

Kali

*Some days she comes with a yellow rose
stuck in her hair
oiled and sticky as fly-paper
a little over the left ear —
a sure danger signal.
Mother's voice turns raucous as a crow's;
her skin turns more bilious
than the yellow in the rose;
she fishes stones even in curds
on such days;
Press the broom full length,
didn't you eat last night?
where is your elbow strength?
Kali only flashes a smile at me
like lightning in a black sky,
sweeping the red floor serenely
turning it redder;
Is it the miracle of the rose
or is she dim witted only
I wonder.*

*She worked her mornings off
at five houses;
Talk of rich multinational chain stores
this girl has a chain of chores
in five homes
where they cook chapattis in butter
saving ghee only for lamps near the altar;
Standing constantly in cold water
the undersoles of her feet have sponged out —
they are certainly not butter fat.*

*Kali's dreams are always of her children
one is Prashant, the other Anita
I named her with an A
so she will always be first in life she smiles toothily;
One day I saw Kali
taking her to the clinic
forehead burning with fever
the yellow rose was in Anita's hair
Kali's head was covered with her pallu
to pray better to the gods.
I always believed Anita recovered
because the yellow rose,
not the prayer,
had struck its destination.*

*Mother relented at Kali
when she came with disheveled hair;
her husband had run away
with another femme fatale;
Out of her deerskin pouch near the altar
mother fished out five silver coins
shiny as words of wisdom
dropped from high on Anita's hand
for sweet buns and soda water.
Kali added two more houses —
a proper chain gang of memsahibs.*

*Now it is mother who dreams of Kali
whose magic turned the red floor
glossier than a mirror!*

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