

Classic Poetry Series

Mohammad Rafiq
- poems -

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Mohammad Rafiq(1943)

Mohammad Rafiq (Bengali: মোহাম্মদ রাফিক) is a prominent Bangladeshi poet.

 Early Life

Rafiq was born in 1943 in the village of Baitpur, Bagerhat, Bangladesh (then East Pakistan). In his youth, his country was going through a political instability. During his student life at Dhaka University he was a political activist and was arrested and jailed twice. Pakistani martial law court sentenced him ten years of hard labour. He later was released earlier to complete his university studies. During the War of Independence of Bangladesh Mohammad Rafiq served as a Sector-1 commander and motivated the freedom fighters. Later he worked with the famous Radio station of Independent Bengal (স্বাধীন বাংলা বেতার কেন্দ্র).

 Bangladesh and Autocratic Regime

Through Mohammad Rafiq's dozen volumes of poetry, Bengali readers have witnessed not only the evolution of a distinctive personal vision and style but also a reflection of the changing fortunes of a homeland—all against a backdrop of folk tradition (a typically Bengali mix of Hindu and Muslim lore) and timeless images of water and sky, sun and rain, clouds and dust. This is not to say that Rafiq's poems tend to be predominantly "political" (other poets of Bangladesh more regularly respond to specific events and issues). Rather, an awareness Bangladesh's freedom struggle, the time of idealism and hope after independence, and the long dark period of military rule after the assassination of the new nation's first democratically elected leader, Sheikh Mujib Rahman, should help readers from less turbulent parts of the world understand the potentially explosive impact of a particular literary work and the extraordinary risks that a writer may take in writing and publishing it. When Hossain Muhammad Ershad—a dictator who fancied himself a poet—seized power in 1982, the people of Bangladesh had to endure crushing repression from his regime and from the growing forces of communalism.

During the dictatorship of Hossain Muhammad Ershad, Rafiq wrote Khola Kabita (Open Poem) and it was published as a leaflet and was circulated throughout the country. It was the first voice raised against the unlawful military autocracy. It became very popular among the student activists and they performed the poem as drama and song. Later on, he was summoned and interrogated before a military board of inquiry. A warrant for arresting him was also issued. By this time, Mohammad Rafiq escaped and began to live in hiding.

** Teaching Career & His Awards **

Mohammad Rafiq worked as a teacher at Chittagong Government College and at Dhaka College. After working in the Department of English, Jahangirnagar University for three decades, Mohammad Rafiq retired in 2009.

He received Alaol Literary Award in 1981 and Bangla Academy Award in 1987. In 2010 he won the prestigious "Ekushey Podok."

A Chestful Of Contentment

Oh the girl's tresses unloose themselves,
her clothes fly away,
in the flame-orange of her body comes the dawn,
in the beckon of her enchanting smile the morning follows.
the farmer with plough and yoke on his shoulder
walks the ridges of his field

the daughters gone the sons gone the cows gone the land gone
only their mother remains

pour the water, oh golden maiden, put your mind to the water
fetch the pitcher winnow the grain wash the floor serve the rice
oh she's used up her body, she can move no more
her flesh comes off her bones, her eyes from her head, her hands from her arms

at sunset this wounded woman's shadow sticks to the mat.

the farmer, shrinking within himself
in the husk and ashes of his dreams, roasting all night in the vapors of his burnt
youth

and stuck to the pot of jaggery, the corpse of a dead ant

[Translated from Bengali by Prasenjit Gupta]

Mohammad Rafiq

A Winter's Tale

Enough—such terrible cold—it's dawn
his eyes opened slowly—look
a pair of mynahs come up to the window
in the ground, talking beak to beak, wing to wing

Quavering dew climbs the jute leaves
once he was a boy with no elephant in his elephant pen
no horse in his horse stall . . .
still he would cross calm skies and seas

On a cane raft—the rest of the story is familiar
after eighty winters piled with dust and straw
bamboo leaves and grass make a lap for him one day
and cry—so you've come back, child . . . with sand-

Painted faces day and night unfurl
a soft white sheet and smooth it over
his makeshift green cot—eyes closed in sleep
he too sees—the tender cleansing is complete

Children—golden and silver—are yawning everywhere
even the frozen stones thaw—in such sunshine

[Translated by Carolyn B. Brown]

Mohammad Rafiq

Angikar

Mohammad Rafiq

At Aricha Ghat

At midnight the moon was lying across
Padma and Jamuna's sand-and-water-covered cot

This time, it said, this time, tide, come willingly
it's the season for balancing your ledger to the last cent

The skiff with the broken prow in the cove has witnessed
all these great departures for the banks of the Styx

Countless crossings, fatal shores, remote ghost trees on both sides
faithful wives, metaphors with no memories, the cosmos

Colorless smells, this journey from the ocean to the Himalayas
Padma and Jamuna 's water and sand, self-satisfied, dissatisfied release

lolling on the makeshift cot, the moon calls, come, today I am
the earth's twin sister, a frozen floodtide of flesh and blood

[Translated by Carolyn B. Brown]

Mohammad Rafiq

Brishti O Khorar Kobita

Mohammad Rafiq

He Shodesh He Amar Bangladesh

Mohammad Rafiq

Jolchitro

Mohammad Rafiq

Kirtinasha - A

At the river's edge ambushing
shadows huddle in the mud
rasping breaths echo in the dusk
it's only evening, not doomsday

Mutterings boil up and burst
over the land, grumblings gather
and scatter—it's not
the flood, only the turning tide

The air cracks, then shatters
ayai, it's the end—the wind shrieks
and whips the night—it's only
the riverbank plunging, not the deluge

Surging spurting spilling
it's only water, not poison.

[Translated from Bangla by Carolyn Brown]

Mohammad Rafiq

Kirtinasha - B

Ho now, Beguni! your lover's coming tonight
so comb your hair, coil your braids high
hush, Kirtinasha's rising, racing, drenched in desire
under the last full moon in this season of sighs

Damodar, the wind's husky voice is sweet tonight
hope's phantoms rock the tethered boat
water kisses it, night clasps its planks
seeking sleep's secret in the dripping rain

foamy waves whirl wildly over rippling arms
soaked ribs quiver in the rampaging wind
ho now, Beguni! never mind your scented clothes
no tired feet, no darkened doorways, forget them tonight

tomorrow Kirtinasha will ebb and flow as always
tonight is different, Damodar, tonight's call is different.

[Translated from Bangla by Carolyn Brown]

Mohammad Rafiq

Kirtinasha - C

Brine-encrusted wall . . . snake drooping over a beam
dusk approaches with a sigh . . . scraps of crumpled paper
scuttle across the floor . . . a window has blown open
the chill wind sweeps in whooping and wailing

grit scatters over a grimy body with spine-tingling
scratches and scrapes, covering it from head to toe
a half-empty barley tin lies close by, an open
bottle of medicine . . . a bat, just one, frightened

wings flapping, follows the trail of fading light
heavy-lidded eyes open wide, straining to see
the end, its face, its shadow, though the man knows
he's alone . . . no one's been there for days

now even that dim awareness dissolves . . . it's night
a drift of dust shifts without warning, burying
the trickle of painful memories . . . eyes glaze
a lizard clacks loudly, the only witness.

[Translated from Bangla by Carolyn Brown]

Mohammad Rafiq

Kopila (Collection)

Mohammad Rafiq

My Mother

This unfamiliar tree bearing fruit over here
it's my mother

mango and rose-apple, pomegranate, pear
or maybe star-apple, hogplum too
guava, pomelo, kamranga
so much pain and love, sacrifice and patience

as if all the pronouns of the world
the adjectives, nouns, and prepositions
of a village too, a field, a map with no form

are my mother's other names
expelled from heaven
crossing timidly over to the underworld

Mohammad Rafiq

No One Belonging To Me

With the meeting of the Baleshwar and Pashur in his heart
the man floats till he reaches dry land
Mehendigang market, Char Baisha's shrine

Half-broken voices, rain-soaked footsteps, whispers among
potatoes and onions in shuttered shops and warehouses
hurricane lanterns' smoky glow like muddy water at high tide

Faces look familiar, bangles and laughter jangle
thatched roofs are slick and mossy in the moonlight
a flirtatious sari slips off a head, everything is dripping, dropping

In Banishanta village nothing moves under the man's gaze
market stalls, narrow path obliterated by water and mud
paddy on both sides, shaora bushes—father and grand-

Father, come back, son—cold touch of people you don't belong to
shadows, odor of shrouds and incense rises from the graves
a sickle of light crosses the fields on the moon's twelfth night

Suddenly, a circus tent touches the body and takes flight
arthritic sleep, miserable horse's hoofbeats, dead tiger's ribcage
tendons—but the man's illusion hasn't shattered

With only the meeting of the Baleshwar and Pashur in his heart
he floats till he digs into the bank one night
knees smudged with dirt, palms smelling of scum and fish scales

Mohammad Rafiq

Of Generations Gone

Just inside the courtyard, on the left an ancient guava tree,
planted by father's father-in-law; on the north side the kitchen,
after four monsoons slanted completely eastward;
the white faces of three widows, an oil-lamp burning in the dark;

On that night the call of high tide in the Arial Khan's waters,
on the bamboo fence two spears, a hatchet, a cleaver,
sparkling, sleepless; in waiting the night lengthens;
with its drenched enraged breath, like a lifting rib a sandbar rises

the tug of primal mystery, of the current's black muscle;
tell me you won't go when the headman calls next,
swear it; why risk your lives;
tearing at the dark, the white teeth of strange laughter,

clutching their wives chest to chest; the sun's red spurting
from the spear's wound, that flaming pain you won't understand, dear;
from their land the three men leap and bound away,
in the same way father went, grandfather went, of generations gone

in the blood-clotted darkness the lamp flickers,
on the bamboo fence hang the rusted spears, the cleaver;
three widows' faces with their ebbtide gaze, listening to
the Arial Khan in the dark, sand-rib rising with its breath.

[Translated from Bengali by Prasenjit Gupta]

Mohammad Rafiq

Open Poem

Every son-of-a-bitch wants to be a poet—even industrious ants
want to fly, tusked boars from the forest dream of sitting on thrones

*

a hole opens in the sky above the third-world marketplace
a god in a khaki uniform clambers down
black boots on his feet, bayonet arrogant in his hand

fields and boat landings lie empty, plundered by
voracious fools, greed and corruption—capitalism's black
claws raze the framework of communities, spilling red blood

this time, Allah willing, the right solutions
will be found, poverty will be replaced by bliss
the khaki-clad god broadcasts these amazing homilies

one year—two at most—then you'll see!
morsels of beggar-flesh stuck in the claws and fangs
of bloodthirsty ghouls, tossed onto carcass heaps

hovering over the third-world sky now, forcing his way
into homes, the khaki-clad god strides, signature
black boots on his feet, bayonet arrogant in his hands

*

27 March, night—Poradaha Railway Junction
tempted by a piece of chapati or ruti,
a teenaged girl is raped, left to die—at Shivaganj, thirty
to forty takas for bananas or chilies in the open-air bazaar

along with Saleha, Mallika, or Mina, eighteen
or nineteen year olds are even cheaper—no shortage
of buyers and sellers, crowds on the rampage
everyone learning the law of supply and demand

swindlers—from bureaucrats to the village headman
the witness tree is weighed down by centuries of dread
a gecko's weary eyes shrink from squabbles
a hundred thousand peacock boats have sunk in the floods

only Saodagar, lone merchant, is left drifting
on the current, watching the fickle moon
a puff of cloud slowly grows heavy and bursts
drowning Champaknagar in pounding rain

a shadow lingers, a bone-thin black snake sneaks
through a crack in the lane by Behula's bridal chamber
toward the inner rooms, into the marriage bed—its offspring
blue with poison, each dropp of blood seed for another monster

this filthy twisting shadow strikes viciously
gnashing childhood, swallowing young and old
slashing the scorched earth of a suicidal century
pulverizing the banks with water's savage malice

the blood of Nadyathakur and Mahua, stabbed in the heart
prosperous, anonymous household in a casteless community
in a land so fertile, paradise on earth
horrid screeches shatter the spheres from heaven to hell

haunted tamarind on the sunrise side of the courtyard
at midnight, faraway shadows of colonial bogeymen
driving killer winds and clouds in different disguises
searching for hiding places, spying into every nook and cranny

15 June, dawn—yesterday before the sun was up
village farmers cutting marsh grass dragged the rotting
corpses of ten young men out of the swamp
according to rumor some of the farmers have

vanished without a trace—they still haven't come home
this sorcerer-shadow, bloodshed, bullets, guns, rape
black boots, boot rule, starvation, epidemics
slicing through ribs with one thrust of the spade

*

humiliation-stained faces, smudged black from ravenous boots
the moon comes up—wounded chests heave, the tide flows past
unbraiding girls' plaits—bodies of the dead float by
thousands and thousands, beyond counting

racing round the bend, centuries of riverbanks crashing

black masks torn off in silent inner rooms, muttering
conspiracies—sweeping torchlight—pitiful moans
from the corner of the courtyard a raped wife wails

trailing saris torn on batabi thorns—all night long
a wakeful severed head lies in the moon's hammock
plows turn over earth and bones
fields of grain are uprooted with lathi strokes

hearth and home, human dwellings, marketplaces ablaze
mice, dogs, all kinds of birds seek refuge—entire processions
crowds from all directions overwhelm the burning ground
long rows of anonymous bodies lie under broken tombstones

echoing laughter awakens fear, dread—rumblings
rise, earth crashes down, swallowing the granary
faces with dark bruises, cruel bootprints
the moon comes up—wounded chests—impotent terror

*

write a love poem, no matter what you feel
write a love poem, senseless rifle bullets
are aimed at your head—chitchat, shitting, pissing
except for these trifles, everything is banned

poison in the bloodstream, betrayals at birth
Padma's bosom has withered into sand dunes
the moon's spindly skeleton wanders a dark path, nibbling
all night, eyes flicker and flare on the endless mud flats

everything is banned now: eating and drinking, conversation
in the dry season a lizard resting on a beam above starving
shapes and squinting eyes pricks up its ears—the law's
soulless conspiracy hauls in its nets with expert hands

worm-infested skulls, doomed whispers of laughter
the newly risen sun spies a village mother's
dead body (untied from a tree limb) sprawled
over a broken cot—suicide is a great crime

shout, reach out a hand to help, rise up

and march—it's banned now
write a love poem, no matter what you feel
write a love poem, with no risk, no responsibility

*

you're bound to be beaten—the land awakens
to the thwack of violent blows, wind thrashes
the spines of thatched roofs far and wide
rivers of silt wrench the flesh within

year round bamboo walls crack and break
vats of rice, onion seeds, soaking dal
knifelike boots come running down the road, crunching
from the corners of courtyards, blades splitting minds

slashing through brains—the moon's sickle
chops down the rows of green vegetables
cattle herders cower with fear, self-doubt
guts torn to bits from living a lie

sickening blood spattered everywhere
on dust and mud, canals and boats in the water
noble, reassuring words—freedom—Tagore sangeet
folksongs from dark figures stretched along the river

you're bound to be beaten—vicious kicks
blows, terrifying bullets startle a sleeping herd
still safe, the animals are amazed—we've survived!
wounds from clockwork plowing ooze on their necks

the tug and pull of the yoke's gleaming steel
will make a land of plenty—swarms of locusts
overwhelm the rice crop time and again
earth, water, and sky herded by dread fate

*

how long can this go on? how many years of struggle?
from the twenty-first of February 1952 until today
four million martyrs, three million raped women
moaning, Munir Choudhury's blood still flows upstream

how well-trained and tame! cowed by a raised lathi
don't know how to flip a fish in a pan, clueless
just following orders, houses, streets, ghats
immaculate, dirty souls scrubbed clean

spic and span—how long can these dying gasps
last? self-respect, living with dignity—fairytales
grandfathers' ramblings from days gone by
nowadays, cows' severed heads in butcher shops

smoke keeps rising, scorched by the sun's flames
bricks bake in the furnace's suffocating heat
rebukes answered only by a feeble thought, 'help
please,' like the tide, ebbing and flowing in the veins

how long will this last? trying to stand tall
independence in 1971, brute force of monstrosity
swollen rivers, dead youths with their eyes torn out
still trampling over Shahidullah Kaiser's corpse

idle middle-class dilly-dallying in a downtrodden
nation, in elegant cowsheds, in self-satisfaction
without shame or embarrassment in their tidy prison cells
acting like slaves, prisoners drowning in their own urine

*

crossing the seven seas and thirteen rivers to dreamland
the rajah's kotwal has enforced the law of the realm
in the last two years the population has soared
that's why from this day forward no couple
will sleep together or lie down on a bed
or join together as a husband and wife should
unable even to consummate their marriage—if it's proved
that some man or woman, giving way to lust or longing
has broken the law and tempted fate
the sentence will be seven years of hard labor

the rajah knows all—an obedient middle-class
always glad to abide by the rules
that's why whatever the mighty law says

his sham dreamland and edicts endure

if the noose is loosened even an inch, everything
is sure to fall, rajah, his parasol, and all
the smoke and mirrors will plop into the mud

the whole crummy dreamland and its chimerical relics

*

Habuchandra, the stupid rajah, and his councilor, Gobuchandra
rise up from the rubbish heap of stories to display their wares
on the royal throne—if you open the door and come out, you'll see
the rajah walking on foot, escorted by priests and bodyguards
riding chariots and elephants—what a show! what a show!
bizarre speeches buzz—if you open your ears, you'll hear
wear a suit if your lungi's torn, trade your wooden clogs for shoes
then starve any way you can, pare down your expenses
get yourself some blinders and wear them, stuff your ears
with cotton—hurry up, find some other way to walk too!
call a bastard a bastard, call a thief a thief
talking openly means harsh punishment according to the law
if you're told to walk, walk—it's an order, stand still, be quiet!
even the wind has ears, if it finds out, you'll get hard labor
for an 'ugh' or an 'ah,' you'll get your head chopped off
gold and brass, truth and lies cost the same at the market
barter your cow for a dead horse or a sick mule
cold peace of the grave, bitter certainty
houses festooned with cobwebs—frogs, chameleons
conspiracies against the people hatched in garbage heaps
Habuchandra and Gobuchandra are ready to reign
amazing how they manage to juggle the books

*

these lines of poetry, images, walls of marsh grass
and mud, thatched huts, fresh-mopped earthen floors
Kirtonkhola's blood, marrow, and bone—all torn up
crumbling homes of a few thousand prostitutes
veteran police spies and their mangy dogs
in ruthless roundups—farmers' wives, their pots and jugs
landless peasants make a wonderful bonfire

native and foreign leopards conspire under a painted moon
naked imperialism pulverizes acres and acres
of plowed fields, crumbling earth forever floating past
scouring the features off Karim Ali's toothless face
menacing dreams scorched in the Choitro sun
empty sockets, forgotten jawbones, implacable plows
carving out furrows—this time the land will be developed

*

got a problem? lungi torn? patch it!
no undershirt? let the sun dry your sweaty chest
six days a week with no food or water in your belly?
so what! keep fasting, work one more day

back getting crooked? bend down a little lower
standing up straight hurts even more
this will make you free—wishes and longings, rubbish
are you dying? go ahead! such a fuss over nothing

marches, meetings, pros and cons—few can live
in peace—tell your children that eating is banned
wearing clothes is banned, government spooks are everywhere
wandering the streets with uncombed hair is banned too

yank out your hair, bang your head! scared? don't
budge even an inch in the dark, no shouting allowed
keep that smile pasted on your lips! not a peep
all this emotion—what's the point?

cut things down to size—got a stomach? no appetite?
good! hungry? no rice! sweep up those messy feelings
and throw them away—no car to take you places?
no boat? then walk! feeling tired? stand still!

dust stinging your eyes? keep them shut
who else will solve your problems?
practice austerities! lungi torn? mend it
no undershirt? let the sun dry your sweaty chest

tears pricking your broken jaw? let them prick
six days a week with no food or water in your belly?

fasting tomorrow too? are you going to die?
go ahead—no problem, you'll sleep without a care

*

quit screwing around! Jabbar's sweat, pain and suffering
cough consuming his starved, overworked lungs
fate-line dying out on his callused palm
broad brow grimy from weeding the garlic rows
sand dunes, storms seethe on the horizon, blood vessels
burst, Boisakh scowls, thatch flies off the rooftops
bowls of rice are swept away, a starved child's
rotting corpse, accursed history, hypnotic trances
salt tears in Fatima's mud-colored eyes, broken bones
milk from shrunken breasts, black rags clinging to limbs
last night's rice with a couple of chilies, vegetables, sauce
a devoted husband's caresses, sweetness rising in the belly
perfume of kamini penetrating the veiled earth's bridal chamber
the nightly bed of deprivation, a black cobra's flaring hood
landslides on the cloud-covered earth and moon, epidemics
henna-stained nightmares hissing with blood
this hocus-pocus, the whole razzle-dazzle swindle
stop, bastards, right now—quit screwing around, pigs

*

this dream is as old as the earth
the blood of Bagha Jateen
awakens the morning sky

in the dawn light of '52
climbing up the bamboo walls
shining through the windows in the lanes

in the courtyards in '71
rice cooking over the fire
waiting mouths at harvest time

like wanting to touch the clouds
plump rice in burning hunger
water in parching thirst

[Translated by Carolyn B. Brown]

Mohammad Rafiq

Pastoral

Covered by an instant's nakedness. the drum-roll of mid-monsoon rain.
primal sound rumbles up from Omkarnath's throat.
Ramkinkar's Santhal family. stillness, motion.
in the primal touch of skin, the stretching of sun and moon. stars and soil.
evading the hunter's net, the fish in a splash of froth
diving deeper into the water.
the sparrow's young pecking food at her beak.
butterflies along the house wall, tangled in their desire for union.
suddenly, smiling teeth in the dark.
from Joyonul's paintings the fragrance of rice paddies comes flying,
spreading color and air. overflowing the chest, a blood-tide of base
darkness.
the Padma's terrible current. in every field the cow's breath-broken lowing.
painted Bengal's sky, clouds, sunlight.
all along the water, the flying coastline. waves shaped like wheels.
every space filled with atoms. atom and space, bound in explosive embrace.
space
and atom.
that dread dark of the tidal wave.
in every blink, in every hundredth of a dropping eyelid, a blessing.
in an instant's nakedness, release, frenzy, millions upon millions breaking
through;
just one human kiss.
staying and resisting seek their language.

[Translated from Bengali by Prasenjit Gupta]

Mohammad Rafiq

Poems

1

you forgot everything
so easily

me, a dry broken branch

you, like an able housewife
feeding it to the oven's flame

watching it burn, watching the cinders
you sighed with content

you forgot everything
so easily

2

brushing the lap
of your courtyard
the coy branch of the shojna
overspread with flowers

with the rocking of the gentle air
they'd scatter on the ground

i couldn't have known

or this pillage
would never have been so deadly

forgive me

4

see that hawk flying alone in the long sky
that one hawk alone, in it the whole sky
a deserted field and on its breast one man alone
one man alone, in his breast a desolate field

the sunlight trembles
i'll go on like this
with each other near
with each other far away very very far away

8

over your face the shadows of the sickly evening fall.
moist shadows; the boat lies nestling the bank
unused forsaken in the gentle cold the track across the field
the slow water its thin lazy waves
breaking in the evening a thin dim series slowing and dissolving
the twilight deepening in love joins its hands
in strong entreaty, surrounds you in the memory of a kiss
fear clings to the length of the body fear settles
eerily over your face the shadows gradually fall
some light some darkness some known and some unknown

the boat lies there nestling the bank alone.

[Translated from Bengali by Prasenjit Gupta]

Mohammad Rafiq

Poramon

Mohammad Rafiq

Unknown

At every instant, this possibility remains:

instead of one footfall, another footfall.

to jump the fence of a particular simile, metaphor, or symbol
and find some other unknown style, meter, or tempo.

instead of one poem, another poem.

instead of one touch, another touch,

in the shadow of a sharpened knife, other comings and goings.

familiar words, exhalations and inhalations, ardor and aversion, deception.

in one kiss, the edge of another kiss.

in one body, another's red death in fire and decay.

[Translated from Bengali by Prasenjit Gupta]

Mohammad Rafiq

Unresolved

The moon struck them as a little more shameless that day
they felt as if the snake really lay hidden in the grass too

By then even the girl's moans had become stifled
their slightly guilty expressions were washed away by indifferent dew

One by one, the five of them unbuttoned their pants slowly
and relieved themselves a little by pouring water for the moon

Then they headed home, some through fields and brush, some turning
at crossroads, to knock at midnight—get up wife, give me rice ma

Their darling boys had come home, all sighed with relief
only one among them woke up his sister, washed

His hands and face, and sat down to eat—don't be angry dear
chucking her under the chin—he's struck by surprise

The face of that working girl was just like the moon—
could it be that this one man might not be a man

Mohammad Rafiq

When Will It Rain

drums and gongs call it dawn
as if it might rain today

the sun hasn't reached the lotuses yet, their petals
are still curled up, the screwpine, jasmine, and chameli
and the blossoms on the fruit tree haven't opened their eyes

the herd came running
the conch will blow soon, someone says
someone else says, today's the beginning of the end
they've taken pots of parched rice, plain and sweet
and hung them from tattered towels over their shoulders

everyone's ready—the children, though nestled
in their mothers' saris, may not really be safe
the bird's vision may be imperfect, but it knows exactly
which is the plant, the leaves, and which is the succulent mouse

nearby, laments have grown louder—it's coming
who doesn't know the connection between festivals and death
there's nothing new to say about that—a chunk of father's arm
will fall to the ground—some will be scared when they see
grass sprouting from the wound again

waterlogged clouds aren't supposed to know these things
no one will come running or rowing a boat
against the current, absentminded, indifferent
water, they say, lacks the slightest trace of lust

this is how poetry teaches, scattering puns everywhere
or surrounding us with a steady dazzle of lightning
but then the sky is blank, as if someone had shaken out
an immaculate winding cloth from the east

to the northwest—still, the festival keeps going, the sticks
have struck the drums, the world has been roused, uncoiling
its great body, the sun opens its eyes, twin droplets of blood

somewhere an angry cloud is calling—listen.

[Selected from 'Bishkale Sandya', Translated by Carolyn B. Brown]

Mohammad Rafiq