

Arjun Choudhuri

Negotiation

When we died, faithless ones,
the world did not die with us.
Remember this and know
you are luckier than the rafts
that flow down the Barak.¹

What would have been true
became the painted word
now a holy part,
of these songs of the past,
these remnants of a day lost—

I do not live anymore
I do not live in these songs
or the plantain rafts that you float
every odd hour on *Varuni*² day
in the waters of this stilled river.

I waited long enough for the earth
to turn itself over. But the gods knew
more than me. And so I died, my child-wife
third in a row, pregnant, your fathers
ranging one to seven in tow behind.

And still you ask me,
tiresome sons of my sons,
what would have been your fate
if I had been a bit wiser?
It should be enough for you
that there are fields of grain
left golden for the asking
and a new railroad making its way
across the paths we once walked,
barefoot, dusty and nearly dead.

And now we are dead, indeed.
Astonishingly enough,
here there are no fathers like me,
dead, done and gone,

but still living for a name.

Notes

1. The Barak is the name of a river that flows across the states of Mizoram, Manipur and Assam on the northeastern boundary of India and into Bangladesh. It assumes other names like the Surma and the Kushiara in the course of its flow. The river also lends its name to Barak Valley, a region in Assam known specifically for its eleven language martyrs who died during the Bengali Language Movement of 1961.

2. *Varuni Snan Yoga* is a festival of the Hindus celebrated specifically on a particular stellar conjunction during the Hindu calendar month of *Chaitra*, which corresponds roughly with the month of March. The main event during this festival is a holy dip in the river Ganga, which is sacred to all Hindus.