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Writing Sample

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Includes "Funeral Verses," "The Tale of Man and Wife: A Song (Paagl Tomar Shangey)," "Scientist (Bijnani)," "Scientist," and "Essay concerning Light."

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Funeral Verses

Corpse adrift, body all ablaze
that day we rescued Ma from the river
of fire, Sister, do you remember
the questions in our neighbor's eyes?

The experts marched in, snouts outstretched
hairs bristling on the back of their necks
the headman said: "Listen, here's the verdict—
they don't have any right to cremate"

We ran away from the village that night
Ma's body on our shoulders, moon shining above
pestilent swamps along the way
salt and lime pits along the way

Your breasts desiccated, my fingers
corroded from the caustic lime
nothing to eat, no way to bathe
our task overwhelmed us

We reached a realm with dead trees everywhere
dead animals' skins dangling from the branches
when we came to the riverbank at the end
of the earth we put Ma's skeleton down

Sister, I swear, we won't burn these bones
though it's not our custom we'll hide them
in the hollow of a tree. Won't those who
follow us know how to honor them?

Our bodies have grown moldy, we have
no eyes now, only sockets smarting with tears
I've forgotten whether I was ever a man
you don't remember your last show of blood

The light in the east is skull-white
behind it is dark as coming night
sitting in the last burning ground on earth
we're just a pair of body snatchers.

Translated by Carolyn B. Brown
The Tale of Man and Wife: A Song
(Paagli Tomar Shangey)

Baby, with you I'll live life dreadful and severe
Baby, with you I'll live life in the dust and the sand
This one, we'll dazzle, and as for that, his waters stirred to slime
baby, with you we'll check out the waves while we can

We'll raise hell everyday, the birds will avoid this house
You'll hurl the plates and I'll shatter the precious glassware
Baby, with you I'll break up this land as a rule
Baby, with you I'll live life in nineteen forty-two

Then at high noon, we'll lose it, our money and the sons
You'll make it up by cooking an imaginary brew
Baby, with you, I'll perform the rites, as set down
Baby, with you I'll sleep over it in afternoons

Baby, with you I'll have the rice and the broth
Baby, with you I'll have my broth dipped in meat
Baby, with you I'll live life, unlettered, to the core
Baby, with you I'll live life with the letters four

We'll go to the movies, cheap thrillers for us, to entertain
And sometimes, for a change, we'll try out the artier stuff
Baby, with you I'll live life in theatre workshops
Baby, with you, we'll turn the high-priests of art

Baby, with you I'll live life in sleazy ferry-ghats
Baby, with you I'll live life at the busy cross-roads
Baby, with you, it's nothing but the truth, -- as always
`Such a liar' -- it'll be -- in my life, here, with you

My lone hand to bring home the buck, with both hands you'll blow it away
We'll bet, we'll gamble and go borrowing in a thousand and one ways
Lottery, with you, I'll live life with blessings from above
Lottery, with you, I'll live life with a little bit of luck

At festival time, `here's a sale' they'll scream -- everywhere
We'll go from shop to shop, looking for the jewel in the crown
Baby, with you I'll pore over the festival lit
Baby, with you I'll live life at an annual discount
Baby, with you I'll go through the proofs -- wet and raw
Baby, with you, I'll live life in the broadsheet
Baby, with you I'll do the layouts for sure
Baby, with you I'll live life,
'goodness, gracious me!'

My poetry will fly away and I'm not going to pursue
I'll make up a story, a novelette, or something on those lines
Baby, with you I'll churn out the words, arranged in art
Baby, with you I'll live life, cackling, as pigeons do

I'll get a new girlfriend and go see her sometimes, on the sly
Till you catch me one day and give me a sound dressing down
Baby, with you I'll live life, blinded -- in a maze
Baby, with you I'll live life, settling the scores

Baby, with you I'll live life -- afflicted with sin
Baby, with you I'll live life as the scriptures suggest
Baby, with you I'll perform the Pooja Bedi rites
Baby, with you I'll have the heroines of yesteryears

We'll watch TV together, and go to the palmists as a rule With twenty-one fasts and twenty-six pledges to fulfil Baby, with you I'll live life in a rented room Baby, with you I'll live life -- `own your own flat'.

Baby, with you I'll live life in the district towns
Baby, with you I'll live life near the railway station
The trains stop midway with people squatting on the tracks
And the late-slips slapped on me, regularly, at my place of work

Baby, with you I'll live life in wish fulfilment
I'll buy flowers and you'll do the rooms all your life
Baby, with you -- hail our labourers and farm-hands at work
Baby, with you, we'll bring joy to this world

We'll quarrel in the evening -- our two beds moved well apart
No talking to each other till a sudden intercourse ends it all
Baby, with you I'll live life in pious abstinence
Baby, with you I'll live life as the first couple did

Baby, we'll be ruled by the monarch, as in myths
Baby, we'll live life the Republic way
Baby, with you I'll live life even as I'm fleeced
Baby, with you I'll live life by the skin of my teeth

We'll nudge this one here and push another to make way
We'll break this and make that and play with the waves for a while
Baby, with you I'll live life in the raging desert storm
Baby, with you I'll live life to the tune of morning strains ...

Translated by Chitralekha Basu
Five pages I wrote on death
Before the end
Then I moved far away
My earnings spent

But just how far was it
I knew, from the ocean
And the same law will tell you
The sun, is, after all, the sun

Three pages I wrote, on the sun
And everything under it
Of which a line shall I bestow
On his children - those vile spirits

Made more vile, and viler still, with each death
And so the earning and spending proceeds
I'm yet to include a section on
The faraway seas

Translated by Chitralekha Basu

- If I knew that they (the Germans) would fail to build the bomb, then I would not have done anything which would go toward building the bomb.

I've written five pages
of the antedeath chapter,
then I went far away
to loss from profit.

The conception was born
Of distance from seawater,
By that token we knew
that light does mean light.
I've written three pages
On the other side of light,
        I'll give just one time to
Its cruel lineage.

From each death comes cruel
Profit to loss profit,
Keep writing secretly
The ocean chapter.

Translated by Ananda Lal [in MODERN POEMS FROM BENGAL]

Essay concerning Light
1. Today again after many years, to invent
   ‘a technique to revive the dead’
   Today again after many years, to plug one’s ears
   and sleep
Again after many years to sit at home memorising
   Bande Ali Mian’s rhymes
Today again after many years, inspiration on
   seeing a green bathroom
And being commissioned to write the biography
   of a cloud
Today again to shoulder the shiuli* tree cut down
   long ago and
   Bring it home and grow treefuls of flowers
   And lying under the tree at dead of dawn
To try to spell ‘flowerbed’ again, today after
   many years
To end all quarrels with the songbird,
To cut off illicit relations with the fragrant
   flower, and
Today again, though colourful rousers from field
   and rallyground still
Call to arms, simply to walk away and not give a
   hoot
And to let them know that,
Every Monday a fortress opens up in front of me
And inspiration walks about inside it lamp in hand

Inspiration’s shadow falls to the ground,
   the long robe trails
The old cannon come rolling down, and in rasping
   voice,
   After cautioning the colourful about this,
   turning
This scene around backwards with a push again
Again to print pictures of autumn on all the skies
To let loose springtime on plant and leaf
To fill Bengal after Bengal to the brim with
   rainy season
Standing in paper boats one after another
   waving hands
Going to Gangasagar* again after many years
Because it’s just today that the lid having
   come off
Smoke and fire start to come out of my head
You save yourselves
2. Just now I was writing about the shiuli tree and
   That instant the one who came into the room
   Her name is
   “A branch to keep waves on”
Oh but it’s neither wave nor branch
   Her name is
   “I’ve applied colour”

Just now I was writing about applying colours
   This instant the one who came out of my room
   Her name is
   “Please take a bath, sir”

Oh it’s not bath nor room at all
   Her name is
   “In the quiet of the waterfall”

Just now I was writing about waterfalls and
   That instant the one who covered my page with her hand
   Her name is
   “Caress me”

Ah who says it’s either caress or hand
   Her name is
   “Red flare blue flare”

Just now I was writing about two kinds of flare
And the cloud came darkening my page and said
Everyone wants to hear something from you on the subject of sunlight
Today’s Monday, you can start right away...

3. Today when I’m having to write for lay audiences
   an essay concerning sunlight
The essay concerning shadow is lying behind all those tall buildings and below tall trees
When the essay concerning motion has started running even before dawn
On the heads of porters and backs of rickshaw-vans
And when the essay concerning vapour is puffing intermittently in rage
Under the lid of the pot cooking rice
And the essay concerning sound is roaring through affluent motorhorns, middleclass cookers
The Shiva-temple bells and government siren-cars
And my essay concerning air with a heighhh-ohh
Shout belches out of tubewell-drilling Joginder
And my essay concerning high temperatures is
shooting out
Through the eyes of the conductor just slapped by
a passenger
And the essay concerning earth is coming up shovel
by shovel
Going on basket by basket to fill up marshland
And the essay concerning water without a word to
anyone
Goes on sucking the sleeve of the young lady’s
kameez
And also leaping in joy
‘Long life to you’—the openmouth roadside pipes
And dancing too, the essay concerning water has
started also to dance
In time with the streetkids’ splash-splash-jig...
And then a wave of light is hitting me from
behind
Pushing me on beyond day and night

4. Dense black and dark
The womb
Choking hot or cold, solid or liquid
The womb
Inside it stirred my
Foetal state
Piercing the surface rising upwards from the
earth’s centre it began
My autobiography
Cracking layer after layer of rock with its head
Suddenly diving, helplessly tossing in water
Being forged in a stream of hot metal
Upwards piercing the soil or downwards came my
Autobiography, not knowing from which side
of the globe it would come out
Parting
Earth and sand and earth and sand and earth
Parting
The yet unturned-to-earth skull and headgear
A handful of dead hair stuck on the skull
Within sand the whispering of secret murders long
ago
And within earth, the ceaseless sobbing of
mouldering queens
Broken goblets and broken down baths and crawling
Through holes in bones of buried soldiery of both
sides,
And parting parting parting those turned to earth
In their thousand thousand families and
And piercing the earth
My autobiography raised its head in a desert
And again I entered the limits of day and night

5. This doesn’t mean that just by groping in the
sand heap
You’ll find its whereabouts
This doesn’t mean that it has hidden its face
This doesn’t mean that you’ll be able to touch
even a hair of its head
This doesn’t mean that it’s forgotten
how to butt with its head
This does mean that,
It still lies half submerged in the desert
Blazing daily in the sun
And goes wild with each conflagration, upsets the
atmospheric layers
Finds no shore from ocean to mountain range
It means
This poem is fire that poem is lightning and
That other poem is the south-west monsoon wind,
that
When it blew across my country
Left little Mou in the house across the street
Who morning and evening goes book in hand to learn
to type
From typing to singing class and Shumi has ended
up
As far away as Nagerbajar, flat of chest, morning
and evening
Tutoring, acquiring no lover, till suddenly
It happened, one evening, with me
We lost all sense of direction
Floating floating we ended up in mid-ocean
And the instant we hit peak she tore away
From on top of me into space a meteor
And having become a broken piece of ship’s timber
Floating floating floating floating
I came aground where
Habitation begins
All day I lie by the water and dry
And when evening falls
And one by one the lights go on
In the houses
I get up, I stand up like a live body
In front of the windows one by one—see the
children at study
I ask, will Teacher come today?

6. Then one day light advances
Through windows one by one
Through the upstairs gallery through the rooftop garret
Through the streetpost also through the lamp above the vendor’s snacks light advances
Checks to see if my muscles have withered to the right twist
Whether or not the spine has smelted to the right strength
And at once transmutes me to fuel
And I start a prayer:
Break me, stick me into the bottom of a brick-piled stove
May the pavement household be happy
Chop me up, mix and burn with all the dry leaves, on winter nights let my backwoods brethren warm
Their hands and feet
Then pull me out, pull me out from the firepit and toss the long embers
Shack by shack may your neighbours’ households burn to ashes. Great.

7. Great, how dandy your run over the fire now
To escape the fire
Running, running, hands and back warding off arrows, catching arrows on the fly,
Inaugural songs for each new mayhem and the blood-chilling
Substance of painful shrieks
Getting to understand them how dandy your getaway artist shedding blood along the way, all kinds of Hullabaloo balooohulla muted cursing Sounds of weeping, the last breath exhaled Trampling trampling on, your run Leaping up underfoot, entrapping the feet, the
bite of all these fluid flames
Who says, who says so, from under the running
The ghost of the mudswamp says so,
They’ve buried me, ripped open my gullet, the
knife is in the pond
It says, Here’s my navel opened up and my entrails
In pieces, spreading as fertiliser from plot to
plot
The crop
Sways, Can you recognize me I’m the sharecropper’s
ghost there’s no need to redeem me
The daily murder over shares, trouble over wives,
men cut up over cutting crops
Blood
Bloodshed
All blood, all innards, all heads, all bones, all
calcium, all phosphate
Under the paddy, under the jute, pressing and
pushing up the paddy crop
The seedling stirs and roars, the fire burning
The soles of your feet makes them new again and
mixing freely
With this earth-substance I enjoy possession
of my land
So who said
Under the soil it’s only darkness?

8. Today it’s a darkness, tomorrow it’s a fire, the day after a
Hair-tossing
Wave
Inside the wave a something or other
Possibly a peak, which has begun to form last
night
And the sea is sloping away on both sides
On a rock am I, a plant just awake from sleep

A gust of wind
    A cyclone
A cloud, clouds jostling
A black
    A column
Sounds inside the column, landslides inside the
column
    And right up to the horizon a collapse
    A spill reaching up to the sky
After that all things sink away
By the shoreline I, a life, have just opened my
eyes

A distance, after that
Water, after that water, after that distance,
   after that distance, after that
Water
A flicker, a colour, a circle, a
Day, a wave

I leap on to the head of the wave
A tiny fish

Tiny fish, tiny fish, one fish, two fishes,
Three fishes, shoal after shoal leaping,
Dropping to the water, one day not dropping
One flew on, flew on, with wing and
Feather, flew on out there where there’s sight of
   The shore

9. Where does this shore stay?
In the middle of water.
Who sleeps beneath the water?
I.

Many miles from this shore
In the night from the water rises
My reptile face.
My neck is like a column. From my
Eyes’ empty sockets sandy water
Many kinds of fish and slime
Roll out and drop below. Like an eyeless camel’s
The face, neck twisting around for a look back,
Many miles back, towards its back, the vegetation
That has taken life on its back, the birds asleep
And all living things

Looks, then the gigantic face set on its column
Drops once more into the sea

10. —Hey wait, you can’t have the right
To say just anything,
Or licence to to see just anything
Or passport to write just anything.
There’s a science to everything. This time
You’re really, really going beyond the limit
—Okay, but the room I come to work in
It's a ghouls' workshop. Set on a raft, this room
Has come swaying swaying to shore one day, now
Its stone walls are pocked with all kinds of
Holes. From one of them appears
An artist's brush come alive and towards it
Colours rush of their own.
And of its own a mural stands up and stands
Against the wall. In some holes are
Big fat books. The stories of their own
Come out of the books walking,
And even after the book is finished walk on
Wherever they wish. From some holes
Roll down great rocks and the roof cracking
Lightning strikes it again and again.
Splinters flying, of its own it turns now
into a face,
Now into the branch of a tree and now into female
sculpture,
Then it flies out through the hole in the roof.

And

Instantly before me
Someone takes the great ocean lying supine
And stands it up vertical reaching out to sky,
The ocean is then all fire instead of water,
The sky can't be seen at all, only on all sides
Thousands, thousands of small and large lumps are
Shooting out, the fire-ocean at one point
Pulls me in too, and spills me out and up
Beyond the fountain above its head
That very instant once again I violate
The limits of day and night...'

Aa aa aa aa aa...you are who, you are who, you are
what,
You are which, you are colour, lava colour, comet
colour, scorched red
Diamond colour, heat is white, heat is all, I am
where, what world
How many suns am I passing, arms made of
particles, legs made
Of particles, all a whirlpool, all spiralling,
floating colours, blind colours,
I don't know their names, heat is pure, heat is
all, in it an egg
Transparent egg, floating, running, egg, ovum, egg
of creation*

Inside, that eyes-shut-fingers-clenched, I am I,
Inside the egg opening the eyes, opened the eyes,
just this instant
My my
Foetal state...

On the other side, left behind under the volcano
My brain is humming in joy,
And in the earth’s cavernous centre my hot heart
is throbbing
And my smoking autobiography, up from the desert
Roams the habitations, takes part in
Coining axioms, makes musical instruments out of
    wood
Aims weapons, raises the mouthful
To the mouth, snaps fingers, whistles a tune,
With both hands conquers lack and want, builds
Love anew, finds union, and coming home
Late at night drenched by rain, sees as she
    Opens the door,
In his mate’s eyes, a light...

And my essay concerning light is then
Rushing on shooting past star after star after
    nebula into a dark open mouth...

Translated by Probir Ghosh