

The Umbrella

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Lying under its appliqué wings –
handcrafted, exotic, bright –
the Pipli garden umbrella
spread like a mythical bird in flight,

my mind weary, seeking emptiness,
I hear a cry of desolation –
a sigh that could only be muted by folding
oneself in like an umbrella.

I remember unfurling my first
umbrella like a first kiss, awkward, unsure,
when the wind whooshed in, turning
the metal frame inside out. Broken,
it skulked like a skeleton behind the door –

an extra, never picked to feature centre-stage,
no opportunity to show off its strong, supple skin,
open up, let itself take wings,
be properly forgotten on a bus or train,
venture into other people's homes
like its companion, the walking stick
that went on expeditions far and near.

Even the broom that shared the stand
had a life, sweeping cobwebs and dust.

¹ Shanta Acharya, born and educated in Cuttack, India, won a scholarship to Oxford, where she was among the first batch of women admitted to Worcester College in 1979. A recipient of the Violet Vaughan Morgan Fellowship, she was awarded the Doctor of Philosophy for her work on Ralph Waldo Emerson. She was a visiting scholar in the Department of English and American Literature and Languages at Harvard University. The author of eleven books, her latest is *Imagine: New and Selected Poems* (2017). Founder of *Poetry in the House*, Shanta hosted a series of monthly poetry readings at Lauderdale House in London from 1996 to 2015. In addition to her philanthropic activities, she served twice on the board of trustees of the Poetry Society in the UK. www.shantaacharya.com.

They also serve who stand and wait –
the umbrella never stopped dreaming
of discovering the world, finding its path,
of being most true to itself when serving others.

Day the Clouds Came Home

Blowing open doors, ushering the sky in,
drenching us in a spray mist of hope,
a rainbow looking in on our courtyard,
and flowers on their knees, worshipping,

leaving us wondering how some waters
fall, some bend, curve, flow,
rise like incredible angels of hope
while others vanish like ghosts
into the earth, becoming one with the universe.

We were entranced with the miracle of water
not just the kind that roar in your ears
while flowing silently in your veins
or the transparent types – dew, sweat, rain,

glistening in the light, a shower of stardust,
not to mention the opaque introversion
of fog, mist, frost and snow –
fresh faced children fingering the fields.

It was the day her waters broke,
her body a reservoir bursting
and a thousand questions came home,
searching for answers, something to do with love –

a promise splashed across the horizon
turning into tears to brighten the eyes
holy water to leaven the soul, water that kissed our lips
leaving us laughing, crying –
in an astonishment of meaning.

Friendship

Like birdsong beginning inside the egg,
a flake of snow dreaming of an iceberg,

the rainbow sky beyond judgment,
a soul dwelling in two bodies.

Names safe in each other's mouths,
walking together, sometimes in the dark,

in silence more sympathetic than words –
something treasured, understood.

Not a duty, but a responsibility gladly undertaken,
a comfortable hand-in-glove feeling.

As the giving grows, the taking goes –
angels let us see the best of what we can be,

the shimmer of dawn prophesying
the appearance of a zillion stars at night.

Not following, not leading, just loving
for trying, not blindly, but closing one's eyes

in forgiveness, in prayer, finding the hard times
worth suffering, there being no better love than love

with no object, just being there, believing,
willing to be trusted with everything.

Being Human

The startling discovery always of the moment –

Keats lost himself in a sparrow,
Whitman found himself in a leaf of grass.

In time everything is transformed –
the deepest ocean floor finds itself the roof of the world.

A desert dreaming of its past incarnations
recalls cradling an ancient civilisation.

Nothing is, especially the illusion of permanence.
Nature is always in a state of becoming something else.

To know your true self, seekers of enlightenment
have said we must learn to step outside ourselves,

feel the grandeur of the universe,
experience the suffering of all creatures.

Adrift in my world, searching for myself,
I stepped inside myself, met my many selves –

persons I could've been under changed circumstances,
accusing me for not creating my chances.

Yet all the time I've been true to myself –
my art a way of seeing without distorting lenses,

the startling discovery always of the moment.