

CHANDIGARH

Lines composed on the verandah of a house in Chandigarh, India, February 2018

yesterday on the way back from a wedding
I saw an elephant riding on a lorry
earlier I read in a newspaper
that a man-eating tiger had killed eight people
and so far avoided capture
today I see all the usual things
street vendors on bicycles
people in cars
people on scooters
people walking
as if they too had avoided capture
and everywhere I hear birds singing
as blithely as if they were perched
on the back of an elephant
or a tiger

a woman brushes her long black hair
in the sun
runs her fingers through her hair
brushes and brushes her long black hair
black as water falling over stone

a goddess ambles onto the road
stands there as if
being divine
she can stand wherever she likes
an impatient driver blows his horn
unruffled
indifferent
the goddess moves aside
the embodiment of dignity
dignity in humans looks more like pride
than it does in a cow

scaffolding made of long bamboo poles
surrounds the Hindu temple
a man climbing the scaffolding
looks like a sailor climbing a mast
the temple is in dry dock
when everything is shipshape
the scaffolding will fall away
the crew will hoist sail
and the temple will float up into the sky

Ravana
ten-headed demon king
was defeated for the first time
by Rama
with the help of Hanuman
and his monkey army
many lives were lost
but when it was all over

peace was restored
to the whole of India
the second time
when not just Sita
but the whole of India
had been held captive
not just in Ravana's palace in Lanka
but in the whole of India
Ravana
having learned the lesson of history
made a tactical withdrawal
there was no battle
only a massacre after he left
Ravana
undefeated
ten-headed
considers his next move

how I envy that cow
her ability to stand quite still
for long periods of time
staring ahead
thinking of nothing

memories fond or sad
regrets
quandaries unresolved
puzzles unexplained
disappointments
dreams
deceptions
tangled webs
hopes deferred
thoughts of every kind
willing to make the four thousand mile journey
are welcome to join me
some do
but when they get here
they are waylaid by the sun
sit
wait
it tells them
he is resting now
there is no hurry
you can talk later

the dusty road is a dried up canal
its ancient traffic sailing still
motor boats and sailing boats
tugs and barges
rowing boats and rafts
and fish
tails and fins flickering
just below the surface of the rippling air
there are mermaids too

seated on the bank
with long limpid tails
and black black hair

this morning the trees
cast uncertain shadows
the sun trails its fingers
absent-mindedly across my face
as if to say
everything revolves around me
you are just an afterthought
my mind dries up in the heat
it is a barren womb
and I am an outcast
from the village of useful poets
when the panchayat
the council of five bards
meets to consider my fate
I will be summoned
speak
the sarpanch
foremost poet
will say
tell us why you cannot conceive
and I will say
it is too hot

tonight on Himalaya Marg
in Sector 22 of the grid
Le Corbusier drew with his ruler
on the plain below the Shivaliks
footrest of the Himalayas
there will be no stars
they will have withdrawn
leaving to the street lights
and the blue flames of paraffin stoves
the job of lightening the darkness
all along one side of Himalaya Marg
where the shops are
they are gathered
labourers
rickshaw pullers
street food sellers
squatting on the pavement
to cook their evening meal
one of them is washing his clothes and feet
in a bucket of water
another hurls a stick at a stray dog
the dog runs
looking over his shoulder
barking in protest
though he knows he is beaten
there are more men than dogs
the dogs don't stand a chance
when the men have finished licking their fingers

they will put out the blue flames
lie down on their hard beds
the smell of paraffin will dissipate slowly
like an oil spill at sea
someone will turn off the lights
and the stars will come out

Neil Rathmell