

LESSONS IN BENDING



JONAKI RAY

Lessons in Bending

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Lessons in Bending
for K

At the tiniest scratch in my throat,
Ma boiled basil leaves in water,
added shredded ginger, crushed peppercorns,
and honey, made me drink
this mix first thing in the morning.

Here, the morning starts with the wake-up call.
“The walkway is open for 10 minutes, ladies.”
We line up in the hall to get the trays—I drink the
milk, eat the toast, and give the rest away. No one
has the time to prepare anything else for a
vegetarian—sometimes, I get peanut butter in a
cup. I don’t gag at the eggs-sausage-burger smell
anymore.

The blue shirt and pants piped with red on the sides
enshroud me as I cut soaps and fix heels in the fume-
filled factory. The pay here is the highest, so I ignore
my watering eyes that make the soap bars
blur like large snowflakes.

The day I landed in America, the town was in the
news for the “Worst Snow of the Season!” I could
understand the words if spoken loudly and many
times, but my voice remained suspended like the
veil around my face.

They said, “Whatever you say can and will be
used against you,” when they saw the ropes and
the knife and the blood. They shouted, “What
happened? Speak up.”

How could I? I had been taught my whole life
to be quiet and obey—first my parents, then my
brother, then my husband and in-laws.

At first, I would dream I was in a movie, and the hero
would trot into the hall on a white horse—whose hooves
would mark the floor that I buffed for three hours every
day for a month—to take me away, and I would once
again dance to the *dhak-dhak* of the *dhols* during the
festivals and win the Best Dancer trophy.

The rare visits I get are “bend forward
till I can see your coochie and cough”-bordered
days that make me shrivel like the tortoise back
home.

I have stopped dreaming and know now
that no one will come to save me.

The number of years of your sentence
and your favourite number.

“It’s lucky for me. They have to rule in my favour now.”

Forget-me-nots:

Your favourite flowers.

“Cuz they match my eyes, faded though they are now.”

You threaded them into every cap, bootie, bag
you crocheted.

Always, you asked for smokes in exchange;

Your neighbours ordered them in the next commissary.

Once you asked for a Kit-Kat, excited that your daughter
would visit you. They denied her entry,

and you returned to your cell,

flushed down the Kit-Kat right away.

Afterwards, you crocheted a dress for her, sitting up
on the lower bunk, not sleeping for a week.

Each time we met, you’d end with an

“I’m so tired” breath.

You lost your appeal.

What started as an “ordinary cold”

—the prison doc diagnosing the problem

on the kite itself that you sent, requesting an X-ray—

turned into cells multiplying like the lace in your hands.

“At least, I am getting out,”

you had winked

the last time we met.

You Will be Saved
for Rose Williams

Close-cropped, curly hair,
pitted, blueberry skin—
you ruled a coterie
of veterans at shelters,
prisons, and half-way houses.

Her girlfriend DeeDee,
who spends the days
in class braiding her hair.
Whose ex, Ariana, hisses
at them in Spanish throughout
class.

You call your babies angels
*even though they got
different baby daddies!*
I was bad. *Girl,
I sinned then.*

You claim
It's different now.

Jesus is here and will save us.

You leave.
*I am gonna get my GED
and then finish college.*

You say,
*You are bomb diggity.
I will write to you.*

You send one letter bordered
with brown stick figures
and red pencil flowers.

I hear from the others that you
are in jail in another county.
That your daughters are in jail, too.

I never hear from you again.

Dandelion Time

She plucks the dandelions from the yard. The dandelion heads are like the hair of the Barbie that mom bought for her years ago. She doesn't remember why.

Some days, she can taste home: the grits and the cornbread, the bacon and the fresh beans, green like the grass blades in the yard. The hawthorn tree in front of the house with the swing on it.

Some days, she remembers being hugged by mom. Some days, she can only remember the chain around mom's neck, mom's soft chin nuzzling her head, mom's iron singeing her hair straight, mom's cranberry sauce, and her soft hums on Thanksgiving.

Some days she is tempted to slam something against the walls: The lunch tray. The chair.

Instead, she reminds herself to breathe.

She slides pictures into her head: Of her roomie. Her boo. Her shelter 'mom.' The single card on the wall of her room: "Miss you. Come home soon."

Some days, she tries to remember home, and her mind scatters.

Six Feet

Six feet stuck out
from the maroon quilt
as Abba woke early,
queued for rations.
Amma polished our shoes,
combed our hair,
readied us for our miles-long
walk to and from school.
Six feet was the length
of the room I shared with three others,
as we juggled classes, cooking,
learning English, washing
dishes, scraping leftovers for later.
Six feet was the driveway
that I cleaned every day,
unable to believe that I had
my own house, and enough
money to travel back home.
Six feet was the distance
from which my wife watched,
as my passport, card, papers,
clothes, and accent got checked.
Six feet is the span of the cell
where I am detained,
where I hear the cries of others,
who, like me, wait to belong.
Six feet in the ground
will be mine in the end.

A Mirage at the Border

On the road dividing two states within the same country, a blockade of policemen check the licenses and papers of the people lining the border. A man parks his motorbike, holds out his wallet, and shows his papers. A policeman blocks him. The man takes off his helmet, shakes his head. The policeman shouts, "All you outsiders think you can fool us." Ahead, the tar on the road shimmers like liquified coal. The peak of summer temperature is measured by how fast tears evaporate.

The peak of summer temperature is measured by how fast tears evaporate. Ahead, the tar on the road shimmers like liquified coal, multiplying the border. The policeman shouts, "Go back where you came from." The man who took off his helmet keeps shaking his head, holding out his wallet, showing he has no money. He starts crying and kneels in front of the policeman. The other policemen laugh and feed biscuits from a packet to a puppy playing near their feet.

All over the world, a road divides two states within the same country, sometimes more than one country. What remains common is someone, somewhere seeking the mirage of a refuge.

Evacuation

*for the people who fell from the planes taking off from Kabul,
Afghanistan in August 2021*

I remember You
 swallowing
papers pieces of life homes

I remember You
 clawing
gates fences borders

I remember You
 birding
barricades ports planes

I remember You
 freefalling
bodies names numbers

 Blood rusts
 those who left,

and those left
behind

Two Hundred Thousand

Mémorial des Martyrs de la Déportation, Paris

Undress. Bend. Spread your legs.
Squat. Cough. Spread your legs more.
Answer questions: Why are you here?
Never receive answers: Why am I here?

Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

Put your clothes into a bin,
jewellery/watch into a bag.
Shoes into a different bag.
Toys/cash/charms into the trash.
Climb into the van/bus/train.

Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

Room with twenty/thirty/forty others.
Split sandwich/hot dog/mash/toilet water.
Share shower/phone/bunk/blanket/pillow/sanitary napkins.
Prefix wrong to country/religion/sex/party/colour.

Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

Be detained/interned/imprisoned/deported.
Be fenced in/fenced out/pushed in/pulled out.
Leave your name/family/home/you.
Forget moving forward. Forget coming back.

Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

Become time sent to stand outside in punishment.
Become history and never remember nor forgive.

Not once. Not twice.
But two hundred thousand times.

Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

Sarajevo
for Jasminko Halilović

“I have seen the face of sorrow. It is the face of
the Sarajevo wind leafing through newspapers
glued to the street by a puddle of blood...”

—Goran Simić

A blue compass
the letters to the high school crush
the candy-striped-clad Barbie
the plastic lemony apple with teeth marks
the teddy bears
the friends who are suddenly “on the other side”
the collection of food cans
testifying to the charity of others
the coloring books
the seeds from the horse chestnut trees
that propped mock battles
the football matches
interrupted by lightning moves
from shelter to shelter:
an assembly of memories
instead of children

The Killing Trees

“I don’t know what I would have done in
[the soldiers’] place. I have forgiven them.”

—Chum Mey, one of the seven survivors
at S-21, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

The mother’s head is tilted to the side,
as her hair, fashionably short, curves around the thin
shoulders stooped around her baby.

Why is a strand of her hair tied to the machine behind?
It kept their heads in place, explains my guide,
walking calmly through crunchy fragments of bones and
rags, showing me the killing tree where babies were
smashed to death, the mass graves where thousands were
buried.

In the photo, the mother looks straight at the camera,
as if defying her fate, even as screams
landscaped the lattice windows,
and exercise poles were flagged by upside-down
“rebels.”

Two thousand went in. Seven came out.
The skulls mound, each witness to the different
paths to death. Some with holes from blows by
rods, some with jaws and necks slashed.
They decorate the seventeen floors of the stupa
haloed by a cerulean sky.
Outside, lemony flowers blaze
the prayer flags and bowed heads of visitors.

The killing trees traverse time like abacus beads.

Delhi

becomes

Kashmir

becomes

Louisiana

becomes

Florida

becomes

Cambodia

becomes

Serbia

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About the Author



Jonaki Ray was educated in India (Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur) and the United States (University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign). A scientist by education and training and a software engineer (briefly) in the past, she is now a poet, writer, and editor in New Delhi, India. Honours for her work include a Pushcart and Forward Prize for Best Single Poem nominations in 2018; the 2019 Iceland Writers Retreat Alumni Award; and First Prize in the 2017 Oxford Brookes International Poetry Contest (ESL). She has also been shortlisted for multiple awards, including the 2021 Live Canon Chapbook Contest and the 2018 Gregory O'Donoghue International Poetry Prize. Her debut poetry collection, *Firefly Memories*, is available from Copper Coin. She is on Twitter as @Jona_writes, on Instagram as jonaki_stories, and on the advisory board of the YouTube channel, *Just Another Poet*. You can read more about her at www.jonakiray.com.

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