

Two Poems by Amlanjyoti Goswami

The one who knew the heart of elephants

He knew forty ways to kiss an elephant.
Most know ten, some go on to thirty
Sweet nothings,
Shrouded in elephant lore.

At night, he would go looking.
A dense jungle where no human lived.
He would soothe whispers to the night
Tend wounds with a song, listen to their love stories -

Who was after whom, who rebuffed whom.
He would put a balm on their hearts.
The one he learnt from the Elephant Queen
The goddess - he saw her just twice - all his life.

She lived among them in the forest,
Wore a smile, never spoke.
Her skin remained dry, even in the rain.
And she understood elephant pain.

He fed them with his own hands,
Salt, paddy, sugarcane dressed in plantain, and what they loved
most -
Jaggery, red and juicy, fresh from the farm.
He would tell them of his daughters.

Pratima, who collected folk songs like medicinal herbs.
Parbati, younger, wilder, who tamed a wild tusker at fourteen.
As they listened, a tusker shed tears, hearing his tales.
Even Pratap Singh, his beloved beast, who lived with him all night.

Sometimes he looked out and saw the river flowing moonlight.
When he bathed in it, with the rich meaning of night.
When he drove a knife in, a promise made to the goddess,
If Pratap Singh returned hearty, he would offer her

A little blood, that ran down the red river.
Sometimes, sleepless, he came out, where the elephants lived,
Holding a trunk, rubbing the rough with tip of finger,
Calming nerves behind ear, with one more story.

This would go on all night.
When dawn broke, they were still fresh for more.

He joked with them, that elephants were short sighted but had
A long memory. Heard them chortle at the joke.

His grass grew taller than the castle.
He tended them with the milk of love.
They felt signs not words.
He knew their moods like a beloved, their sighs in the breeze.

Pratap Singh, the baby elephant, remained a favourite.
They bonded like father and son.
He named the local hospital after the elephant.
Why not? he asked those who asked why.

When they found him sprawled like morning just born,
A knife dug deep, the glass half drunk,
It was out of grief they said. They still remember him
As the one who knew the heart of elephants.

(remembering Prakritish Barua, Lalji)

Notes:

1. Sonar Baran Pakhi (The Golden hued Bird), Bobby Sarma Barua, film, 2016.
2. A Trunk full of Tales, Dhriti K. Lahiri Choudhury, Orient Blackswan, 2006.

Finding Shillong

Find me Shillong on a map.
If you flew from Reykjavik & tilted the world a little
Or flew like a songbird
From Penarth where Philip lives in snow,
You will find her somewhere near Guwahati.

My Shillong of childhood.
Bone chilling cold, December clad
Hail on rooftops as we trawl our way
To aunt's house, where a cousin listens to a transistor.
Gavaskar just scored a double century.

Shillong, in those misty caves of morning.
A lone stranger walks, chewing betelnut
Believing in clearings, a forsaken turning.
Looking up - the sky - all blue muscle,
A winter jacket telling him something.

Shillong of our dreams
Betelnut red, plum red, walls splattered blood red, now bubble tea
red.

Bhupen da's evenings, Jayanta da's Monalisa Lyngdoh,
Guitar strumming beyond Nongpoh, Jorabat and Barapani.
The blue hills a little distance away.

For Philip Gross

Amlanjyoti Goswami's new collection of poetry is *Vital Signs* (Poetrywala). His earlier collection *River Wedding* (Poetrywala) was widely reviewed. His poetry has been published in journals and anthologies around the world. A Best of the Net and Pushcart nominee, his poems have also appeared on street walls in Christchurch, exhibitions in Johannesburg, an e-gallery in Brighton and buses in Philadelphia. He has reviewed poetry for *Modern Poetry in Translation* and has read in various places, including New York, Delhi and Boston. He grew up in Guwahati and lives in Delhi.