Chandini’s Thumbprint

Chandini holds the pot spoon wherever she goes.

In her bedroom, she makes vows before sunrise, singing to herself; all to keep her bosom calm.

At the fireside, tired from sleepless nights before; she makes dhal and rice and bhajie to nourish her husband, blessing the food in saucepans for his journey into the canefield.

A woman has no time for afternoon breeze on the verandah.

The vegetable garden awaits her strong hands. She fills her basket and makes her own path, walking barefeet for miles to the market; all to earn her own wages.

Why are those hands so heavy and red across her neck? Answer me! Answer me now!

In her belly, unseen torture silence! Again and again.

She counts the days and thinks of her children on the edge, She buys pencils and books and shoes for their entrance to school. Her only consolation is this privilege: to push for their education, her girls especially.

Chandini knows limitations, but she works out everything. She looks for the moon every night.

Now comes her husband’s silence, she puts her thumbprint on the front door, on every window, high up on the ceiling; She walks for miles – Every step she takes for the house and land in her name.

Gone are the days of outrage. Each step, a breath of fire! Each step, the woman who dares!

—Janet Naidu
Trails of Treasures

Not so long ago, roses whispered the gentle song of your name, and your mother held you close in her arms, her eyes and heart listening. Her garden widened with sunflowers across promises of a fragrant future like a vessel at harbor – with every comfort for the journey.

I slip into memory and catch your enduring years in a basket of floral keepsakes – a birth marks a mother’s grace like a velvet sky at nightfall, looming. Every glance unfolds another moment captured by the boldness of wings, by the freshness of paintings.

The soft pull of eastern drums echo and warm your heart, like an infant on its mother’s bed. The sun follows you through the fields where your name is planted, grown among the women, girls too adorned in colourful head ties. Their grass knives swing in the sun cutting new grass without malice.

But their moments cannot pass without the wild songs and rhymes that ring of lessons in pride: of survival in the way some work shortens play.

Your heart missed a privilege, only fingertips away where skipping ropes and hop scotch swelled in girlish giggles. Not even a day of A and B or C made it your way – but pages at night, not even another alphabet, in your veins – but eastern languages at wasteland. Still, not one leftover book, shortened pencil or unmatched ribbons in your hair for only a day.

I hear the penalty in your voice, deep void as your head leaned against the school – in the yard alone, hiding your face from the rain. There, you glimpsed a pressed uniform, girls ten years or so, clapping a rhyme. The small of the window left you gazing into the ways of the school room. But the grass bundle you carried remained at your feet, waiting.

Each sunrise caressed your steps across the long distances in weight upon your head

Now, I walk with you – in your hand, along the length of your feet carrying the unwritten words in my heart.

I feel your time – your golden heart hiding its silent wish – to read. Our nights move, slowly receding long after the sun closes her door. your gentle walk nurtures my spirit, In a way, like a waterfall constant, voluminous in flow. Still, like a sunburst, your eyes smile a thousand gifts.

—Janet Naidu
Ammani’s Cushion

In courtship, he reveals his dreams 
pouring out daily doses of deep nectar 
to sweeten her and nurture some sense of domestic bliss.

She too had dreams concealed, 
bursting like midday hibiscus, 
She too walks the earth.

He gathers himself, many sleepless nights, 
aching heart and lonesome days. 
The equation: he knows the wind carries 
bare branches 
missing the fruits of necessity, 
the comfort of family.

Restlessly, he approaches her in the garden.

“I who am strong, 
like a lantern post, 
Should a storm prompt me, 
Should lightning torment me, 
I would fall, I know. 
Without you, I cannot go on.”

Ammani leans her head 
against the bark of the golden apple tree.

“I know you are only feeling this today, 
when the sun is low and the clouds are dark. 
These days, you must look for the rare moon to shine in your heart, 
the wonders that are before you, 
dreams perhaps of this new place. 
I release you from this state of darkness by virtue of divine love.”

She upholds the doctrines of friendship between man and woman, similar to godly affection.

Anand cups his chin with both hands, 
despondent that Ammani wants to remain by herself and not merge with him in a matrimonial bond. 
He did not know that from her childhood days, 
she had witnessed much turbulence, distant attachments. 
Anand sees his pensive and sorrowful eyes evenly reflected in Ammani’s.

“I don’t know why I suffer like this. 
I am happy you are my friend 
But I need more – a wife to cook sweet dishes like my mother, the devoted goddess. 
A man’s future is in the blessing of a wife, the heart of home and family.”

Ammani, unaffected by blissful temptation, hears the call of the Bluebird, like a clock ticking inside her body. 
Love comes after midnight, soundless and shapeless.

“I am not made like a hammock 
but a little cushion, not big enough for two in days of rest and time alone.”

He now sees light rain at her window:

“I have waited many moons to break 
My silence of deeper thoughts. 
Since childhood, I felt sure you would come to me. 
Long ago I was strong, tilled the land since a teenager, reaped rice harvest. 
But now – now I want to pursue higher knowledge for better work, family… 
I want to rest near you as a husband who comes home to his wife for tenderness.”

She wraps her arms around the tree trunk like a soft cushion against her bosom.

“Like a lantern post should a storm impel me 
I would surely fall, I know; 
But these days 
The sun comes regularly, 
The clouds dance.”

Anand appears pensive:
“My dear friend, in divine love,
I feel your strong heart near.”

Ammani gazes at the tree top:
“Like a lantern post,
I too dream of higher knowledge
For better work.
My arms are strong
and I think of higher beings.”

Anand’s eyes hold a steady gaze, welling up:
“Oh dear goddess, freedom washes your feet
to dance in the sunlight
to make pathways for your own being.
I understand this new dance of life
To love – togetherness and as separate self.”

—Janet Naidu

Tower of Babel on the Suriname River

I who wrote
about your world
am deaf and dumb
in the language
that you speak

I who live by discourse
disputes and diatribes
weave webs of words
learn to look
in your presence

You play with silence
paint with your eyes
tell stories with your body
you translate yourself with jewellery
tight tiger leggings
long fuchsia nails
you talk in monosyllables

I say something
you ask what it is
I reword my question
you answer another
I speak of cooking
you talk of roasting—
tongues converse

—Gloria Wekker

Paramaribo/Amsterdam,
October 1997.