

## Three Poems: Christmas List, Weekend Instructions, and Letter to India

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### CHRISTMAS LIST

1. Someone just asked me how I celebrate Christmas in India and if it is snowing
2. It's 75 degrees °F and it's only 9am
3. My mother and I go to my hometown, Surat
4. Christmas Eve, there is a wedding parade on the street
5. I bond unexpectedly with my aunt
6. She shows me a video on her iPhone of the community's head imam welcoming the new imam onto the altar in front of the convocation
7. The video shakes because she is crying
8. You don't need to understand someone to love them
9. Christmas day, the family goes to see a Bollywood action movie
10. My grandmother sits next to me and speaks instructions to the characters on screen
11. "There's a bomb in that box. She's going to die. Move to the left."
12. I'm obsessed with butts and curves lately
13. Curves are harder to distinguish when the women wear burqas
14. I persist; I keep looking
15. Christmas night dinner we eat at a Chinese restaurant
16. Hakka noodles and chicken with basmati rice
17. My aunt drives too fast on the way home
18. My grandfather grips the seat and knits his eyebrows together so hard I half expect a dress to fall in front of his face
19. Boxing day, we wear pajamas until 4pm
20. My aunt and my mother measure fabric for a yellow burqa
21. Extra for me because my hips are generous
22. I shower my generous hips in cold water until my fingertips wrinkle
23. Pond's cold cream on the tattoo that I haven't told my family about
24. It says (r)evolution
25. My mother had said, "You can't get a tattoo. What if your husband one day doesn't like it?"
26. She excitedly uploads sections of the Quran onto her iPad
27. My grandmother draws a moon behind my right ear to guard against the evil eye
28. The windows are open and someone is playing jingle bells
29. You don't have to understand someone to love them

### WEEKEND INSTRUCTIONS

When a bartender  
asks about the scar on your arm  
as you wait for your gin and tonic

no ice,  
 remember how your flesh opened against a granite wall  
 on the Kashmiri border  
 as a soldier examined your passport.  
 Call it your possibility scar  
 then remove the lime.

Leave the bar.  
 Cross the road  
 and when a taxi  
 hurtles past your outstretched hands  
 and Subhanallah falls from your lips,  
 do not look surprised.  
 Do not feel confused.  
 Wash your face  
 and go to bed.

The next morning,  
 eat peaches from the can  
 and learn to tie a sari  
 by the instruction of a YouTube video.  
 Argue with your mother in three languages  
 as you give up on folding pleats  
 and curse yourself silently  
 for not knowing how to say 'sticky'  
 in the language of the country  
 that your skin and sinew  
 assign you to.

Rediscover the handbag  
 that your grandmother gave you  
 for your Muslim birthday.  
 When you discover a half-used lipstick  
 in the pocket,  
 pawn the bag,  
 use the money to buy a vibrator.  
 Then buy an avocado and eat it  
 on a park bench  
 with iodized salt from Starbucks.

On your way home,  
 recall every person  
 of textured, difficult beauty.  
 Every suggestion of ferocity.  
 Every instance of tenderness.  
 Call this your history of love.

Write it down and put it into  
the check deposit box of the nearest multinational bank.

Then buy a map of the world.  
Tape it to your bedroom wall.  
Find India.  
The one that looks like a hastily folded handkerchief,  
and circle it.  
But this time,  
include Bangladesh,  
and Pakistan,  
and tell everyone who will listen  
that the name India  
comes from the river Indus  
which flows in what is now known as Pakistan,  
that once we were one country  
and that this is another history of love.

Swallow everything.  
Give up nothing:  
Amla and question mark  
Garam masala from Trader Joe's  
and your collection of Pablo Neruda.  
You do not need to trade  
one love in  
for another.

On Monday morning,  
do not lie in the cramped space  
of your habitual worship.  
Open the windows,  
and all your shampoo bottles,  
so that you remember the smell of beginning.  
You are a child of blurred boundaries  
and this must be a blessing.

## **LETTER TO INDIA**

Dear India,  
You are the reason that I get out of bed in the morning  
And this is the only thing about you  
that I know for sure

I came to you one year ago  
after a dinner party where I was asked how it feels

as an Indian woman  
 speaking English with a British accent  
 to have the voice of the colonizer  
 inside the body of the colonized

I came to you all suitcases and certainty  
 all wide eyes and open palms  
 all fire and thesaurus  
 and you knocked me clean out of synonyms

I asked for revelation  
 And you gave me broken gas cylinders  
 I asked for oracle  
 You gave me car exhaust  
 I asked for certainty  
 And you took my hand and laughed

You were never about making it easy  
 You sat across from me; precarious, sultry  
 Snapping as I stumbled over your syllables  
 Fumbling for the appropriate pronoun as though it was  
 A telephone ringing in the dark

You are slow to respond.  
 I watch the painted crescent of your upper lip  
 I watch your lips  
 tick  
 And wonder which card you will deal me today

You think that I will give it up and leave  
 But I am cupped tight within your hands  
 You are the parentheses  
 To my paragraph  
 I wouldn't be allowed on the page without you.

Many years later  
 When I am less block print  
 more pinstripe  
 I hope you will be proud to tell people  
 That you knew me when I was hungry  
 And you were my world.  
 After all, it is you who always said that love  
 in whatever way it comes  
 is flawless

You continue to teach me well.

Ferocity: like high noon sunshine in Bombay, the light that brings the city to its knees  
like ancient Sodom praying for redemption.

Faith: singular as a bell tolling

in an empty alleyway

That in devotion

there is no room for deviation.