

Advance Praise

“Warning! This book is filled with unexpected turns, happy surprises, fresh language (in every sense), sudden awakenings, quick tears, knowing laughter. And above all—delight.”

—SUSAN GRIFFIN, *A Chorus of Stones and Bending Home*

“With her electric combination of lyric poetry and theater, Minal Hajratwala crosses genres and voices. In the process, she charms, sears, shocks and delights us. Her voices strip us down to the space where erotic and the sacred commingle. We pass through traumatic knowledge into a fresh species of enlightenment.”

—MEENA ALEXANDER, *Birthplace with Buried Stones and Fault Lines*

“In Minal Hajratwala’s *Bountiful Instructions for Enlightenment*, we see the poems and acts go beyond ‘instruction’ to a deeper calling of engagement. They are poems full of ‘the wisest/trupest thing you know’; they discern the different ways to ‘dismiss the sun, that artifact of lost seasons.’ Lucid descriptions unite discourse, history, and metaphor into concentrated affects and images that keep you engaged in her language. Just as ‘throats crack,’ the entire collection sings ‘holy, holi, wholly.’ This is a stunning collection of poetry that modulates between steady narratives full of anchored images and storytelling, and playful voices occurring out of lyric utterance.”

—PRAGEETA SHARMA, *Undergloom and Infamous Landscapes*

“Explosive, intercultural deities reign over and accept supplication for the concerns of a postmodern age, from AIDS to abortion to art itself. ... At the boundaries of theater, cult ritual, and poetry, the artist incarnates herself as original, fearsome divinities never before experienced on the planet: the Goddess of Tough Love, the Aborted Buddha, the Goddess of Absence (Paleface).”

— SAN FRANCISCO BAY GUARDIAN on the 1999 world premiere of Minal Hajratwala’s “Avatars: Gods for a New Millennium”

Also by Minal Hajratwala

Leaving India: My Family's Journey from Five Villages to Five Continents

Out! Stories from the New Queer India (editor)

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{ in the temples of silence }

The fundamental belief underlying the whole system appears to be that the human body is ugly and that its natural tendency is to debility and disease. Incarcerated in such a body, man's only hope is to avert these characteristics through the use of ritual and ceremony.

—HORACE MINER, *BODY RITUAL AMONG THE NACIREMA*

Angerfish

...who 'wrap up' anger—that is, wrap around [themselves] repeatedly the anger based on the thought 'he reviled me,' and so on, like wrapping up the pole of a cart with thongs, or putrid fish with straw—when enmity arises in such persons, it is not appeased, pacified.

—DHAMMAPADA I.4

1

On the first day
the fish wrapped in straw
starts to stink.

On the second day
if you walk by the barn
it enters your clothes.

That evening your wife
sniffs your suit
but says nothing.

On the third day
dressed in your skin
the fish begins to walk.

Your friends know
to hold their breaths.
This is not the first time.

If nothing else happens
the fish retreats

to its mean nest.

You shower.
It sleeps
waiting for you.

Fish oils
soak the hay
of the whole barn.

The chickens begin to dream
of seaweed,
of roe.

2

In the middle of it
the fish
is the wisest
truest thing you know.

It whispers
sweet sauces—
We are brought here to love, yes,
but not blindly.

Its jelly eye
winks at you
codes of Morse—
No remorse.

Every oracle
takes its price,

skin for scales,
gold for gills.

Some days
it is a bargain.
Or else it costs
everything you have.

3

I was raised without the fish
as some children are raised without candy
or time.

No one in my family spoke of it
as no one spoke then of cities
or queers.

Somehow in the cradle, rocking,
I caught a whiff; or in the crib clutching
at rails

a bit of fish caught
rough in my scream.
Swallow.

Since then the fish has grown in me
like bubblegum or seeds of water
melons so

is this what I meant
when I longed for teeth?
Is this what they meant

when they named me *fish*?
Soon I shall slit my
belly

to stroke its silver scales
bilious, slippery
as love.

4

At last the fish
swallows its own tail

scale by creamy scale
orgy of self-

righteous lips
on sharp bone

tongue sucking spine
vertebra by vertebra

teeth shredding
gummy ovaries

ripe with black meat
millions of living

seed of fish.
Belly full of soft

swift pulsing
heart of fish

parallel eyes
forehead

white gills
filled

with the last sea.
When the fish

is all jaw
row of incisors

grinding plankton
coral salt

churning oceans
like milk

into sweet fat
gold

then I will be ready
for you.

Her Discourse on the Leaf

Here is the place where the leaf leaves the tree, the hole in the stem where the umbilical cord is not, has been slashed, shriveled, then disappeared, like the Guatemalans into our grip of history, or the ocean when you round a curve cut into the mountain, cut with bulldozers & barricades, the roots of trees pushing out like amputated limbs still feeling themselves itch. This is where you can find me.

But when you liberate me, I will open onto a new scene like cardboard doors of a puppet stage, mother & father pounding their united *No*, my first word. I always dreamed of coming down the spiral stairs in white veils. For breakfast: sunset eggs, fat slabs of bacon, cereal wading in milk-glue, a kiss before the buzz of the school bus. But I could only eat toast & tea. All the rest made me sick. We are not born Americans, after all.

Out there someone's sailing the Pacific of privilege, wind-filled white tearing the seersucker blue, which any moment the sun will set aflame. I would stake your life on it. As you have wagered mine, ours, wages flipped on green felt tables: seven-card stud, Texas hold'em, pai gow, horseraces & pigskin. It must be cold out there on the yachts. They will need their eiderdown jackets & rubber boots, their oiled sealskins. I know how the salt air whips, & every mirage is really there, wet & chilling to the extremities. I get cold flashes in my toes. I have the iciest hands & feet of anyone I know.

Soon only the poinsettias will still be alive, crinkled in red foil, their leaves like velvet paintings inscribed with gold cowboys or dying landscapes of fruit where we could travel strange as pilgrims. I can't wait to wear that guise, chop celery & bread crusts for the belly of our free-range turkey, pierce its skin with mace-sharp cloves. I will lipstick its beak with cranberries & thyme. *Kiss me*, I will say. *Kiss me*,

yes, now, while everything is pink: the smoke-soaked shag, curved iron rail, bottom of the sky. All blues recede. I turn up the heat, twist switches of lights. Don't do me these favors. I am waiting for the pink to condense to caviar black. I won't leave, eat, or sleep until then. Slashing prince-like through the brambles, you'll think I love you more, then.

Let's dismiss the sun, that artifact of lost seasons. Mid-hibernation I taste the dry crisp mouth of autumn, thirst all the way to the back of my throat. I eat spicy dan-dan mein till it comes out my nose, clarified. My ears are frostbitten by the shouts of ugly children. It's the cheerful ones I hate, the have-a-nice-day girls, the ones who giggle whenever someone talks about night. This is the season of our death & it is where we want to stay.

Really the falling part is no big deal. I have been noticing the leaves desert their branches since March. What's new is the rain stinging the tin gutters, turning the shingled dormitories gray as nuns, & our boots grinding gravel into concrete stairs. We are all wearing boots this year, hiking boots tawny like hummus & pita bread, light but substantial. Me, I prefer black leather or even suede with dyed fringes to crush rusty leaves, half-smoked Marlboros, purple flowers tiny as snails, pistachio shells because someone's got money, enough to squander uncracked nuts intact & meaty

but even in this hunger I won't stop for them, keep moving, thighs aching from too much & not enough walking. We are making a statement with our displaced high-fashion boots, the gravel is growling its own statement.

This leaf is the least of it.

Generic

In the land of the free
we are eating french fries

forty-seven percent
of our daily vegetable intake:

french fries curly fries spicy fries
home fries Mickey D fries beer
fries steak fries chili fries fried
fries chicken-fried fries all fries
gimme fries anykinda fries

Touch us
we are always soft & smiling
waxed lasered epilady'd
our skin smooth
as the coating on Prozac

Gap-hued
we wear millennium blue

Still
past Star Trek
& Victoria's Secrets
in seventh circle of our souls
individual as angels
or nightmares
our own fantasies

America

In the land of the free
we are eating kumquats

kohlrabi
nopales
steamed bok choy on white rice
portabello risotto
tandoori pizza
walrus pears
shenandoah grapes
okra

We are rough-
edged
w/belly hairs
& volatile
systems of belief

turquoise of Guatemala
cemeteries
tangerine of Vietnam skies
morning black

pulse
there where we have buried them

alive

Abode

In the House of Love, save
the best room for Rage.

Give it the softest
warmest blankets,

sweet endless light of the plains,
a stack of dishes to break.

Tell it to make itself at home.
It will anyway. Let it roam

through the dungeons where Compassion
wrestles Suffering into chains. Let it mess up

the kitchen where Sympathetic Joy
whips up confections & spaghettis

for all beings. Let it piss
in the pots that Equanimity & Generosity

disinfect daily on their knees.
Let it whirl through the study

ruffling the rondos
Lovingkindness composes each dawn.

Notice me, it wails. Notice
where it tells the truth. When it lies.

Honor it like a divine guest
or your beloved, soft-hearted child,

the one who will not let you rest
until you have made room in your house

for one more stray cat,
one more bastard child or thought

unwanted
with nowhere else to take refuge.

{ from the museum
of lost sources }

Delusions are inexhaustible; I vow to end them.

—SOTO ZEN CHANT OF THE BODHISATTVA

Pole

*Often I had stopped, on my way down the road, to hold
my ear against the pole, and, hearing its low moaning,
I used to wonder what the paleface had done to hurt it.*

—ZITKALA-ŠA, *SCHOOL DAYS OF AN INDIAN GIRL*

Persephone gone dark is disassembling
the telephone pole that connects
hell to the upper world. She wants to grok
the precise configuration

of wires that makes it possible
for her to speak to Mother
those wrenching seconds,
erratic e-motions

of circuits which allow
Mother to hang up on her
simply for stating the obvious.
Round thighs wrap old wood

as she begins to climb. Each thrust
splinters brown flesh,
sucks her backward
into memory's spacetime:

frenetic flight through the woods,
tinkle bells of Mother laughing,
slip from the womb's
warm walls of shame

which make her hell-home so familiar now. So
close she feels the sizzle off the wires,
could with her stainless clippers
sever the seven million

calls to the ones we curse,
Burn in Hades, bitch.
But all she wants to do is climb, run
without meaning or direction

beyond the acid ache of legs & lungs,
beyond desire or the end-state of suffering,
run to forget nesting in maternal arms,
run till she becomes running itself,

wind tearing out its own hair—
outpacing whispers & betrayal,
the memory of Demeter,
the letters of her name.



About the Author

Minal Hajratwala (www.minalhajratwala.com) is the author of *Leaving India: My Family's Journey from Five Villages to Five Continents* (2009) and editor of *Out! Stories from the New Queer India* (2013). Called “incomparable” by Alice Walker and “searingly honest” by the Washington Post, *Leaving India* won a Pen USA Award, an Asian American Writers Workshop Award, a Lambda Literary Award, and a California Book Award. Minal graduated from Stanford University, was a fellow at Columbia University, and was a 2010 Fulbright-Nehru Senior Scholar. As a writing coach, she is passionate about helping people give voice to untold stories.

About the Collective

The (Great) Indian Poetry Collective is the coming together of poets who believe words can transform lives. Founded in 2013 in Bangalore, India, as a not-for-profit press, the Collective publishes innovative, diverse poetic voices from India. Through a mentorship model, members of the collective support one another in producing beautiful poetry books, chapbooks, and anthologies. Through workshops, readings, and community and school events, the Collective is building a poetry community in which artistic expression leads to positive action, as each poem initiates a dialogue with society and the greater world.

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Also from The (Great) Indian Poetry Collective

Geography of Tongues by Shikha Malaviya

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