of the kitchen and says, “let’s go. I have a number of things to do after we come back from Pashupati. If we are late, we will have to keep in queue for *darshan* which might take hours.”

Anamol comes down to the portico where he normally keeps his car, starts it and lets Sumati in. The unprecedented agility in her gait and look, the brightness on her face and the authority of her voice make Anamol feel light and happy. Many times her hanging lower lip has made both of them unhappy.

Anamol has a weakness. He utters bitter things about people on their faces. He is a little too egoistic, a little assertive, a little bumpy, a little more over estimating his intelligence and physical look, which Sumati never likes. Anamol seems to have forgotten all this today. He does not utter anything that might hurt Sumati, appreciates whatever she says and concedes whatever she suggests.

“I too feel like searching a job now,” she says. “What will I do at home alone?”

“It is a nice thing to work. It keeps you busy, but Kumud is there and you have to take care of him,” he was talking of their two year old son. “When we send him to school, you can think on.”

Sumati nods.

During their drive to the temple, they talk about their plans and in a short while they arrive to the Bankali parking lot. Their exit from the vehicle is charged by a host of florists, sadhus and babas—Hindu ascetics, beggars and street children finding their home in and around Pashupati, making their living pursuing their weird trades ranging from begging to pick pocketing.

“Here are the flowers please. They are fresh. I will give you a basket to carry them. I also do have fresh cow milk. You must give Shiva a ceremonial bath with milk today,” the florist continues.

“Get the blessings of the serpent God. You have a great luck at stock today. Touch the serpent God with a big bill in your hand,” a baba wrapping round his neck a snake

roughly two meters in length and more than ten inches in diameter with black and white patches on its scalp and a vibrating fork running in and out literally chases the devotees with a hope of tapping some banknotes in the name of serpent god and good luck. The reptilian look of this snake belonging to the python family, the alertness of its eyes, the inward and outward flow of its fork led to some young people to a hysteric scream, which the baba seemed to enjoy. Anamol passes to the baba a ten rupee bill, which gives him the impression that he is an easy victim. The baba follows him and the words good luck ring in the ears of Sumati.

“Why don’t you touch the naagaraj—the king of the snakes,” Sumati says, “if the baba wants you to?” She doesn’t want to use any derogatory term to address the snake—the décor of God Shiva’s neck.

Anamol does not take out any banknote, but ventures to touch the snake with his shaking index finger as he does not want to offend Sumati and invite her displeasure.

Anamol had seen snakes swirling through the bushes during summer only to be caught in a nightmare. He could not recall how many nights he literally screamed in a hysterically frightful manner at nights following the days of his encounters with the snakes. He however made an effort to touch the sadhu’s snake only to fall back in terror. Scared and terrified like a wounded animal chased by the hunter behind, he looks at Sumati.

“The naagraj—the snake—is not going to eat you. Touch it and call it Shambhu, meaning the god Shiva,” she thundered. Anamol finally touches the snake and feels as if a cold current has suddenly run through his body. Mixed feelings of sensation and terror evolve in his mind. As they get rid of the sadhu and move away, a stammering voice tumbles into Anamol’s ears.

“Give me some money for food. I am hungry for days. God will help you if you help me.” A woman wearing shabby rags, having a dingy and mottled face and entangled, uncombed hair extended her begging bowl. Anamol turned his eyes aside but the woman ran in front and appealed, “I don’t have any ointment to use on my wounds. Leprosy is killing me. Show mercy on me and God will show mercy on you and will never inflict you with leprosy.”

The very thought of being inflicted by leprosy shocks him and he quickly makes his way ahead dropping a five rupee note on the woman’s bowl.

Hardly has he moved across the maddening lot, a monkey jumps in front of Sumati screeching harsh and gaping mouth, flickering its eyes as to frighten and demanding sweets and fruits that she has been carrying to feed Shiva who hardly ever requires any food. Anamol and Sumati finally make their way ahead bribing each in whatever way they could.

Among this offending multitude ranging from humble human beings to horrendous beasts are some merciful hands which loot in the dark and distribute foods, fruits and money in coins in the day light to reveal their mercifulness that has long disappeared from their dictionaries. Their mercy too goes to the capable. Weaker men, women and animals remain away from these phony propitious hands. Passing through this jostling crowd of men and beast, entering the shrine and getting the *darshan*—sight of the image of god in the temple—is really an effort for both of them.

Upon their entry within the premises of the temple, Anamol and Sumati again encounter a multifarious host of things more various than they encountered outside: a gorgeously rambling bull, screeching, yelling and attacking monkeys, twittering and fluttering pigeons on the pagoda of Pashupati, dreaming, drumming and chanting devotees, mantra reciting priests, a bhakta—devotee—donned in monkey god’s attire and tinkling his *majuras*—jingles, policemen civilizing people, old people devotedly chanting *mantras* and

awaiting for *darshan*, young boys more interested in the rush in the hope of getting a chance of molesting the young girls' protuberant breasts and feeling their warmth, young girls shyly peeping for happy hefty young boys and *pujaris*—priests—eyeing the offerings. The entire world is present there in a miniature. Anamol thinks of this world which he is in touch with. Sumati who is more interested in the *darshan* is less aware of all this.

“Keep in the queue. I will just stay out, have a *parikrama*, a ceremonial walk round the shrine-- and the *darshan* from outside,” Anamol says.

To his surprise, Sumati complies.

Anamol takes a number of rounds around the temple, chants the *mantras* not knowing why as he has never been a believer, lights the oil lamps and incenses passed to him by his wife and waits for her. Looking at the long queue of the people, he assumes that it is going to take long for Sumati to get through. So he chooses to go around. His sight now falls on the images of gods and goddesses. He closely looks at the phalluses of Shiva, at the temple of the serpent god, at the image of lying Bhisnu, the preserver, barely six feet inside the eastern gate of Pashupati. Attached on the wall beside the eastern gate, there is an image of Saraswoti, the goddess of knowledge. Anamol stands there for a while. In about ten minutes around three hundred people walked through and hardly a couple of them bowed their heads before the image of Saraswoti whereas everyone of them surrendered to Laxmi, the Goddess of wealth. This scene disturbs him; he walks ahead; he peeps into the Bagmati River flowing proudly with a summer swell. The tears of a woman whose husband's faded body is placed on the ghat—the bank—to be cremated in a short while has added to the swell of the Bagmati in flood.

The cry of the woman is slightly more than Anamol is capable of tolerating and therefore he turns on the other side only to see more faces singing on the *sattal*—pedestal—with a man playing the harmonium at the center. Some of them are old and emaciated, some haggard and shabby and some still young and chubby too—all singing *satyam shivam sundaram* – truth is divine and beautiful. Anamol does not know how near or far they are from the knowledge of the divine and beautiful. For a moment he also gets that illusive peace of mind, but is again disturbed the next moment when empty hands anticipating some money—the filth that everyone aspires for—are extended in front of him even within the premises where gods dwell. He wonders when and where these hands will be satiated and full. Failing to get the immediate response, he moves ahead and sees every head bowing down to every stony image frozen on the wall or on the basement around.

Anamol notices eagerness intermingled with hope on every human face and complete indifference on the faces of the frozen images. The paradox of human distrust on the fellow beings with over dependence on abstract, non-reacting lifeless objects appeals and horrifies Anamol at the same time.

With a gusty mind, Anamol stands just in front of the southern gate of the Pashupati and notices that Sumati is far away in terms of time and space to be able to hold her gods tightly enough to learn what truth—the divine-- after all is. With more storm gathered in mind, he peeps around the dreary nature of all worldly apparitions. On his left just opposite the shrine of the Pashupati, he notices a pagoda temple with a narrow wooden door through which an incessant flow of human inventors—men and women inventing their meanings of god in multifarious forms—is coming out. He watches them enter the pagoda shrine with a calm and unperturbed mind and body, and come out with their foreheads slightly constricted and crumpled, their body drenched in perspiration and their faces tensed. Anamol is tempted to explore the cause.

This artifact had never come into his sight ever before during his previous visits. He enters the shrine with some effort and on his entry, a divine life size image—not of a human being—of Kalabhairab, Shiva in the form of God of death, confounds him. He notices the entire human flow circumnavigating the shrine with heads bowed down, demanding for his mercy to live a few more days, never ever peeping into his face. With eyes closed, heads humped and mouths mumbled, everyone appears to be demanding Bhairab's propitious blessings.

Anamol too cannot help surrendering. Quietly he too circumnavigates the shrine and unlike others, gathers courage to look into Kalabharab's face, which momentarily shakes Anamol.

Bhairaba wears an astounding posture: his angry, wide and red eyes seemingly emit fire; his *damaru* reminds the funeral bells; his haggard, determined and extended legs compressing underneath the demon with one foot on head and the other on legs reveal his resolution to annihilate the evil; the demolished demon's effort to save his life indicates the indeterminacy of evil's end; the heavy bloody garland of demons' skulls that Bhairab is wearing indicates the destiny of destructive demonic power; the demons' blood stains around Bhairab's mouth explore the extensive expanse that he may step on to wipe out the vice; his openly and sparsely extended stiff and erect phallus hints for creation the need of erotic thirst amid chaos; and Bhairab's naked dance within the fire flame that surrounds him reveals the necessity of carrying out all life forms in whatever state of condition they are.

Life amid fire and all its mundane mutations. As simple as that yet so complex. Anamol is almost glued to the image. Nothing else is visible to him. Despite the incessant flood of human beings there, no one is in his sight.

"What a threat to *kama*—desire, *krrodha*—anger, *lova*—greed, *moha*—attachment, and *mada*—arrogance and pride," Anamol exclaims. "I thought I knew what I am, but I never realized that he stands here to remind the limitations of space and time, the erotic life, the temptations, the inhuman and cruel acts aiming at selfish motives, arrogance and pride, flesh and physique, will and wealth, and our destiny," Anamol finds himself speaking alone.

He does not remember how long has he been watching Bhairab with his gaping mouth and unblinking eyes. The twitching pinch that Sumati gave makes him aware that she has had the *darshan*. She then reminds him of leaving the place and he follows her like a baby wherever she led.

Sumati makes an exit from the eastern gate of the Pashupati down to the bank of the Bagmati River next to the cobbled steps on which the dead body of the yelling woman is still laid waiting for the cremation to be performed. Sumati wants Anamol to offer *jaladbara*—ceremonial water offering—on to the phallus of Shiva.

"Wash your hands and offer water, it will save you from all evils," she commands more in a dictatorial and authoritative tone.

Anamol steps down the steps on the bank and reaches the river water. As he washes his hands, he realizes, the water of the Bagmati in flood has an equal admixture of water and sand and the bank of the Bagmati is as meaningful as the statue of Bhairab that he has just come out of. He has a strange feeling to gather that sand in his hands and to bring those hands close to his heart when Sumati interrupts, "what are you doing? Why don't you offer water?" She waits for Anamol to offer water when she lights the oil lamps near the phallus.

With water on his joined palm, which is half the way filled up with sand, Anamol offers water on Shiva's phallus and finds five elements—fire, water, air, sky and the sand—coming together.

“ I now know why I am offering water on the phallus.”

No one standing around understands what he understood and how he associated that water offering with a practice of giving life to the dead. For Sumati, Anamol’s reverie was a riddle which she would hardly ever be able to solve in her life.

The Bond of Blood

It was close to the midday and tears were flowing persistently from Manorama’s cavernous eyes like spring water gushing out of tiny holes in the land. The village women were trying to pacify her, to silence her and to remind her that one day all of them will have to depart. They all knew right from the day they became conscious that nothing in life was as sure as death, as real as death.

Manorama too knew it. She too knew that the villagers who joined his funeral would come back within a few hours after cremating his body and she would not find Shailesh-- her husband--among them, among those lucky survivors whom death had given some more time to be with their loved ones. But her tears did not stop. Madhu and Rupak, her two sons, were also weeping not knowing why. They still wondered why their father was wrapped in a white cloth, put on a bamboo bed and carried away by villagers. They were angry with the villagers. They knew their father had not done anything wrong. Simple and innocent as he was, he was not actually capable of doing anything wrong.

“I cannot live without you, Manorama,” he said. “Actually I don’t know how to live without you,” he said.

“I too don’t know how to live alone, in your absence,” she replied.

And both of them used to sit beside the fire in the evening eye to eye. At times they forgot their being there and the fanning hands and giggles of their children brought them back to the world of reality.

By counting his last breath, Shailesh proved today that he knew how to live without Manorama, who was left behind, left to see his absence.

Manorama too knew how to go, how to follow Shailesh. They had promises, promises to keep. And she wanted to keep those promises even if Shailesh didn’t. But Madhu and Rupak stood in front?

She thought, “What will happen to her sons in the absence of their parents? They have not even understood the very meaning of their being in the world. They do not know who they are, where they are from and what they are supposed to do. They know nothing.”

Manorama looked at her sons. The flooded stream of her eyes receded. She looked around and stared at the way her Shailesh was carried on the bamboo bed. She looked down to the stream to see it meeting the big river. Her eyes noticed a thick flame of smoke rising up. It was her Shailesh, mixing up into the elements. She cried again—nonstop. All of a sudden she looked stern. She wiped her eyes. She embraced Madhu and Rupak.

“I cannot live alone without you, Shailesh,” she cried. She held her sons tighter and uttered “You are here with me. You cannot leave me alone. You cannot leave me alone.” And she started kissing her sons and started embracing them even tighter.

The village women were shocked to notice the abrupt change in Manorama and still in tears thought about her, thought about the days this couple worked hard only to survive. It was hard work, work that paid little—carrying loads like donkeys, tilling land that produced little and keeping engaged in physical work from dawn to dusk for meager food—that took Shailesh’s life. They all started thinking about Manorama’s destiny in their own way. They all knew her days would not be easy ahead. But still they tried their best in their own way to make her forget the traumatic past knowing very well that doing what they were suggesting would after all be very hard to do.

The sun was about to sink and Manorama was not ready to get up from the place where her husband was wrapped in the coffin cloth. Her unwavering look was aimed to the very site from where the dead body was lifted and taken away. The image of Shailesh lying on the ground was not ready to go from her eyes. Shailesh was still visible to her.

Her two sons had slept on her lap. When the rays of the sinking sun could only be noticed on the top of the mountain across the valley, the village males who had gone for the funeral rite arrived. They were shocked and saddened to see Manorama still sitting in the yard with her sons on her lap. Hardly anyone of them had the courage to say anything to her. They rather instructed the village women to take her to the village tap and give her a bath according to the tradition. All was done. There was hardly any reaction that Manorama made. She was brought home after the bath.

Manorama had almost stopped speaking. It seemed as if she was maimed and muted. Some village women kept at her place that night. They looked after her children. The routine followed for a number of days. After thirteen days funeral rituals were over. Manorama did not change much; she did not speak; she did not move; she did not react; and neither did she take care of her children. It was not easy for the village women to tell when she would start behaving normal if she at all did. Time however passed silently beside her until Madhu got 23 and Rupak got 21. She looked after her sons mostly lost in her own world.

The village women knew what it was for Manorama to live and to grow her children up. She did not leave any stone unturned. Hunger was her friend; scarcity was her company; humiliation was her shadow; worries her breathing; pain--regular pain --was her blood. All these twenty years she was with them.

Madhu and Rupak knew little how she drank and swallowed the pain without any scream. It was hard- very hard at times – for her to forget Shailesh. All these twenty years, not a single night was such that Shailesh did not come to her. When her sons slept, her tearful eyes always called him. He would come quietly, sit together, roll through her eyes to watch the offspring heading on the right path. Manorama could hardly tell when Shailesh quietly disappeared and mixed with his elements. Her heaving heart and hands trying to reach him would search him but in vain. At times she would be impatient to call him back to be reminded of her past.

One night Manorama was caught muttering and sobbing. Madhu got up and asked his mother, “Ma! Who are you talking to and why are you sobbing?”

“Talking and sobbing? Not at all dear,” she said wiping her face in a hurry. “Perhaps you had a dream. I think your day was hectic. Take rest,” she said and Madhu did not question next.

There was nothing that Manorama didn’t do all these twenty years. She did every possible thing to support her children, to provide them food and education.—washing, cooking, carrying manure to the fields and working in fields in adverse climatic conditions too. She didn’t ever say oop!

Her work paid. Though not physical, Shailesh’s support was always there. He was always with her. His absence was a strong presence; his disappearance was a strong appearance; his death too gave meaning to her life; it was all that which made a meaning.

Time passed and with the passing time everything changed. Madhu and Rupak grew up well. Madhu got a position of Lieutenant in Royal Nepal Army. He finished his cadet training in the army and came back to his home to pass a couple of weeks with his mother. Manorama’s sons were what others were not. Madhu had achieved in the village what others had failed to achieve. The first army officer in the village.

“Look at his face. He looks just like his father,” the old people of the village said recollecting his dead father.

“Look at his pointed nose, dark, big eyes, broad forehead and the smiling face, they are all just like his father’s,” a village grandpa said.

Rupak too had grown. He had also joined a local school as a secondary level teacher. He had majored in social science. People got confused when they saw him. They thought he was Madhu. Most people thought that Madhu and Rupak were twins. Both were bright, brilliant, friendly and handsome.

Manorama’s toil paid. Both of her sons were with her to pass the whole month of September 1993. They would join their duty the next month. At night, when it was time to go to bed, Manorama went to her sons’ room, recollected her past, told them who they were, where they were and what they had to do. Sons knew. They didn’t speak. Their eyes used to be full of tears; their hearts ready to break. With tearful eyes, keeping their lips still tight, they spoke-- spoke so much to make the mother understand their hearts. She understood their promises not to forget the past and to act in the days to come so that no mother would ever after suffer so much as their mother had suffered.

Manorama enjoyed living with her sons. She was happy that Madhu was deputed at the district barrack located at the headquarters of her hilly district. Meeting him would not be difficult for her. Whenever the son’s absence fell heavy on her, she thought, she would go and meet him or send him a message to come home once a month or so.

Rupak was deputed at a local school barely half an hour’s walk from the village. He would always be there with his mother. A month’s time before starting the job had mixed reactions for the mother and the sons. The sons wanted the time to pass quickly, but every single day, they thought, passed like a year. For the mother, time was just fleeting, days passed in seconds. She wanted to procrastinate the days and wished that nights and days doubled their length and gave her chance to be with her sons longer and longer. She had borne a lot of separation. The sons

had little idea of that separation. They had zeal, enthusiasm and excitement of starting a career. Here was the struggle between a career that was on the rise and the career on the fall.

'Time and tide...' proved true. With tearful smile, the mother had to wish the sons a very happy career ahead again.

Was she smiling or weeping or both or more than that?, only her heart could tell.

Manorama sent a son clad in army uniform to his duty and the other with books in hand to his school-- with love in a golden bowl.

Manorama's heart was squeezing and bulging wide, opening and closing, beating fast and again narrowing. Pride and honor, self-satisfaction and elation, gain and pain mixed. It was difficult for her to tell white from black, rise from fall, happiness from sadness. It was all an admixture of remote feelings and her smile and tears really spoke what was inside.

Days passed, three months passed. December came to an end. Madhu and Rupak enjoyed the work and got the love and affection of friends and colleagues. Madhu's disciplinary conduct made the Major, his chief, adore him. Friends enjoyed his company. Rupak proved his ability as a lovely teacher. Students enveloped him wherever he went. He would put his heart in teaching. Putting one's heart in teaching, losing oneself in a profession? It makes a difference and it made.

People came to Manorama and told about her sons. She knew nothing. She understood nothing about their jobs and work procedure. But her heart swelled up when her sons were praised. Her swelling again burst out in mixed wave of tears and smiles in the seclusion of her tiny hut in the absence of her son.

She would then start talking to Shailesh. "It's all because of you Shailesh. You gave me company in absence and it had so much strength. You would not be able to feel that strength you know," she said.

In her cottage, she would see Shailesh sitting with broad smile-- loving and cooperative-- but with helpless tone. She would listen Shailesh saying, "I adore you Manorama," she would just blush and turn aside and look up to see him again, but alas! She would find him no more. In desperation, she would again fall back on her sons.

It was mid- January. It was over three months since her sons started working. Madhu was doing well. He sent messages. Rupak was always with her. He supported the mother in every work after the school. Manorama was in a perfect joy after years of her husband's sudden departure. Her only thought was to have Shailesh with her.

January is not a good month in the hills. There is usually heavy snow fall. But this year it was not so heavy. During this month, mountains of her village show no sign of greenery. They are all white and the cold wind blows and makes the mornings and evenings chill.

On January 16 it was very cold. There were some clouds in the sky. Manorama got up at the dawn, came out, looked at the sky and felt the chill and then went in and again went under her quilt. She told Rupak that the weather was not very good outside. For some reason Manorama really didn't like the day. Much later in the morning, Manorama got up, washed her face and cooked for Rupak. He had to go to school.

It was 9:30. Rupak told Manorama, “Ma, I am going to school and I will be slightly late.”

“Okay, take care dear,” she said. For some reason she didn’t want him to go to school that day. But she knew that he would not agree if she told him not to go.

Rupak got to school and resumed his routine task. He mixed up with the students as usual. He kept himself engrossed in teaching as usual. At 2:30 there was a sudden uproar in the school. All of a sudden, the school children started screaming. Some of the children looked so frightened as if a poisonous snake had entered their classroom. Most of the children had blank faces. They didn’t know how to react.

Rupak was shocked by the scream of tiny kids. He left the class he was teaching in and came out. What he saw around the school were young boys and girls of school age holding revolvers, SLRs and heavy rifles. They were about twenty and they had the entire school under control. Every student was shaking with fear. The young boys now started shouting slogans. Shailesh then learnt that they are the cadre of Maoist rebels. They had no intention to threaten and capture the school children. They were there only to abduct Rupak, the brother of Lieutenant, Madhu. They considered army men their enemies and wanted to wipe out their families. The teachers and students came to know about it when a hefty but rude spoilt brat holding SLR broke up and asked who Rupak was. This boy spoke as if he was vomiting venoms. He spoke as if his mother had not ever taught him any word. It seemed as if he never knew what common sense meant. His tone showed no tint of an act meant for people’s welfare.

“Who is Rupak? Come to the front. We want to show your brother that we too know what the trigger does and what the muzzle vomits. We want to show the scoundrel what it means to chase us,” he shouted.

Everyone was scared. No teacher or student was ready to show Rupak. But the cruel voice of that venomous youth angered Rupak and he jumped forth.

“I am Rupak. Why the hell do you call me,” he said.

“Tie this bastard and let him know what we want to do with him and his family,” he said.

Teachers and students with a unanimous voice requested for forgiveness, but they all turned deaf ears towards them. They instead shouted slogans, fired a few blank fires and rushed towards the jungle. All the teachers were left in utter disappointment and for half an hour no one spoke as if a demon had breathed in their mouth and made them mute. Only then they regained full consciousness. But they were all helpless. There was a sense of loss--loss of the friend. They knew Rupak’s return was rare.

Manorama awaited the return of her son from school. She had prepared Khaja for him. She remembered that he had told he would be late. In the mean time she saw school children coming. One of the boys went to Manorama and told her that Rupak sir was hijacked by Maoists.

“What?” she exclaimed.

When the news was rectified by another teacher from the same village, she almost lost her consciousness. Darkness covered her eyes; she lost her vision and consciousness and fell on the ground. Villagers came around, watched her. It was an hour later when she came to consciousness. But the conscious state was more

painful. She wept, fell unconscious and again came to consciousness only to fall into coma longer. This repeated. A few women of the village kept with her.

The news spread around. The news of the seize reached the headquarters. Madhu also heard it. The news of one of their officer's brother's abduction shook the army men. They all sympathized with Madhu. The Major ordered them to make a search in the locality and to destroy the Maoist rebels. He gave Madhu the charge.

Madhu knew how her mother would be, but he made a determination to follow orders. He didn't go to his mother but for search. The soldiers left the barrack in the evening. It was getting dark. They had to walk up the hill and climb fairly high to search those rebels who had abducted his brother. The army had got a message that they were hiding in a rocky cave up the hill about 5 kilometers from Madhu's village. It was midnight when the army arrived to the area where the rebels were suspected to be hiding. This proved to be true. As the army was heading towards that cave graciously, they came to the notice of the rebels and the firing began.

At midnight the whole locality shook. Villagers around the hills and valley below shook in fear. Gun fires criss-crossed like fire crackers. Both groups took the front. The rebels used human shield. The army fired indiscriminately as did the rebels. Firing continued until the sunlight shone on the hills. In the light, the rebels found themselves at loss and ran away.

At the time of fight both the groups had come neck to neck. A large number of people were killed. A larger number wounded. Both were happy that they had killed the enemies unaware of who they had killed. During the clash the army lost many young and vibrant soldiers. But they had hardly any time to see who died. The soldiers however knew that one of their soldiers was shot dead-- Madhu was shot dead. His body was noticed by soldiers lumped on the body of a rebel--their enemy. But they had hardly any time to check if Madhu was still breathing. It was only when the gun fires silenced in the morning, soldiers noticed Madhu's body--frozen body lying face up on the body of an enemy which was below. Both bodies had deep wounds. A pool of blood--now clotted-- from both the bodies had gathered in a ditch.

The sun was up in the morning. The enemies of the soldiers had run away. Everything was silent. The army still occupied the hill. Soldiers were tired and didn't know what to do to the dead bodies of their friends--soldiers. They damn cared the enemies.

One soldier, a close friend of Madhu said, "We have to inform Madhu sir's ma, at least, she is very close from this location."

A messenger was sent. A soldier went directly to Madhu's house. His mother was still in tears for Rupak who was taken away by Maoist.

The soldier said, "Ma, you have been called by our officer to Tika Hill. The officer said it was urgent."

Manorama wondered why she was called. She asked the soldiers but he revealed ignorance regarding the cause of the call. Manorama thought it useless to ask him. She was divided between hope and despair. Hope for Rupak and despair for his loss. What about Madhu? She did not even think of him.

After two hours walk, Manorama arrived to Tika hill. From a distance, she saw a few dead bodies scattered. Her heart gave way. She got shattered. It was

impossible for her to hold herself. But however she got closer to a place where army jabans were ganged up. When Manorama arrived there, all soldiers looked at her and bowed their heads. The officer however, gathered courage and came closer to her and said, "Ma, I am very sorry. I could not save him."

Manorama's heart sank. She was now sure that Rupak was no more. The officer gathering some courage directed Manorama to a place where two bodies lumped one upon another. One face was turned to the sky and the other was buried underneath. When Manorama went closer the dead pile, she saw Madhu's face. She got discolored. Her face now looked like a dried petal of a rose. She was neither conscious nor unconscious.

"Ma, he killed the enemies and saved us, but we could not save him. We are sorry Ma," the soldiers uttered in single voice.

There was no drop of tear on her eyes. There was no expression on her face. It was blank. She went closer to the dead, saw the pool of blood, saw Madhu's face, clasped him to her breasts raising his body aside only to notice that beneath him was his brother Rupak.

Rupak, the enemy, and Madhu, the soldier. Manorama looked at the blood. It was all red, clotted. She tried to pull one son from the other. But the clotted blood denied cracking. The fight was there in the dark. Invisible worm had bitten the brothers in the dark.

Manorama did not react at all. Her widely opened eyes which had ceased to blink could tell everything that her gaping mouth wanted to utter. The only voice heard thereafter was "Shailesh, I have promises to keep." With this utterance, three of them became a lump, became one.

Tears rolled in the soldiers' eyes and on the distant rock a huge vulture appeared looking at the corpses with piercing eyes, and perhaps the rebels in their distant hideouts were happy that they were capable of leveling.

The Dog on the Terrace

It was almost midday. The sky was clear. The timorous rays of the sun unable to give desired warmth flooded over the landscape. However, the sun was gradually showing its signs. The winter wind was getting warmer. The inhabitants of the houses—particularly the older ones—were gradually appearing on the roofs to bask in the sun and pass their winter afternoons.

Among the people appearing on the roofs was a sadhu -- a holy man. He was living in a house built on a mound bordering the noisy town. The sadhu quietly came out of his room with a peaceful mind and bright face.

A sadhu living in a house on the outskirts of a town!

The neighbors of the locality whispered with amazement: "What the hell is the sadhu doing in a modern bungalow? What has happened to his Ashram?"

But again they nodded with some realization. The neighbors knew that only guns could claim places and property. Armless ones were helpless and their cherished spaces were

in the hands of the levelers who had cropped up in a large number and were out claiming to bridge the disparity. But everyone knew that no one else was so much in tune with disparities and gulfs than the levelers. Nobody ventured to utter anything against them due to the fear of getting literally skinned down or deprived of the ability of even producing an utterance. Deep in heart everyone could feel what he or she aimed at.

The sadhu too knew all this and, therefore, he had chosen the modern bungalow to live in seclusion and its roof to bask in the winter sun. It used to be so warm and soothing in Tribeni where his Ashram was. He would be sitting in the sun and teaching his disciples the meaning of being ethical and *gyani*, a man having the knowledge of the world. He would also be teaching *advaita darshan*—the non-dual philosophy-- to his disciples. He would be talking about *jibatma*—*the life forms*-- and *paramatma*—the divine soul -- and telling them how *jibatma* could be one with *paramatma*. But the levelers found a gulf between *jibatma* and *paramatma*. They found a gulf between *jogis*—*the ascetic*-- and *bhogis*—the worldly men-- and felt that *jogis* were free from worries.

The levelers said, “In our leveling philosophy there cannot be some people living in comfort being free from worries where others are suffering from the mundane anxieties of day to day living.”

The yearning to know the meaning of life was considered detrimental to their leveling philosophy. They thought that either all or none should understand the meaning of life. They found the language the sadhu spoke—the ancestral language—to be the language of the elites and aristocrats. They even reviled the sadhu’s saffron attire and the *dhvani* of the chanting of the mantras in the *yagnya* -- the ritual fire-- as it was different from the *dhvani* of their guns. They loved only the red colour and the piercing sound of the guns compounded by the cry of women, children and disabled. As their taste appeared amazing to the sadhu, he took shelter in the town. The roof of a modern house was now his basking field. The Ashram was no more. The disciples, who would have learnt a few things more about the meaning of life, were devoid of the sadhu’s insightful association. No more Ashrams, no more disciples and no more learned associations.

In the modern bungalow, the sadhu sat on the terrace cross-legged. It was his routine at the day time. His eyes moved around. He looked to the north. The Himalayas could be seen crystal clear. The whiteness of the snow-clad Himals transitorily took away all his inner grudge and blemishes. The Himals, which were not yet ruffled, blemished, smeared and devastated, were visible at least. The serenity of the Himals gave temporal peace to his mind. He surveyed the snow-clad range with increasing mental peace.

All of a sudden, a black stray dog came to the main gate of the house he was living in. It started barking. The pet dog of the house too appeared. The black stray dog, envious of the luxury of the pet dog, started barking at the pet dog so angrily that the whole locality was disturbed. It had seen food being served to the pet dog. It so querulously attacked the pet dog that the inmates had to chase him away.

After the dog ran away from there, the locality was once more serene and the sadhu again started looking around. But his attention was again punctuated by the same black dog enviously barking at every door it passed by. The sadhu was now compelled to think over the destiny of this dog. He thought about the dog’s life and its envious nature. “The dog’s envy,” he thought, “will be the cause of its suffering and its destiny, which will impel it to follow the cycle of life and death over and over again.”

A moment’s silence took the sadhu’s sight around and he happened to look at the bizarre opening of the town. He didn’t really know what made him think of those houses and their making. He was finding some parallel between the beauty of these houses and the

beauty of the flesh. He was inwardly thinking of these houses, the luxuries amassed within their walls, and of whatsoever was happening to the entire humanity around the world. He thought how peace has ceased to be, how violence has taken its place, how love has extinguished and how hate has gradually been revealing its distorted appearance. Seeing the world with all its distortions was too difficult for the sadhu. He closed his eyes and chanted *Om* in order to pacify his disturbed mind. Only in *Om* – the memory of the eternal God-- could he find the unfound peace.

It was half an hour later that the disturbed thoughts of his mind gave way and he opened his eyes again. His eyes now fell upon the terrace of the next-door neighbor. The sight again occupied the sadhu. There was a dog on the terrace—a black dog on the terrace again. The sadhu knew this dog. The only owner of the house called it Angule. Angule was a big, black dog. It loved its owner. The only time the sadhu had noticed Angule making noise was when the owner, tired of the day's work and sunk in the car's seat, arrived home. It jumped all over her, licked her, ran around her and flattered her. She too was flattered by Angule's enticing flattery. The greatest prize it got for this flattery was a buffalo bone.

The sadhu's sight fell on the dog. It was chewing the bone of the buffalo left for it on the roof. The sadhu knew that the bone had been there for more than a week. The engagement with the bone kept Angule from moving out and attacking passersby. Angule did not ever bother to question whether it was a prize or a punishment.

When the sadhu saw Angule, it was vigorously trying to chew this bone with its sharp canine holding it with its hefty forelegs. The bone was dry. The marrow had gone. There was no flesh around. The bone possessed nothing but a rotten smell. But its impact on Angule was tempting. It was not ready to leave the bone. The sadhu saw Angule cling on to it hard.

The sadhu could not resist contemplating over this. He closed his eyes. But his thoughts took him away. He pondered over the world and its mendacity, its temporality, its tribulation, and its temptations. He thought of the *jibatma*.

“Is the world not like a bone to the dog?” he thought.

Man bears and nurtures first. Then he snatches, tears, levels, and captures. He thinks of getting luxuries, comforts, and enjoyment. A dry bone to a dog!

All of a sudden, the sadhu thought what would happen if another dog entered the terrace and demanded the bone from Angule. Would Angule give the bone knowing that it was bare and dry or would it fight for it?

The very thought shook the sadhu. Being a bit disturbed, he opened his eyes. He shook himself a bit. He looked at the sky and found the sun inclining to the west. The wind was blowing softly and the *jibatma* within him was now pining for the comfort, which the sadhu knew, was a mere dream.

December 20, 2003
Dhapasi, Kathmandu

Intermittent Melody

On a stage
musicians were engrossed
under the gaze of village and town folk
to set the chords
guitars, sitars, veenas and drums
myriads of sounds
in the making.

Audience waited longing for a fine tune.
chords were still being set
discordant voices still rang
desperate musicians and impatient audience
waited for melody to flood the pervading gloom
like the fragrance of hills in bloom.

After an eternity of impatience
chords twanged melodiously
making the audience sway
but a sudden snap jarred
and shattered the expectant crowd.

“Chords of harmony and cords of life
what a company!”
an old man from the audience exclaimed.

Soaring peaks
dark and desolate deeps
torn and unbridgeable crevices
disconnections
disjunctions
frame the constitution of human life.

“This life reminds,”
a wise man said,
“a cord
merely a cord
on a stage.”

Insatiable Hunger

Achilles, the mightiest of the Achaeans
brought precious prizes
for Agamemnon—the Achaean Lord
or the hunger's epitome
who allocated defamation to his chieftain's share
and ignited swift and shielded Achilles
into a red fireball.

In his presence
Trojan Fronts and Scaean Gates
shook in fear
rained blood
and when Achilles
thunderously warned the lustful Lord
even Hector--firm in resolve
dwindled.

Ego of two nations
fought a dreadful war
Achaeans too clasped death with Trojans
but with better recompense
of some more land
some more treasures
some more beauties
confiscated and treasured
and left for their Lord
to subdue, use, and enjoy.

Soldiers have fought bloody wars
and kissed death on heart
and have always done so
an undefeatable Achilles
has brought treasures home
for an Agamemnon
idly to consume

And has kept Briseis as a booty
 For whom every Agamemnon
 has staked an empire
 and has disgraced every Achilles
 seizing the treasured love
 only later to find
 his possessions and prize
 reduced to an unappeasable cove.

What concoctions are kings made of
 with properties to be tempted at
 others possessions
 with an appetite so insatiable?

Why do they feign Olympus
 beneath the public feet though they lie
 why do kings possess
 fawns little heart
 and dog's fiery eye
 why they with lustful art
 into others domain dart?

*

Normal Life!

Life is normal
 only a bus carrying
 infants, youth, and old
 had to be gathered in scraps
 only the skull of a fifteen year old
 had to be collected and identified
 by his mother
 to find life in death
 and death in life
 perhaps more life in death.

Life is normal
 announces the Home Department
 with clarity of conscience
 only a hundred batons
 have left bloody scars
 on a sane protestor
 caught in a protest's insanity

only a few soldiers' boots
have rained on a lone pedestrian
only a mother in her twenties
has disappeared in an encounter
leaving behind an eleven month baby
yelling and searching
his mama's protuberant and heaving breasts.

Life is normal
a girl is working right at sixteen
mostly at cabin restaurants
where old men come
and fondle her breasts
put on glasses
to gaze at her bosom
giggle showing their false white teeth
and lick their wrinkled lips
only to be noticed by a policeman
who scolds the old men
and hands them a tender theory of ethics
sends them home
and directs the girl to his lodge
throws her on a dingy overused bed
makes her lick his stiff growth
and compels her to undress herself
shuddering she complies
he enters her
perspirates
and lets her go
and says life is very normal.

Life is normal
only a few POWs
have been kept in dungeons
handcuffed, nailed and nude
masked and pissed in the mouth
knifed and salted
like a green cucumber
nothing serious has happened,
has it?

Life is very normal
Only the widows in their twenties dream
Their husbands bringing gifts home
only the parents
reminded by the sinking sun
stare at the way expecting the son
only the villagers

have nightmarish rash
 only the inter-village commotion
 requires the levelers' pass
 only equals can travel
 only more equals can unravel
 But life is normal
 Life is very very normal.

*

The Iowa River

Lying flat face up
 with hands and legs tied
 parallel and correspondingly
 and like a terrorized creature
 unable to gather the body together
 for a hope of living
 Iowa River continues her journey
 through the prairies
 to the endless end.

Denying to embrace
 her folks on shore
 without responding and complying
 to their smiling chores
 never even waving to the willow's good-bye
 or the silhouetting of trees so high
 handcuffed, chained and blindfolded
 Iowa River continues her journey
 Like a harnessed horse in mourning.

Refusing to speak as if shy
 secretively and silently
 she passes by
 without even ever hugging her neighbors
 burdened by her own labors
 maimed by her own pressures
 Iowa River continues her journey
 like a Sufi's disciple
 given to the meaningfulness of silence.

Bowing down in humiliation
 with a face turned gloomy and dark

as if tarnished by one's own adulterous acts
 or by the revelation of one's father's hideous facts
 giving up the shimmering glitter
 and discarding the reflective power
 like a dark shadow amid the lawn
 Iowa River continues her journey
 to an endless end of her own.

Never enchanting the son sunbathing on the shore
 or the daughter rummaging in her lore
 to dive into her bosom and cling to her
 to kiss with aching heart and floating eyes
 because she knows her children's lies
 indifferent to inmates and aliens alike
 Iowa River continues her journey
 amid the hearts of infidel ties
 and through the chests of boundless lies.

Having known the limits of a chatter
 and the temporality of a glitter
 realizing how bonds can shatter
 and that hefty hugs and flirtative caresses do not matter
 wounded by the wealth of man
 maimed and mumbled
 Iowa River continues her journey
 divided between hope and despair
 to an endless end.

August 31, 2004
 Iowa House Hotel

Hands

My hands are two little antennas
 which receive remote waves
 distill and disseminate messages
 generated and circulated by the brain.

My heart pounds and heaves
 releases blood to brain and body
 like a *raja* of the east
 the brain commands.

And like the *raja's* subjugated subjects
 the body concedes
 and the hands execute
 though oft times bruised they are.

My heart's the maker
a legislature
formulating the fundamentals
hoping for honest obeisance.

My mind's the decipherer
a judiciary
making analytic and indifferent decisions
on the fair and the fallacious.

My hands're the mechanic
the executive
having strong faith in performance
particular, pertinent, perfect and productive.

Believe me! my hands are my heart
I join my fingertips face to face
see the bow they make
and feel the vibration of my heart
on the fingertips
you know?

*Wednesday 12.00 Noon
9.1.2004
Iowa House Hotel*

