

## Ode to Her Legs

Ok, before your eyes start glinting  
And your mouth registers the curve of a smile,  
Let me tell you it's not that kind of poem—

The kind that begins innocuously at the ankles,  
Pirouettes around a taut yet supple calf  
To boldly expose the thunder of thighs.

For one thing, this is not Marilyn Monroe airing  
Her crotch on a sultry New York night.  
Nor Angie Dickinson, that faded poster girl, serving up

Her most celebrated parts.  
Neither is this a Broadway line-up of flesh disguised  
In frills, feathers, lace – the legs, one mass entity propelled

By the music. No, these are not baton-twirling legs,  
Ballerina legs, ice-skating legs, or trapeze-artist legs!  
These legs are not airborne, leaping off

A diving board to pierce the water like an arrow.  
Though having said that, the legs I sing  
Are classic too. And graceful, and as daring

As those other beauties born to perform,  
With one difference. Her legs work unseen, out of public view.  
At this point in the poem you make an imaginative leap.

Where she comes from, legs are the least  
Extolled part of the body, living a secret life  
Cool and dark, veiled in silk or cotton, blooming

Incognito. But forget the legs for a moment.  
We never were Victorian, pinning our lust  
On flash of ankle or heave of bosom.

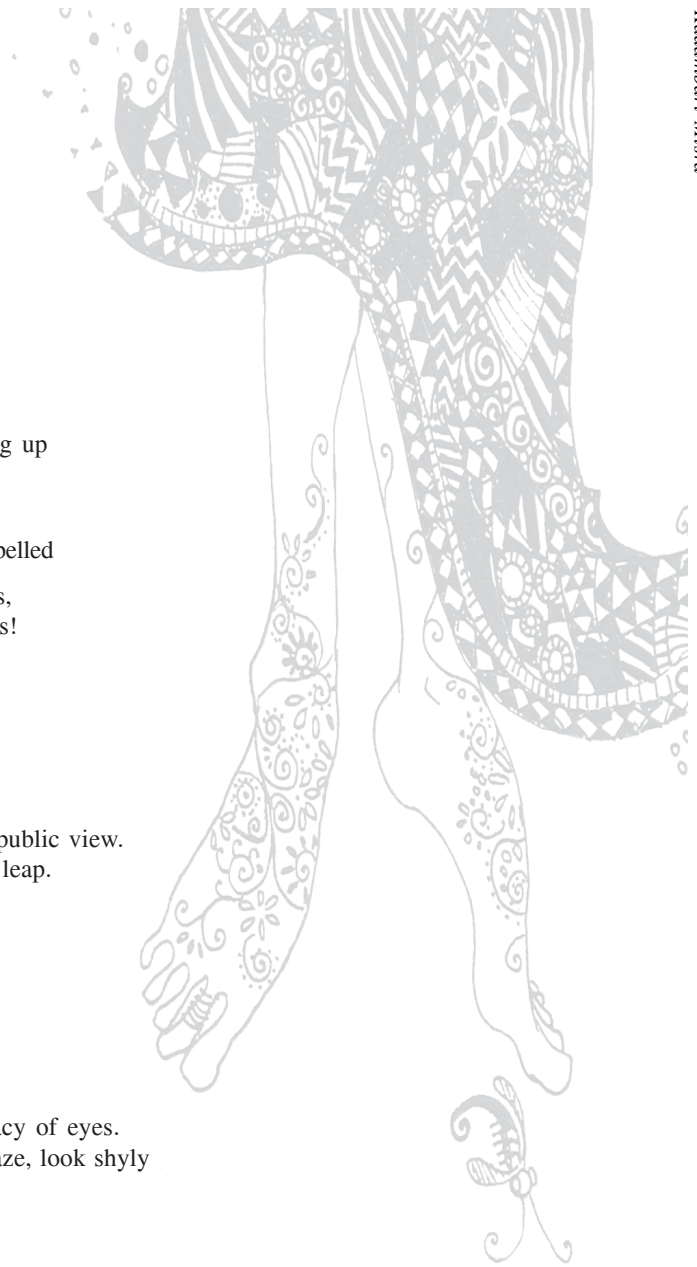
We cultivated other themes. Consider the epic legacy of eyes.  
Look how much work they do: they simmer and blaze, look shyly  
Away or straight through

Your intentions, leaving you puzzled or wounded.  
The real place of mystery is  
The hair – plain or adorned – thick, black, lustrous, fragrant,

Bound by years of grooming rituals.  
Hair driving poets to drink, loosening  
Their metaphors, confounding their logic.

Equally enigmatic is that midriff space between  
Blouse and sari – glistening with beads of sweat –  
That shapely curve of waist swiveling in the light

Of day. With so much to adore who misses the legs?  
Ah, the legs. Back to those legs.  
Having made the shift, perhaps you are now ready





To understand why it is not that kind of poem.  
For not being seen or displaying their art in public,  
Those legs are no less unique. They come equipped

With power and purpose. Think of them as pillars  
That hold your world upright, that keep your days  
In order. Everywhere – behind counters, desks,

In hospitals, mills, fields, factory floors;  
In sweatshops, bazaars, stores, and offices – a woman  
Is standing, waiting or running, her legs clocking

Miles in silence. When everyone else is off-duty  
Her feet are still plodding. When there is no one else  
To count on, she unfailingly answers

Your call. As for being bone-weary, you have no idea  
What she endures. So I say to the men  
(And some expensive, pampered women):

Recognize the wonder of those legs, ignore them  
At your peril. Because, when those legs fail,  
You will have nothing to stand on.

To the husbands, I say:  
Give those legs the respect they deserve. Look at those  
Feet in amazement – how small and tough the heel,

The skin ready to crack. The toes, though shy,  
Will stay the course; the ankles are so slender  
For the burden they carry; knees, the pivot

Of your universe. So, let her stretch out and place her feet  
In your hands. Everyday. After all, she has lavished  
Attention and care, devotedly tending your feet every night

Which you have taken as your birthright  
Citing scripture and myth in your defense.  
Well, here is your service manual: Stroke and press those legs

All the way up where the muscles knot  
And veins break out and throb. Knead  
The flesh firmly, gently, to draw out the day's

Weariness out of the body. Now work downwards  
Soothing the ache with fingertips as if the feet  
Had been long lost and just found. Cherish them

As if those legs were the most precious and prized  
Of your belongings; as if you were under oath  
To God to keep your holy promises. It may turn out

That Heaven lies underneath a woman's feet.  
Honor them as if they were – but they are –  
Your beloved's legs.

**Saleem Peeradina**