

Harnidh Kaur

How to Drape a Sari

Tie together loops around your waist, tight enough to bite into your soft belly (a little reminder of the diet you're on, the thirteenth this year), tuck in one layer of silky crepe in, pressing down each inch with the same force you use to dig your nails into your palms every time you're told to keep shut, start folding accordion folds, each as wide as half a handspan, the smaller, the better—just like you, creased into yourself because taking space looks unkempt, and rude— start wrapping the shaded purple leaves onto your body, each overlap covering up the anger you carefully pin to your chest diagonally to where your lungs lie, each breath a reminder to keep quiet, keep calm, keep still, culminating in a half-mast flag fluttering down your back, caressing your tailbone as you walk tall, accepting compliments for your cultured values, agility, and skill.

Linguaphilia

The love of languages

I'm going to murmur sonnets down
your spine, as I trace words in soft,
trembling cursive into your skin,
invoking the poets I grew up drinking,
leaving wet prints of translations
that left just enough taste to make
me ache for something purer than
the murky trail of histories lost to
the confines of colonial heritages,
and I'm going to let my tongue
write Hindi poetry into the flesh
of your shoulder, leaving glowing
words stamped into you, a code
I can unscramble with the songs
I hum when I play with your hair,
and I'm going to weave old folk tales
into your chest, pouring the fury
of loss and longing that has flown
for years through five rivers, together,
if held distinct and separate by
borders that refused to respect how
the words moved together, fluid,
and I'm going to press my fingers
into the inner curve of your upper
arm, showing you how Urdu slips
like the smell of crushed petals,
from my lips to yours, and I'm going
to do this one by one, explaining
each word I use with the texture I
associate it with, for I'm going to
show you how one language will not
ever be enough for me to show you
how much love you make me spill.

If Eve Belonged to the Sea

my heart does not know
how to beat well sometimes
it beats so fast so hard so quick
and sometimes it beats so
slowly that I can time my
harsh breathing with it, but it
never beats in steady words,
it's never stable enough to be
a

solid

foundation

and that would be okay, I think
because I've always preferred
the sea's sea to the way the

way

ground expects me to hold still,
trapping my feet in bramble and
moss, expecting uprightness from
my twisted and warped bones, but
it's not; it's like breathing in the way
saltwater teases itself into my knotted
hair, nestling against my neck, mingling
with sweat, salt on salt on salt (from tears)
leaked out quietly soaking through scarves
tied in intricate curves and curls wrapped
in themselves just like my words, withheld
for the fear of the lack of ability to punctuate
or control the syntax that spills out of my
mouth, unbidden, unwanted, cutting through
my tongue like so many bites of acid coated
a

p

p

l

e

s.

Would You Take Some Sugar

My chest is a teacup,
fine bone china

chipped
off
at
the
edges

by the teeth that clashed against
the porcelain cream,
leaving rose shaped bruises
people gasped over-

'is that hand painted water colour?'—

rimmed with the thinnest line of
gold trim
scraped off by years and years
of tongues being held back
by the brim

of scalding

liquid that
poured
 forth
 every
 time

someone tried to tip it—

hot heated crimson stained with anger, lust,
and, uncontrolled spillage o f w o r d s
that mar the sheen every time they
flow through,

till the glaze is tinted
a faint yellow,
 not bright enough
to be the sun,
 and not weak enough
to live in the melancholy of sepia
tinted dreams and wants,

my heart
is the that gathers all the
 bottom
dregs left by every spill that splashed,
quietly hoarding every leaf, every drop
of dirty milk, and every little
omen I can read, my chest is a teacup,
and it c r a c k s every day,
little rivulets
 escaping
 their
 little
 cage,
the pressure of simply trying to
exist,
to be
exploding through their embrace.

Crooked Shores

My feet are inelegant,
 crack-like veins
 protruding
from translucent skin,
discolored by the silverfish scars

that mar

the spaces that have been cut open
by sharp gunmetal gleams,

my feet have no *arch*,
I was not born with one,

they're just as obtuse as I can be,
with no skill or finesse to their very being,

my toenails are wide, and flat, just like pebbles,
and I trip on them in much the same way.

I've made a habit of
 curling
them inwards every time I'm so very scared,

but when I sit by the sea,

my feet are not just feet,
they are conduits of all that the water has
to say to me—

my ears are overwhelmed with the
 chatter of the *waves*,
and my eyes are *wound up* in
 the foamy sprays,
so my feet, despite their inability,
 take up the work
of translating the stories that
 need to be heard,
they note down what the tiny bits
 of seaweed murmur,
and the complaints the seashells sing,

and they pay heed to the way
 sand finds itself nestled
between my bones and skin,

and I hear them all, holding court,
letting their words wash over my feet,

*feeling the way the ground slips off under
my grasp, just like these thoughts elude me.*