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International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work

Fall 10-1-2016

Writing Sample

Akhil Katyal

Poems. "My Grandfather", "Dehradun, 1990", "Aligarh", "To the soldier in Siachen", "When Farida Khanum", "I want to 377 you so bad", "Some letters of Indian soldiers at World War One", "Maruti Swift", "In 1995", "In 2002", "India vs. Pakistan", "Namesakes", "[Varun ins typing]", "One day, when he was", "At the Lodhi Crematorium, Oct '13", "Come on", "Girl, when you", "You will not have trouble", "That evening", and "The Hindus never ate beef*".

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Recommended Citation

Katyal, Akhil, "Writing Sample" (2016). *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work*. 554.
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Akhil KATYAL**Poems****My grand father**

used to ask us to read him
the shop-signs in Devanagri:

'मिंटू आइस-क्रीम'

'जगत हार्डवेयर'

'चित्र सिनेमा'¹

All his life, he
had known only Urdu
- leaving Lahore at 18,
a young railway-clerk
new at the desk then
- in the early months here
he had struggled, tried opening
a cigarette-shop in Delhi
(Pachkuiyan Road) before
being given the same job
in the Indian railways
in Lucknow.

In all this commotion,
he never bothered
learning another script,
dependent still, at 73, on his grandchildren
to read him ice-cream signs
when he treated them to
an orange-bar.

Now, years later,
when I ache to read Faiz's letters
in his own hand-writing, I have to
write to a facebook-friend in Lahore,
or ask a boy in our neighborhood,
or worse, use a translation app,
which is like rubbing stones on silk.

What grand-father and I
do not know - Urdu, Hindi -

¹ 'Mintu Ice-cream', 'Jagat Hardware', 'Chitra Cinema'

lie in each others' glass, in
 each others' loss, in their
 remaining on our tongue, and yet,
 as we try, in their flying from our eye.

Dehradun, 1990

As a kid I used to confuse my d's
 with my g's, and that bit of dyslexia

didn't really become a problem till
 I once spelt 'God' wrong. That day,

the teacher wrote a strictly worded
 letter to my parents, and asked me

to behave myself. Also, as a kid,
 I could not pronounce the letter 'r,'

so till I was sent to some summer
 vacation speech correction classes

at age 5, I used to say, "Aam ji ki
 jai," "Aam ji ki jai," -- then a teacher²

taught me to hold my tongue against the
 ceiling of my mouth and then throw it out

quivering, 'R,' 'Rrrr,' she wrenched it
 out of me, over many sessions, "Ram,"

until then, I did not know God was so
 much effort, till they made him tremble

on the tip of my tongue, God was only
 a little joke about mangoes.

Aligarh

In early 2009, in Aligarh, U.P., two men with cameras forced their way into Professor Ramchandra Siras' house and filmed him in bed with another man. By next year, Siras, Marathi Professor at Aligarh Muslim University was suspended by AMU authorities for 'gross misconduct' and evicted from his official residence. In April that year, he died in a rented apartment under mysterious circumstances.

² 'Hail Lord Mango'

Dr. Siras,
In those nights,
you must have felt loneliness like a drip.

The walls of your room
would've been held apart only by a faint song,

and memory must have sat by you all night
combing the hours.

In your Marathi poem, Dr. Siras, the one about the 'beloved moon,'
the one in which you somehow eke dawn from the dark sky,
I read it last night on the terrace,
it held me, it held my hands,
it let grass grow under my feet.

In this house that I have lived in for three years in Delhi, Dr. Siras,
the windows open onto a Palash tree.

I was 27 when I had rented it,
and at 27, the landlord had not spent too much time on the word 'bachelor'
he had only asked if I had 'too many parties',
I didn't, and I had got the house.

But next time, Dr. Siras, when I will try and look for a place in this city,
I will be older and they will pause at "but marriage?"
and I will try to eke out respect from a right surname,
from saying 'Teacher'
from telling my birth-place,
and will try and hide my feeling small under my feet.

What had you said, Dr. Siras,
when you looked for that house in Durga Wadi?
What had you said for the neighbourhood, 'Teacher', 'Professor',
'Poet'?

What gives us this respect, Dr. Siras, this contract with water?

In those nights,
weighing this word in your hands,
you must have felt weak, like the sun at dusk,
you must have closed the window to keep out the evening,
you must have looked back, and hung the song in the air
between refusal and letting go.

(thanks to Apurva M Asrani and Ishani Banerjee)

To the soldier in Siachen

Come back,
the snow is treacherous,
come back,
they are making you fight a treacherous war,
you were not born in snow,
you do not know snow, come back,
I do not want you to fight that war in our name,
I want you to rest, I want you to be able to feel your fingers,
I want the snow in your veins to give way,
for you to be able to breathe, to melt
into a corner, to sleep.

Come back.
Go home.

Go home to Dharwad,
Go home to Madurai, go home to
Vellore, Satara, Mysore, do not stay in the snow,
go home to Ranchi, that war is not for you to fight, that war
is not for us to give to you to fight, let not our name be ice,
let it not heave on your shoulders, do not let us steal your breath,
the people there, the people of the snow do not need us,
they do not need you to fight, come back,
you were not born to snow,
you do not know the treachery of the snow,

go home,
to rest, go home to the sun, to water,
go home to the nights of your village,
go home to the sweltering market-place,
to the noise of family-homes, to the sweat of the Ghats,
to the dust of the plains, go home,

may you never
have to see white ever again like that,
may you never have to see
a colour become death in your very palm.

When Farida Khanum

sings now,

she does not hide the age
in her voice,

instead
she wraps it in paisleys,
and for a moment
holds it in both of her hands,

before
she drowns it in our sky.

When she sings now,
she knows

that at the end of that note
when her voice breaks
like a wishbone,

he will stay.

I want to 377 you so bad³

till even the sheets hurt i want to
ache your knees singe your skin
line you brown breathe you in i want to
mouth you in words neck you in red
i want to beg your body insane into sepals
i want to 377 you like a star falling off the brown
i want to feel you till my nails turn water
i want to suck you seven different skies
i want to be a squatter in your head when
it sleeps when its dark i want to break laws
with you in bed and in streets and in parks

³ Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (since 1860) introduced by the colonial British government in India criminalizes sexual activities 'against the order of nature', which in practice criminalizes homosexual sex.

Some letters of Indian soldiers at World War One

'Only the broken limbed can go back,'
'no man can return to the Punjab whole,'
- there are things in the soldier's pack

that, once you open, there's no going back,
'I am like a soap bubble and have no hope of life,'
each letter knew only the broken limbed go back,

the trenches were death and the nights were black,
even 'lice...they bite terribly...worse than a rifle bullet,'
there're things - if you'd hear - in the soldier's pack

that say: it is soldiers who die when men attack,
'...in one hour 10,000 are killed. What more can I
write?' And when the broken limbed go back,

what stories would they tell, which crack
would they cover, for 'this is the time for brave men,'
no matter that the things in the soldier's pack

know that bravery is the oldest lie on the rack,
pulled out in bloody times. 'Star of my eyes,' listen,
if I am not among the broken limbed who go back,
read the things, will you, left in my soldier's pack.

(thanks to Daljit Nagra)

Maruti Swift

It takes a 1248cc diesel engine,
4 cylinders,
16 valves,
a max. torque of 190 newton meters
@ 2000 revolutions every fuckin' minute,

it takes rack & pinion steering
& drum brakes & disc brakes
& steel tyres,

it takes one thousand five hundred kilos of metal
moving, always moving
in 48 second loops on the assembly-line,

painted & cut & bolted & fed
by workers.

It
takes
workers

on 9 hour shifts,
one 30min lunch break,
and two 7 minute tea-cum-toilet breaks
(those two-seconds-late-&-pay-cut-breaks)

it takes "if my leg itched, I do not even
have time to scratch it,"

it takes waiting
for one's own fingers

it takes white-hot "discipline" cut by teeth,
welded by metal to townships
with smoke-grey evenings

it takes 13 days of occupation,
months of sit-ins, lock-outs, it takes 147 workers
arrested on manufactured evidence,

to make one of these.

(thanks to Anumeha Yadav, Satish Dalal and Imaan Khan)

In 1995

I was ten and you were
already battling the stars

of a virus, and in the middle
of grocery shopping,

and street pavements
bursting with lilacs,

you lived so close to
dying, that every morning,

when you woke up, it took
two seconds to ascertain, oneself,

and then, one's own.

With the worst behind you,
you said, how can people write

about letting go, as if
it was 'tragic' that they went,

as if their going could not have been averted,
as if, a scale had weighed in the sky,

but already you sounded unconvinced
of your own voice.

In that year,
I did not even know what sex is,

what veins are, except a book - my
father's - on the benefits of herbs, which,

on its last pages, talked of stuff
that nobody told me nothing about,

talked of erections, semen, power, & something
perverse about a horrifying illness, and how it takes

only the select.

You said, in those years
of holding that which you did not

know, "Reagan let us die,"
with a kind of resignation that

without forgiving, already wraps 'letting go'
in a hope, and slips it in the dimension of myth,

before sneaking it behind the books on your shelf.

Now when friends visit me, and stay for
a day or two, I thank my stars,

and when they leave the room, go to the loo,

or run for a morning appointment,

I think of you, making what you could,
of someone always going, of someone

gifting togetherness as if wrapped in
paisley, light like feathers, resting on the sill,

about to go which way I do not know.

(for Mark Doty)

In 2002

- as late as that - Switzerland

joined the UN, and that old

cat, Queen Elizabeth, was 50

years into clawing her throne.

In 2002 there was a failed coup

against Venezuelan President

Hugo Chavez - so the year, you

could say, saw both good & bad

days. In 2002, Daniel Pearl was

killed, and Israel dragooned a

Bethlehem church, but in India,

in 2002, nothing of note happened,

except of course Dhirubhai Ambani

died, besides that, nothing as such,

they say, "2002? It was nothing much."

(tr. Hindi poem 'Do hazaar do mein')

India vs. Pakistan

Kashmiris will cheer
for Pakistan when it
comes to cricket;
my criterion usually
is - the more gorgeous
one should win it.
So when I compare all
the boys, in their team
and ours, will I absolutely
disappoint, because
I kind of see their point.

Namesakes

On the second date, he asked,
"What does your name mean?"
"It means the whole universe, all
of it, the whole damned thing," I
said, quite tipsy, and elated, but
found myself very soon deflated,
"Akhil," he said - being creepy -
"isn't that the first word of ABVP?"⁴

[Varun is typing]

Varun: ~~Hey how have you been? You know
just last week I had been thinking of you~~

Varun: ~~Listen hey I'd been meaning to tell you
something for a while but~~

Varun: ~~Hey I saw you near PVR Saket the other day
and I was going to~~

Varun: ~~Hi Uday, have you seen *Margarita, with a Straw*,
Would you want to go this week?~~

Varun: ~~I don't know how to say this but I'm just going to,~~

Varun: ~~Hiiiiii~~

Varun: ~~Hi~~

[Uday is typing]

Uday: ~~Hiiiiii I'd just been thinking about you, where
have you been~~

Uday: ~~Helloooooo you, long time!~~

Uday: ~~Varun!!!~~

⁴ Akhil Bhartiya Vidyarthi Parishad, the national student wing of the ruling Bhartiya Janta Party in India.

Uday: ~~Hiiii, you know I saw you near PVR Saket
the other day and was going to say hi but~~

Uday: You know you have a long life, I was just

Uday: Hi

One day, when he was

about ten or twelve,
he asked his mother,
"What is my caste?
Some boys in the
school were asking,
I didn't know what
to say." The mother,
got up in the middle
of her supper, "Beta,
if you don't know it by
now, it must be upper."

(thanks to Gautam Bhan)

At the Lodhi Crematorium, Oct, '13

It was the first winter rain,
the auto stopped
at every red light.

When I told him
my friend had passed away,
he had asked - "Was she married?"
"No."

At the Lodhi crematorium,
as the fire took her - outside
it was still raining - our hugs then
were longer,
warmer.

"No one knows the ways of time,"
the auto-guy had said, and
I had thought that there is repose
today even
in this.

Betu, I had read about her
before I met her - 'Sangini support meetings

are held every Saturday afternoon, from 3 to 6,'
the brown poster had read. In the dusty first-floor
Santa Cruz library, I took notes for my dissertation.
'These meetings are open only for lesbians, bisexuals,'
the solid font said, 'and women exploring their
sexual orientation.' Betu, who I met 3 or 4 times,
who I still knew best as that paragraph in my thesis,
and of whom someone said that evening, "I had no friend
like her" - leaving that page, leaving her -
now Betu is gone.

The priest only told us, "It takes less
than half an hour for the whole body to burn."

On the way back
on the Ring Road, as the auto-guy
refilled the CNG tank,
I sat on a concrete bench outside,
taking out a book, but
it is still raining.

Come on

take the pain when it pours,
there is no need to can it.
There're bigger tragedies
than yours - Pluto was a planet.

Girl, when you

blow your boy,
or boy, when
you go down
on her, or when
both of you use
a toy, and all the
world's a blur,
I know it feels
like heaven, you
too violate 377.

You will not have trouble

finding her.

In Frank Auerbach's *Euston Steps*
she is sitting with her back to you
on the bus-stop bench -
her hair is the way it looked like,
each brush-stroke
a distant memory.

Kindertransport
after the night of broken glass
thousands of Jewish children
come to England - memory
breaking at each station, they come
to the arms of strangers -
Bernd Koschland, then 8, Bavarian,
"didn't know the language
except one sentence" in English,
the only one his parents taught him,
before they became only memory:
"I'm hungry, may I have a piece of bread?"

They always came
from the arms of strangers
- *how much of parents*
did they know at eight, at six?
Was memory stronger for them
than distance growing? -
after just a few months
in a local Swansea school,
when his father telephoned him
on his birthday in June
- Henry Foner ('little Heini' of the postcards)
remembers the call, he had stood
in the hall of the Foners' home
in the Sketty - his father continued to speak,
but he had already forgotten his German.
From then on, all his father's postcards to him
were in English -- in them tears were
always two sentences deep.

In Auerbach's *Euston Steps*
the rail station is becoming concrete,
is becoming platform -
two steps, three steps,
bewildered, "that's what I wanted to show,"

Meisler said, years later, in the sculpture
 that he did for the Liverpool Street station
 - "disorientated, tired...bewildered children
 coming into wartime England,
 not knowing a word of the language."
 On the platform, saying goodbye,
 the last thing his father told him
 - before letting him go -
 was "Whatever happens, study, go
 to university."

I am more certain it is her
 - she who'd let him go, every year
 becoming memory, becoming
 distance - who is facing the other side
 - "*It all feeds in,*" Auerbach relented -
 she has a suitcase in front of her,
 the one she had packed for him, in which
 "I had some things for wearing immediately
 and then on some items my mother
 had stitched a red cross in the corner
 for later use [always, love is a letting go, two steps,
 three steps - memory is pain
 in the arms of strangers] and some items
 like tablecloths and sheets were for use
 when I was grown up."



Frank Auerbach's *Euston Steps*
 (thanks to Donald Macintyre and Hannah Rothschild)

That evening

in Kamani,
 - we had gone for
 a Hamlet adaptation
 as the sky outside had rained grey -

and the actor playing Fido (Polonius)
had said - 'Imagine Gertrude,
all of us will die, everyone today
sitting in this theatre
will one day be gone. All
of them.'

Outside in the lobby
as we had waited to be ushered in,
I had known three faces in the crowd.
Two were old students
and one
was a woman who on the metro once,
fortyish, spectacled,
had asked me about the book I had on my lap -
Dorothy Parker's 'Enough Rope' -
she had said *her poems are so clean*.
She stood near the door now
holding her ticket,
by herself, a face that I had once seen.
(*Gertrude: What will the next century look like, Fido?*
Fido: It will be, Gertrude, unfamiliar.)

That evening
in Kamani, as the DMRC cranes outside
dug deeper into the ground,
the under-study stole the show,
walked on air, an' ended his song -
after the music, after the ball,
a cold ground awaits us all.
The idea is so *neat* - all in the audience
will be gone, nothing
could be easier than this, nothing
was simpler than this,
this - our doing the rounds -
old students, old friends.

There was a standing ovation
(the actors did not come *twice* for the bow)
and, at the end, moving out -
no ground beneath our feet, in the crowd
I once again spotted her, on the stairs
(*should I go and say something*)
and before I decided, on the last step
she had turned to me,
her spectacles hanging on her neck,
and said - 'Dorothy Parker!' - and I felt,

at that moment, somehow, that I could embrace her,
 even in this crowd, even in this city, if only I try -
 both of us will one day be gone.

*'A whole world lies in the goodbye,
 and no matter what you tell me, Fido,'*

Gertrude had said,

'I don't

want to die.

I don't want

to die.

I don't want to die.'

The Hindus never ate beef*

*except

Charmakars (cobblers) did,

Bhattas (soldiers) did,

Natas (actors) did,

and so did *Dasas & Medas & Vratas & Bhillas*,

all sunk their teeth afresh,

when served cow's flesh,

&

they were joined by (drum-beat) Vedic Gods,

Indra was fond of bull's meat,

& Agni loved both bull and cow,

& old books even suggest how

& what kind of cow should be

sacrificed for which God, see

that you get

a dwarf ox for Vishnu,

& a big horned bull for Indra,

& a black cow for Pushan, & etc. etc.,

so that whenever the Gods were in the mood,

"verily the cow [was] food,"

and secretly, even now,

the Bhakts who have a beef but still eat it,

they always heave a sigh of relief,

knowing their Vivekananda

(they don't know how to treat it, it shakes their belief)

liked Biceps, Bhagwad & [yolo] Beef.

(thanks to B.R. Ambedkar and Ram Puniyani)

(tr. Hindi poem 'Bhai, Hindi log kabhi beef nahin khate the')