



Surviving

Poems by Nirupama Dutt

translated from Punjabi by the poet

Suicide

*She will not think of committing
suicide now for it is difficult to devise
ways of dying and then
survive even the poison carrying
the guilt that the money saved for
the wedding feast
went into a stomach wash.*

*Instead, she will take out of
her mother's box
the seven saris saved over many years
and the locket with her
grandmother's picture,
which somehow escaped the eyes of
her drunken father,
and go to another house.*

*In the box she will leave her past
tied securely into a bundle.*

*And then in that other house
she may be burnt for
bringing less dowry*

*and the newspaper the next day
will speak of the death of
another young woman
due to a stove burst.*

Papa

"Mama, when will Papa come?"

*"He will come soon", she says
and looks out of the window
of her father's house to which
she has returned, a stranger.*

"Does papa love us?"

*"Yes, he loves us a lot", she says
glancing at the wedding band on her
middle finger—
even gold pales with time.*

"Will Papa send us money?"

*"Yes, pots of it," and she
pushes back the yellowing strap
peeping out of the neck of her
frayed silk blouse—
silk shines but does rot last.*

"Will Papa bring me toys?"

*"Yes, a boxful of them", and
she looks at her brother's son
playing with the toy train
forbidden to her daughter —
toys are prone to break.*

"When did Papa go?"

"Only two months ago."

*She is happy that her
daughter has not yet
learnt to count— it is difficult to count
days.*

*"Why does auntie give apples to
Sonu and not me?"*

*"Your Papa will bring you apples"—
and lies rest in the vermilion mark on
her forehead—
some marry only a dot of lies.*

*"When will we have
our own house, Mama?"*

*"Your Papa will come and take us to
our own house" she says and draws
a house on her daughter's slate —
it is easy enough to draw a house.
"What will you do when your Papa
comes?"*

*The little girl looks up, surprised—
since when did her mother learn
to ask questions!—
and answers slowly :*

"Mama, Papa will not come."