

Acrobat

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Poems by Nabaneeta Dev Sen

Introduced and translated from the Bengali
by Nandana Dev Sen

 juggernaut

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*For the men I love:
John and Baba*

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Acrobat

The Unseen Pendulum

Acrobat

She thought she knew acrobatics rather well.
That she could juggle time with both hands,
Play with the now, right next to the then,
She would make both dance, she thought, fist to fist—
And she would glide, so smooth, along the tightrope,
She thought she could do absolutely anything at all.

Only once in your life will the rope shiver.

Memories of a Floral Clock

standing still by the nameless road
I hear the violence of rain
beating on the panes
going dark

switching off the engine is not
switching off memory
your eyes
the floral clock
survive the rain
and your tongue
the unseen pendulum
keeps ticking away
deep inside me
telling time
under the soil

Composed in English by the poet

The Lamp

(Memories on my mother's birthday)

“Go to sleep now, Ma,
It’s way past eleven.”
“Eleven? It’s still early, then!
But *you* must go to bed,
you’re teaching tomorrow.”

Ma sits in her easy chair,
thick glasses perched on her thin nose,
pale fingers clutching her magnifying glass,
The Statesman spread out across her lap.
Next to her, on the table, her flask of tea, her medicines,
her fragrant betel-leaf in its silver case,
her brass spittoon, her cash-box.
Behind her, on the teapoy, an earthen vase
filled with her favourite white tuberose,
and a wicker table lamp, woven in Agartala.
Before her, the alarm clock ticking away,
her travelling timepiece.

As Ma turns the pages of the newspaper,
its noisy crackle splinters the quiet night.

Closing my book, I come to her.
As soon as I step inside, I drown
in the deep perfume of those tuberoses.
The nurse is dozing in her chair.
“Ma, please go to sleep now.
It’s one-thirty.”
“One-thirty?” She scolds. “And you’re still awake?
Don’t you have college tomorrow?”
Swallowing the rebuke, I keep on wheedling.
“You’ll get sick, Ma, if you stay up like this.
You must take care of your body . . .”
“My body?” Ma breaks into laughter that sparkles,
like jewellery shimmering from head to toe.
“How much more sick can it get?
And what use is my body, anyway?”

I go to her one more time, before I sleep.
“It’s two-thirty, Ma, do call it a night.
Come, let me take you to your bed.”
“Yes I’m coming, just coming,
there’s only this one tiny bit left.
Reading isn’t so easy now, you see—
it’s the gift of these cataracts!”
With a slight smile, embarrassed, apologetic,
she buries herself again in printed words.

Under the glowing light of the table lamp,
with her focus on the magnifying glass,
the ticking of the alarm clock
fades away.

As I walk back to my room,
I hear her speaking softly to the nurse.
“No, no, my dear,
don’t turn off the light.
Keep that lamp switched on, please.
I have just one more page left . . .”

Just one more page left
one more paragraph, one more sentence—
give me one more word, dear nurse,
just one more day.