

**South Asian and other Diaspora Poems  
curated for the Curriculum**

**Edited  
by  
Yogesh Patel**

**This is a genuine colour blindness test plate.**

*Can you read the title?*

**WORLD**

**Skylark Publications UK**

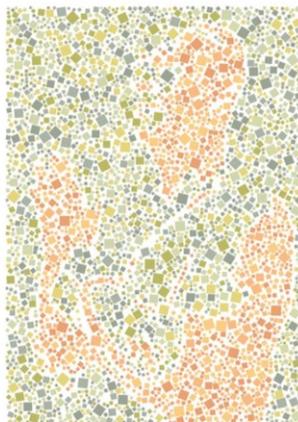
## Back page



Poems about migration, cultural invisibility, cultural duality, alienation, and displacement

Contributing British Poets

Debjani Chatterjee MBE  
Yogesh Patel MBE  
Steven O'Brien  
Rishi Dastidar  
Sarah Wardle  
Usha Kishore  
Jessica Mookherjee  
Reshma Ruia  
Kavita A. Jindal



Colour blind test plate 2: Namaste

Contributing American,  
Canadian and German  
Poets

Sujata Bhatt  
Cyril Dabydeen  
Ravi Shankar  
Pramila Venkateswaran  
Usha Akella  
Ralph Nazareth  
Kalpna Singh-Chitnis

This anthology offers an alternative to the poems selected by those from the monocultural stream. The editor and poets presented here have experienced intriguing facets of displacement which create a ground for a fascinating study. Poems from this selection can form a part of an examination and additional poems or unseen text.

\*

The selection is also suitable for GCSE, A-Level, the International Baccalaureate and university courses as the unseen poems.

**£9.99**



[www.skylarkpublications.co.uk](http://www.skylarkpublications.co.uk)

ISSN 2397-1878



# UNSEEN

Edited by  
Yogesh Patel

**e\_Skylark**



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In memory of

**the late Meena Alexander**

a Word Masala Award-winner

&

a beacon of the best of the diaspora poetry

## **Meena Alexander**

*(Reprinted from the New Yorker in the aftermath of 9/11 and the Word Masala Award  
Winners 2015 anthology)*

### **Kabir Sings in a City of Burning Towers**

What a shame  
they scared you so  
you plucked your sari off,  
crushed it into a ball

then spread it  
on the toilet floor.  
Sparks from the towers  
fled through the weave of silk.

With your black hair  
and sun dark skin  
you're just a child of earth.  
Kabir the weaver sings:

*O men and dogs  
in times of grief  
our rolling earth  
grows small.*



## **Acknowledgements**

The non-profit social enterprise Skylark Publications UK and the Word Masala Foundation are very grateful to the participating editors, poets, and publishers featured in this anthology for their kind permissions.

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## **Other requirements**

Please do inform the poet, the publisher, and us if you use the material from this anthology. *It will allow us to learn from you.*  
Contact us at [editor@skylarkpublications.co.uk](mailto:editor@skylarkpublications.co.uk).

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## **Foreword**

### ABOUT THIS FIRST ANTHOLOGY OF THE 'UNSEEN' POEMS

The Word Masala foundation programme has cultivated expertise regarding diasporic poetry. It puts the project in a better place to advise on selecting texts for any course related to the South-Asian diaspora. We are available to guide and help in this area.

This unique first volume of poems brings together the sentiments of immigrant poets from the British, American, German, and Canadian Asian diaspora. This selection will introduce new facets of experiences 'unseen' by the students of diasporic literature. Unless you are exposed to a vast output of diasporic poetry as we are in a focused manner, you will not find such a wealth of diversity we offer anywhere.

This is not the exhaustive selection: it cannot be. It justifies itself with themes and purpose covering migration, cultural invisibility, cultural duality, alienation, exile, and displacement. There are many poets we could have included to puzzle you with a choice! The poems have dictated a choice. They will enrich the curricular choice, bringing to notice the ignored poets and their work.

The selection also works around the vague definition of diaspora poetry. What is diaspora poetry? Let us know your definition. Does it mean all poems by the poets of colour? Do only the themes and issues make the diaspora poetry? In which case, why do not we include poets of other colour? What is the best way to introduce diversity poets in the curricula? Is it by following the diasporic contents or by their best writing? At Word Masala we are very keen to understand these views. Write to us. I remain encouraged by Katy Lewis and her team at Pearson Edexcel for initiating the debate on the matter. I hope the other examination bodies, teachers and universities will find something here for their active programme.

Please note the learning points or critical comments included - invited from the poets to create a point of view from their perspective - are not prescriptive. Work out your own viewpoints.

Quoting some examples randomly, if [Debjani Chatterjee's](#) child raises questions about how we deal with integration, [Sarah Wardle's](#) Amina demands an understanding of the migrants. If [Mr Patel](#) of my poem displays the resilient cultural trait, [Reshma Ruia's](#) Mrs Basu creates a narrative that raises a question about the aspects of deportations. If [Rishi Dastidar](#) experiments a title of the poem flowing into his poem, [Ravi Shankar's](#) sonnets precisely delve into homonymic rhyming. If [Sujata Bhatt](#) talks about one learning the language but denied owning it, [Cyril Dabydeen](#) makes us aware of the barbed language. The variety of themes and forms offered here should allow any teacher and student to find the richness they would have otherwise missed.

The poems here are not representative of each poet's body of work. To judge a poet by one poem is to judge a nation by one individual! The aim serves the purpose of enriching curricula by addressing gaps and alternatives. Please inform the Word Masala Foundation of any pick you use. It will help us learn for the future. Your feedback is also valuable to us, which you can send at [editor@skylarkpublications.co.uk](mailto:editor@skylarkpublications.co.uk),

Finally, I like to add that curriculum is a tight space and as I learnt from selecting these poems, it must be always an agonising choice to make for the selectors. When we readily talk about a monocultural education, I also like to believe that it is not coming from any prejudices, but comes from instincts, familiarities and a missing knowledge about the diaspora poetry. Let us correct it together.

#### ABOUT THE COVER

*This cover is not a gimmick; it is serious about the colour-blindness. If one young person is diagnosed for the colour-blindness through these Ishihara test plates specially created for this anthology and gets help,*

it would have served the purpose through symbolism that is also at play here. If you cannot read the title, visit your optician.

Colour-blindness can hold us back, an eye condition or otherwise. It manifests itself as a metaphor for the 'unseen' material or cultural invisibility.

## THE SYRIAN AND IRISH EXPERIENCES

Finally, yes, I have deliberately included two non-Asian poets: [Sarah Wardle](#) for her excellent poem examining the relationship of a migrant and English language, and [Steven O'Brien](#)'s poem to understand the oblique aspects of the Irish identity and the feeling of displacement or exile. I hope this collection takes you outside the mental fences we create that the education needs to dismantle.

[Yogesh Patel MBE](#)

**If you have any funding available, please do consider paying fees for the work you use from this anthology.**

**Please contact the poets or their publishers directly.**

\*

*We also welcome a donation to the non-profit Word Masala Project through*

<https://www.skylarkpublications.co.uk/easyfunding.html>

## Debjani Chatterjee

### An Asian Child Enters a British Classroom

Before she stepped into the classroom:  
she removed coat, mittens and *chunni*;  
mentally undid her shoes for entry  
to a temple of secular mystery.

She also shed her:  
language, name, identity;  
donned the mask of neat conformity,  
prepared for lessons in cultural anonymity.

Note: A *chunni* is a long scarf worn with some South Asian clothes.

The poem is published in *Do You Hear the Storm Sing?* by Debjani Chatterjee (Core Publications, London, 2014).

---

#### Learning objectives

- Students should be encouraged to appreciate the part played by patterning in illuminating the poem's meaning. They will identify and understand the focus on words relevant to clothing, removal, and school.
- Students should be encouraged to learn layers of meanings, including the culture conflict experienced by an Asian child who lives in two separate cultures - in her home and in school.
- Students should be encouraged to learn questions such as should British education be multicultural.
- Students should be encouraged to understand how and why anonymity is established by the use of non-specific pronouns and generalisations, e.g. child, she, her.
- Students should be encouraged to learn about structure by

studying the two quatrains, their similarities, differences, and inter-dependence.

- Through a metaphor such as ‘temple’, students should be encouraged to learn about imagery in poetry.
- Students should be encouraged to use the poem to learn about the poem’s rhyming scheme, as well as its use of feminine rhyme and multisyllabic rhyme.

---

### **Editorial comment:**

This is one of the all-time favourite poems that never tires me out! This line left me wide-jawed, ‘prepared for lessons in cultural anonymity.’ For your studies, what arguments and animated discussions can you resort to for this revealing aspect?

---

### **Know the poet**



**Debjani Chatterjee MBE, FRSL**, and RLF Fellow, has been called ‘Britain’s best-known Asian poet’ (Elisabetta Marino). Delhi-born and Sheffield-based, she is also an award-winning writer, translator and creative arts psychotherapist. Her 8 poetry collections include *Namaskar: New & Selected Poems*, *Words Spit & Splinter*, and – for children – *Animal Antics*.

---

The contact details for permissions and engagement

Contact the poet at [debjanichatterjee@outlook.com](mailto:debjanichatterjee@outlook.com) for readings, recordings, interviews, workshops, commissions, and other opportunities.

---

## Further reading: Debjani Chatterjee

### Sacred Dip

Raja Rammohan Roy  
carried Ganges water  
when he came to England.  
The natives were bemused.

Dadu came to London,  
knowing all rivers are  
the Ganges, if we choose,  
or equally the Thames.

At sunrise, he removed  
his shoes and English hat;  
Gayatri mantra on  
his lips, he waded in.

Saluting a mist-veiled  
Turner sun, his cupped hands  
poured heart-felt Thames water  
beneath Westminster Bridge.

A passing bobby spied  
the strange shenanigans  
and rushed to halt the daft  
Lascar's mad 'suicide'!

Notes: Raja Rammohan Roy (1772–1833), is considered 'Father of the Indian Renaissance'. He visited England in 1829 as the Mughal emperor's representative, and died in Bristol.

## Yogesh Patel

### A Leap of Faith

Abandoned by the birthplace  
Idi-Amin Adelie penguins  
Putting the boot in  
The Emperor penguin chick  
Struggles, stops, wonders  
Should I? Shouldn't I?  
At the borders  
At the edge of a cliff  
At the frightening first plunge  
Into heartless ocean  
A new country!  
The warmth of father's pouch is  
The motherland lost  
What can you do when barbarians ride in?  
You summon a leap of faith  
To convince you  
No one owns your home but you  
It is where you find it!  
Jump, jump, you stupid  
Someone always pushes you  
It is a jump from the old home  
There's a new beginning in every jump  
Orcas always ready to pounce  
Every Mara Crossing is a leap of faith

\* Barbarians refer to C P Cavafy's poem 'Waiting for the Barbarians'.  
(Inspired by Snow Chick - A Penguin's Tale, BBC  
One documentary <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06t3sk9>)

**Taken from *Swimming with Whales* published by Skylark Publications UK  
in 2017. Available from [www.skylarkpublications.co.uk/bookshop.html](http://www.skylarkpublications.co.uk/bookshop.html)**

## Learning objectives

- This is a free verse
  - Students should learn how images and words; barbarians, the Mara Crossing, Orca and Idi Amin enrich the narrative with the added layers of meanings and contexts.
  - Students should be encouraged to find implied meanings, as in the line 'What can you do when barbarians ride in?'
  - Explore the BBC context to find out how Adelie penguins behave to the Emperor, and how it relates to the Ugandan expulsion of Asians.
  - What the Mara Crossing teaches us? How has the poet integrated the brutality of the migration in the poem?
  - Explore the dangers and fears of migration. Discuss how the narrative probes the meaning of home.
- 

## Editorial comment:

A Leap of Faith' presents a powerful visual analogy: the Asian Ugandan expelled by Idi Amin, stands at a new country's border like a penguin chick at a cliff edge, deliberating whether to jump. In spite of the grimness of a 'heartless' ocean, helplessness against 'barbarians', and a 'motherland lost', the poet asserts that there is no choice but to take the plunge, the exiled should see their Mara Crossing as a 'leap of faith' and courage, in the hope of 'a new beginning'. The poem invites the reader to reflect on the true nature of 'home': 'no one owns your home but you', and home 'is where you find it'.

---

## Know the poet



**Yogesh Patel** received MBE for literature in the Queen's New Year Honours list 2020. He edits *Skylark* and runs *Skylark Publications UK* and a non-profit *Word Masala* project. He has also received the *Freedom of the City of London*. His writing has appeared in *PN Review*, *The London Magazine*, and on BBC TV, and the others. Author websites: [patelyogesh.co.uk](http://patelyogesh.co.uk) and [skylarkpublications.co.uk](http://skylarkpublications.co.uk)

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Contact the poet at [editor@skylarkpublications.co.uk](mailto:editor@skylarkpublications.co.uk)

## Further reading: Yogesh Patel

### Typical Mr Patel's Typical Promotion

Mr Patel, you're blah blah blah.

BUTT.

(May I ask you to spell it correctly? I'm only an Indian after all!)

Can you fill this form for equal opportunity?

It's to allow us to monitor you know what.

Thank you. We'll let you know in due course.

(Never)

Mr Patel,

Sorry,

You were one of the two selected;

BUTT.

(Hell, you smell of masala)

Try again next year. (And the year after,  
and after, and after.)

Thank you for your interest in our company.

The calf butted the oak:

Mr Patel bought the company  
and promoted himself.

(Taken from *Bottled Ganges* published by Skylark Publications)

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### Learning objectives

- This poem uses colloquial and conversational language and is a showcase of the corporate business culture. Discuss the phrase 'equal opportunity'. Talk about brusqueness as a culture.
- Which cultural perception of the Patels does it raise here?
- What contribution the references to 'The calf butted the oak:' and Solzhenitsyn is making to the poem's narrative?
- Explore humour in poetry through Wendy Cope's work.

## Steven O'Brien

### Lough Swilly

I squinted  
As the light squandered itself  
On three plummets,  
Like votive spears,  
Cast into the scowling water.

After this nothing bright  
Just a vault of lour-  
Torn mists on the mountains  
And three widow crows  
Quarrelling over a rack of fish bones.

Weed fanned the rocks,  
A treachery of green tresses  
Beckoning me out under trapped echoes.

The gravel tramped back in my footprints  
Like a retreating army.  
On the far shore a Calvary of wind turbines  
Stirred the dawn.

I wondered what it must be like under those gibbet gyes-  
Rain smudging the fields,  
A creak of oil famished steel.

I have heard that all times are present.  
My ancestors are thriving as I speak,  
And dying.  
Their now generates against my now,  
Divided by no more than the swoop of blades,  
Or tides we may not cross.

Whatever,  
I know it should have been exactly this way  
When the O'Neill sailed out from Rathmullan-

The dawn as dour as a block of whetstone,  
Black birds and carrion,  
Crooked crosses like milling stars,  
Shorn wind moaning down to the waves.

(From Scrying Stones, Greenwich Exchange. Buy the book from  
[https://greenex.co.uk/ge\\_record\\_detail.asp?ID=123](https://greenex.co.uk/ge_record_detail.asp?ID=123))

---

### Learning objectives

- According to the poet, the separation and experience of exile lie in the background of this poem, rather than being the 'main event.' How has poet achieved it?
- Place is important in this poem. In 1607 Hugh O'Neill, the Earl of Tyrone sailed into exile from Lough Swilly, never to return. It was the end of the old Gaelic aristocracy of Ireland. After this the English consolidated their power over the whole country. How does history intrude into the poet's experience of place in the poem?
- This poem is included because it is an example of an exilic poem where the poems don't 'tell' the subject. This poem evokes the essence of loss and exile. Which details demonstrate this?
- As in many modern poems, this poem also thrives as an oblique reference to displacement. The poet hints at this through 'I have heard that all times are present.'
- The idea of a contested and mythically charged landscape is present in the use of words such as 'spears' and 'blades.'
- Work out how poet plays with notions of time and the interaction of the past and the present; particularly in expressions such as 'tides we may not cross.'
- Images of persecution and violence are threaded through the poem in lines such as 'I wondered what it must be like under

those gibbet gyres.' Discuss how it helps the feeling of alienation.

- What is the overall tone of the poem?
  - The poem is expressed in free verse. How do you think the poet made choices regarding line breaks and stanza shape?
- 

### **Editorial comment:**

Editorially, I have made a conscious decision to include Steven's poem because as said in my editorial a feeling of alienation and displacement should not be identified as unique only to the diaspora. A feeling of divided Ireland is anchored in the Irish identity and culture. How would you compare this alienation of displacement also felt by the other groups?

---

### **Know the poet**



**Steven O'Brien** is an Irish writer with specialisms in mythography, poetry and prose. He is Editor of The London Magazine and course leader for the MA in Creative Writing at the University of Portsmouth. He sings in the traditional Sean Nós style.

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For further rights, readings, workshop, interviews, and talks please contact [steven.obrien@port.ac.uk](mailto:steven.obrien@port.ac.uk)

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## Rishi Dastidar

### The Problem of becoming English

Wasn't as I was supposing,  
Of whether the ethnicity  
Would accept my race;  
But rather one of posing  
In a top hat for publicity.

The poem can be found in Ticker-tape, published by Nine Arches Press (2017):  
More details: <https://ninearchespress.com/publications/poetry-collections/ticker-tape.html>

### Further reading from the above collection of poems

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#### Risk Patterns

1.

I'm hearing that foxes  
are feeling put out  
the chickens are gathering  
in chicken-only meetings,  
discussing how fox violence  
makes them feel.

13.

Refuge is not just a place.  
It's a state of mind.  
A state of hope.

14.

I've already won the lottery.  
I have a British passport.

## Learning objectives

- Discuss how the title continues into the main body of the poem. How successful is it?
- Explore how the poet shifts the burden of meaning to the other words as in 'whether the ethnicity/Would accept my race;' and the use of the word 'publicity'.
- How does the poem create a sense of rhythm while being free verse?
- Explore how the perception of being British can be different to how it might be experienced in reality.
- Explore how the reality of being British is different for people in a minority community.
- In the further reading option, discuss what the parable about chickens and the fox implies.
- Apart from what the poet has written what facets to 'refuge' can you add?

---

### Editorial comment:

You would have explored how Daljit Nagra plays with the language. Rishi Dastidar does this on his term. His collection Ticker-tape often deconstructs the language and forms and reconstructs them making the experience fresh. I implore you to explore it.

---

### Know the poet



A poem from **Rishi Dastidar**'s Ticker-tape was included in The Forward Book of Poetry 2018. His second collection, Saffron Jack, is published by Nine Arches Press. He is also editor of The Craft: A Guide to Making Poetry Happen in the 21st Century (Nine Arches Press).

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Contact poet and Nine Arches Press at [mail@ninearchespress.com](mailto:mail@ninearchespress.com);; [betarish@gmail.com](mailto:betarish@gmail.com)

## Sarah Wardle

### Amina's Truth

mother sisters brother on fire burn  
in my eye now, no english, i learn

third language, trying forget, make friend,  
me syrian, here britain women

lots freedom but I wanting return  
where husband war, mother die, i born,

she flames, sisters brother shout, bombs kill  
most, town skeleton, father fights, will

not live say text, so i come uk  
to questions, men, papers, is ok?

i wanting ask what mean? me need show?  
see they things i saw? but i not know

words, how explain, so nodding, smiling  
time all, my son in arms, and crying

(Taken from Spiritlands, Bloodaxe, 2018, available from  
<https://www.bloodaxebooks.com/ecs/category/sarah-wardle>)

---

### Learning objectives

- To understand the difference between standard and non-standard English and identify uses of the latter in the poem;
- The poet has deliberately fractured the language in terms of grammar, syntax and punctuation to show both subject's fractured experience as she recounts the horrors she has seen and the further challenge of using a new tongue to describe them.

- To understand phonetic spelling and why the poet uses it.
- To analyse the relationship described in the poem. After all she has been through, all she has seen and her journey to the UK, the woman asylum seeker has to go through mundane paperwork and questions, when she needs loving care for her and her son.
- To enable the students to appreciate the poem. The point of view is the woman's pained voice, not a news report, or Government statistic.
- To enable students to understand the thought and imagination contained in the poem: The horrors the subject has seen and losses she has had are imagined and yet she needs to carry on as a mother.
- To appreciate the rhyme & rhythm and style of the poem.
- The poem is a sonnet and has rhythm and end rhyme.
- To train the emotions, feelings and imagination of the students. I hope this poem builds empathy for the mother and the plight of all asylum seekers.

---

### **The editorial comment:**

This poem is not only a celebration of the versatile English language presenting various possibilities, but how the language still can connect us when it is dysfunctional!

---

### **Know the poet**



**Sarah Wardle** was born in London in 1969. She won the 1999 Geoffrey Dearmer Prize, *Poetry Review's* New Poet of the Year award, and her first collection was shortlisted for the Forward Best First Collection Prize.

She has published five collections with Bloodaxe Books: *Fields Away* (2003), *Score!* (2005), *A Knowable World* (2009), *Beyond* (2014) and *Spiritlands* (2018).

---

Contact Suzanne Fairless-Aitken at [rights@bloodaxebooks.com](mailto:rights@bloodaxebooks.com) for the rights and to contact the poet.

## Usha Kishore

### Men in Turbans

*Few people are aware 1.5 million Indians fought  
alongside the British – that there were men in turbans  
in the same trenches as the Tommies...*

Shrabani Basu

Forgotten  
by the world,  
we linger in no-man's land.  
Forsaken by history,  
trampled by time,  
renounced by a homeland  
that does not honour  
its imperial troops.

Our dreams lie scattered  
across the Western Front;  
our blood spilt in vain,  
our memories fragmented  
by empire, colony and nation.  
Our lives, a redundant sacrifice  
*for king and another country.*

Wear your poppies with pride,  
but tell us who we are:  
Brown *sepoy*s of the Raj  
or comrades, who fought  
arm in arm, losing eye and  
limb, when cannons roared  
like thunder and bullets  
hurtled like rain?

From Immigrant, Eyewear Publishing London, 2018. Buy from  
<https://store.eyewearpublishing.com/products/immigrant>

## Learning objectives

- Turban – cloth headwear; Sepoy – Indian soldier, serving under the British.
  - Relationship – Between the British and Indian soldiers during World War I
  - World War I poem – about the Indian soldiers fighting for the British Empire.
  - The poet writes from the perspective of the Indian soldiers, during WWI.
  - The stanzaic poem in free verse; use of repetition, rhetorical question and imagery.
  - To understand the Indian sacrifices made during WWI.
- 

## The editorial comment:

Joanna Lumley champions Ghurkha, their contributions and their abandonment by the British Raj! Not only Sikhs but there were others too, who contributed to the British victory over Germany in the WW1. This poem registers that forgotten and often ignored histories, raising questions about racism and political responsibilities. What are your views?

---

## Know the poet



**Usha Kishore** is an Indian born British poet, who is the author of three poetry collections. Her poetry has been published and anthologised internationally. Usha's poetry is featured in the British Primary and Indian Middle School and Undergraduate syllabi. Her third poetry collection, *Immigrant*, was published by Eyewear Publishing (2018).

---

Contact Usha Kishore at [vajra@manx.net](mailto:vajra@manx.net). For Eyewear Publishing contact poet-publisher Todd Swift at [toddswift@clara.co.uk](mailto:toddswift@clara.co.uk).

## Jessica Mookherjee

### Tigress

Eyes set in stone-flesh  
dimmed with Amitryptaline.  
Her hands are calloused from forty-five years  
of washing-up.

Shuffles down stairs to write  
a list of the day's repairs.  
From the kitchen she watches her husband  
flicking his paper.

He sits in their conservatory,  
glass, cracked as she is.  
Anticipates his need for tea, she serves him,  
over and over again.

Seething, behind the drugs,  
under her rock-salt mask, is a tigress  
that was harnessed  
and lanced.

Caged deep inside her chest,  
she sedates it every morning and every night  
before bed. Around tea time,  
her eyes flick open  
as her heart-beat quickens.  
Faded carpets come into focus. She listens  
for the voices of her children  
in a deserted garden.

She is fierce for an hour,  
stalking nilgai and gaur,  
scent marking the garden, sniffing out  
water buffalo.

Behind her husbands' back,

she plans an attack.  
Until it starts to get dark. Until its time  
to take her pills.

(cont.)

From 'Tigress' published by Nine Arches Press, More details:

<https://ninearchespress.com/publications/poetry-collections/ticker-tape.html>

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### Learning objectives

- Understand how a poem is tackling colonialism and subjugation;
  - Understand why the poet uses gender, the word Tigress as opposed to Tiger;
  - Analyse how the poet tackles 'wildness' within the form of the poem.
  - Learn how a poem might speak about illness.
  - Understand the interrelationships and points of view in the poem.
  - Appreciate the use of rhyme, rhythm and style of the poem.
  - Highlight how poet uses the real and the imaginary in this poem.
- 

### Editorial comment:

This poem may help to challenge the perceptions of cultural stereotypes we cast in Asians. It also may help to see the marital tensions, expectations as woman's role, and allow to probe into women's inner conflicts. Talk about what is happening in: *Behind her husbands' back, /she plans an attack. /Until it starts to get dark. Until its time /to take her pills.*

---

### Know the poet



**Jessica Mookherjee** is of Bengali origin and grew up in Wales and now lives in Kent. She has been widely published. Highly commended for best single poem in the Forward Prize 2017, first collection is 'Flood' (2018, Cultured Llama) and her second Tigress is published by Nine Arches Press.

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Email contacts: [mail@ninearchespress.com](mailto:mail@ninearchespress.com) & [Jessica751@me.com](mailto:Jessica751@me.com)

## Reshma Ruia

### Mrs Basu Leaves Town

Mrs Basu crouches in her seat at the airport gate,  
chewing rat-like at the ends of her sari. Bullet voices  
ricochet around. She grins.  
Confused like a fool. Cameras flash.  
A policewoman scowls. Moves closer.  
Bare white legs pimpled with cold.  
Throw us a crumb of a smile, Mrs Basu thinks.  
Her bladder aches. Eyes burn from lack of sleep.  
Her village - she never wanted to leave it behind.  
A nephew's daft idea to make quick money.  
Life-savings gone, in feeding the middleman.  
Curled like a foetus sleeping behind the kitchen door.  
Minding a stranger's child when she could be home  
in the courtyard, oiling her daughter's hair.

*Illegal alien to be deported - Section 3(c)*  
the policewoman snarls.  
'I have a name!' Mrs Basu shouts. 'I am Kamala Basu,  
tenth class pass.'  
Her mouth twists in anger.  
She pats her heart. Whispers; 'forget the lost years.  
Just be glad.'  
Hustled to the back of the waiting plane where  
passengers fidget, glower and swear.  
Strapped in her seat, Mrs Basu lets out a sigh.  
She is going home.

Mrs Basu Leaves Town is from 'A Dinner Party in the Home Counties'  
published by Skylark Publications UK. Available from  
[www.skylarkpublications.co.uk/bookshop.html](http://www.skylarkpublications.co.uk/bookshop.html)

## Learning objectives

- The poem examines the relationship between a figure of authority (police officer) and a powerless woman about to be deported.
  - The poet uses a variety of techniques ranging from an omniscient narrator observing Mrs Basu waiting in the airport to an internal stream of consciousness as Mrs Basu tries to placate herself for ‘all the lost years.’
  - The poem’s themes encompass displacement, nostalgia and societal inequality.
  - Mrs Basu may be a figure of helplessness but there is also a tone of defiance and new beginnings as she tells herself that she is ‘going home.’
  - The poem is topical and universally relevant with its overarching narrative of displacement and fear of the ‘other.’
- 

## The editorial comment:

In this poem, the poet captures typical Asian behaviour which you would not perceive normally, but in an atypical way, it challenges the treatment ‘aliens’ (define) receive at the hands of the authority that has prejudged them as aliens but not as humans! Is home where one becomes human? What is the concept of home? Where is it? Discuss.

---

## Know the poet



**Reshma Ruia** is an award winning novelist, short story writer and poet. Her poetry collection, ‘A Dinner Party in the Home Counties,’ won the 2019 Word Masala Award. Her work has appeared in international anthologies and magazines and commissioned for BBC Radio 4. Reshma’s writing explores the preoccupations of those who possess a multiple sense of belonging.

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Contact through poet’s website: [www.reshmaruia.com](http://www.reshmaruia.com)



From *Patina*: Published by **the wind in the trees**. Buy at <http://www.thewindinthetrees.com/books/patina>

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### Learning objectives

- To introduce the students to experimentation in style and form and to encourage their creativity in writing new forms that suit their speaking styles.
  - To understand that daily slang or abbreviation can be used in poetry that is conversational, such as the use of 'caps' for 'capitals' (line 8).
  - To tune into the rhythm of a poem: in this poem, the first line of each verse is as long as breath and that sets the tone for how it is read, especially read aloud.
  - To demonstrate how a story can be told within a poem.
  - To understand that some poems work on the page and also as a performance piece, if crafted carefully.
  - To show how feelings and emotions can be described in original ways; such as: 'I wished to be a ribbon of mist' (line 21).
- 

### The editorial comment:

It is difficult to write about religion without offending anyone. How is this poem trying to dismantle the labels we attach to religious views? When we talk about migrants, we often attach a religious identity to them. Poet breaks away from this idea. How?

---

### Know the poet



**Kavita A Jindal's** poems and stories have appeared in anthologies and literary journals worldwide and been broadcast on BBC Radio. She is the author of the novel *Manual For A Decent Life* which won the Brighthorse Prize. She has published two poetry collections to critical acclaim: *Patina* and *Raincheck Renewed*.

---

Poet's website: [www.kavitajindal.com](http://www.kavitajindal.com) Contact email: [contactkaj9@gmail.com](mailto:contactkaj9@gmail.com).

## Mona Dash

### Belonging

Corporate men, pinstripe suits  
in deep discussion, in accents  
lilting French, baritone German, twangy American.  
Among them an Indian, worse, a woman, Indian.  
When I speak in tone, walk with the step  
eyebrows raise, they lean forward to hear better,  
talk louder when addressing me, as if I am deaf  
telling me silently:  
You shouldn't be here.

A crowded English pub, people  
standing in spaces too small for them.  
I order the drinks.  
The bartender stares when I say  
'A glass of red wine and three pints of lager'  
looking confused, leaning forward closer  
telling me silently:  
You shouldn't be here.

Welcoming smiles, women in sarees,  
grinding *masalas*, rolling *chapatis*,  
television is the world, content  
in the four walls, within set boundaries.  
My hometown, my roots, so far from my branches.  
Ill at ease I sit  
listening to my own voice  
telling me silently:  
You shouldn't be here.

*Masalas: spices*

*Chapatis: Indian bread*

From *A Certain Way*, published by Skylark Publications UK. Available  
from [www.skylarkpublications.co.uk/bookshop.html](http://www.skylarkpublications.co.uk/bookshop.html)

### Learning objectives

- Discuss how non-standard English words are creating a cultural imprint.
  - Discuss how in modern-day Britain the British Asians, especially women, look placed incongruously. Can you think of other situations: specifically, for Indian women, as part of mainstream Britain?
  - This poem explores belonging as a multi-layered concept. Do we belong to a place because we are born there? Do we belong only to our birthplace? Can people accept us, despite our cultural differences?
  - Belonging is not a simple concept, and one may want to explore one's identity outside the boundaries society draws. One such myth is that Indian women do not work in the international corporate world or socialise in a pub. How is a sari accentuating this? Students will learn to appreciate being global, multi-cultural and cosmopolites.
- 

### Editorial comment:

A driving force in this poem is the line 'You shouldn't be here.' Displacement is not the only aspect emerging here, thrown in is also *being out-of-place*. There is awkwardness in the prejudice. Instead of jumping to a conclusion, this poem implores us to examine if this narrative illustrates hate, racial abuse, foolishness or ignorance.

---

### Know the poet



**Mona Dash** is the author of four books, Dawn-drops (poetry), Untamed Heart (a novel), A Certain Way (poetry) and A Roll of the Dice (a memoir). Her short stories have been listed in and won several competitions. She lives in London.

---

Contact through [www.monadash.net](http://www.monadash.net)

## Sujata Bhatt

### What Can You Tell Us?

Now that you have learned our language,  
what can you tell us?

*Winter is over.  
I found my son asleep under a tree.  
We danced through the night.  
I know you won't believe me  
unless you see it for yourself.*

Before you cross the next border,  
you must answer the following questions:

Is anyone there to receive you?  
Who loves you?  
What do your friends say?  
Where will you keep your books?

*I have seen horses slide through sunrise –  
through moonrise – horses in spring, wild –  
they look through your being  
and find nothing to hold them back –  
Someone waits for me, someone  
I have never met before –  
Does that make him a stranger?  
Yes, we have exchanged letters.  
My love is anonymous.  
My friends are deaf and mute.  
I look into their eyes –  
their clear, truthful eyes.  
I have lost all my books in the flood.*

If you decide to live among us  
you must observe the following rules:

Speak clearly!

Be quiet!

Enjoy life!

Die at the right time!

Now that we have accepted you,  
do you have any further wishes?

*Long live the King!*

*I'd really like a glass of water!*

*God be with us!*

*If only He were here!*

From Poppies in Translation, Carcanet, Buy from

<https://www.carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/indexer?product=9781847770202>

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### **Learning objectives:**

- Who are the speakers? What is their relationship?
  - Study the diction, emotional tone and syntax.
  - Is the dialogue believable? Is it realistic?
  - What is the tone and style of the dialogue?
  - Ask students to write their own dialogue poems.
- 

### **Editorial Comment**

Debjani Chatterjee's poem ends with a child's initiation with 'lessons in cultural anonymity'. Sarah Wardle's Amina communicates with broken language. In Sujata Bhatt we are finding out the aftermath of 'Now that you have learned our language,/what can you tell us?' Here the language serves the purpose of inquisition. Students should discuss what the absence of God means here. Discuss the juxtaposed exit of God and the entry of a migrant in a country. What is the poet's message?

## Know the poet



**Sujata Bhatt**'s latest books from Carcanet are *Collected Poems* and *Poppies in Translation*. She has received numerous awards including the Commonwealth Poetry Prize (Asia) and the Cholmondeley Award. In 2014 she was the first recipient of the Mexican International Poetry Prize, Premio Internacional de Poesía Nuevo Siglo de Oro 1914-2014.

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The best address for Carcanet for rights is Rachel Bent:  
[admin@carcanet.co.uk](mailto:admin@carcanet.co.uk). For anything else, send query to to  
[info@carcanet.co.uk](mailto:info@carcanet.co.uk)

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## Cyril Dabydeen

### THE MISBEHAVED

This man with half muttered slurs,  
lips pursed, a drifter of sorts  
from the Maritime Coast--  
skin colour only he talks about.

Barbs of the tongue, as I meet him  
eye to eye; and his psychologist  
& social worker are in awe of him  
because of past fears the more

he's determined about race;  
his nerves frayed, and he heaves in  
& what will he say next about  
where he actually came from?

Nothing will deter him, you see--  
but what he says from long ago,  
as he insists upon, being true  
to himself I must really know.

### Further Reading

#### Cyril Dabydeen

#### THE BORDER

No human being is illegal.

--Elie Weisel

1

It's where we do not want to go,  
wire fences only, and making  
faces at the border guards with  
a handshake, a disturbance  
of the spirit really, I claim.

Now in unfamiliar territory  
with you, imagining places:  
palings, staves, tunnels--  
pretending to be who  
we are not, you say.

2

New skin, new clothes, looking  
over my shoulders, sideways,  
taking one last breath, with you,  
no one else, I tell you again.

The horizon only, you see--  
I contend with, and roadways,  
maps of old places in the sun  
I remember most of all.

3

Cochineal and palm trees leaning  
I look forward to, and again  
thinking about it, like paradise  
in someone else's backyard,  
not a parking lot.

Being everywhere with you,  
the equator most of all--  
as I grit my teeth, and  
there's no air to breathe,  
I let you know.

No memory now life-giving,  
no other instinct to follow,  
but to raise a flag, a signpost:  
landmarks I must contend with,  
once in a lifetime.

---

These two poems are specially submitted for this anthology, and are aimed for a future anthology. "The Border" originally appeared in "God's Spider", which is available from Peepal Tree Press at

<https://www.peepaltreepress.com/authors/cyril-dabydeen>

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**Learning objectives:**

- "The Misbehaved" and "The Border" — are written in standard English.
  - The two poems deal with the dynamics of INSIDER-OUTSIDER relationships.
  - Emphasis should be on marginality, as this is relevant to race, identity and becoming.
  - Related to the above the imagination focuses on the individual and the personal, which ultimately becomes universal.
  - The two poems are written in free verse with some internal rhymes. Line-breaks (enjambment) give the poems their special cadence and inflection, and appeal as internal drama.
- 

**Editorial comment**

Is to be emphatic about one's racial identity misbehaviour? Discuss how the poet has lyrically captured man's skin colour as a counterproductive identity. How is the heading playing up this What is the significance of 'The' used in the heading?

---

**Know the poet**



**Cyril Dabydeen** is a former Poet Laureate of Ottawa, Canada. He has appeared in numerous magazines, e.g. Poetry/Chicago, The Critical Quarterly (UK), Canadian Literature, and in the Oxford, Penguin and Heinemann Books of Caribbean Verse. His recent volumes are God's Spider (Peepal Tree Press, UK), and My Undiscovered Country (Mosaic Press, Canada).

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For further rights, readings, workshop, interviews and talks please contact [cdabydeen@ncf.ca](mailto:cdabydeen@ncf.ca).

## Usha Akella

### SCUTTLEBUTT

(Acrostic Poem)

Sailors we are, across the Atlantic we go in vertigo trips,  
careening, never cleaned of our baggage and past, the journey is  
upbound, it seems most of the time with the  
tattle of the waves murmuring our histories, what's the  
tell tail in all of this? The direction of the wind? No matter, no  
lateral systems really aid us.

Embayed, we belong to two lands and the flag of the water erodes the  
bulkhead in our hearts, we begin to belong nowhere.

Unshipped, we are exiled from anything that spells home.

Three sheets to the wind, each of us a paralyzed hulk in the hands of a  
timoneer, perhaps, sea sick himself of the voyages he charts.

*Scuttlebutt: rumor/gossip/nautical term- a casket of water or fountain around which sailors gather.*

*Careen: tilting a ship on its side to clean it.*

*Upbound: A vessel traveling upstream.*

*Tell Tail/Tell Tale: A light piece of string, yarn, rope or plastic.*

*Lateral systems: A system of aids to navigation.*

*Embayed: Where a sailing ship is confined between two capes by a wind blowing on shore.*

*Bulkhead: An upright wall within the hull of a ship. Particularly a watertight, load-bearing wall.*

*Unship: To remove from a vessel.*

*Three sheets to the wind: The three sheets in the mast if loose will result in the ship meandering aimlessly downwind/ A sailor who has drunk strong spirits beyond his capacity.*

*Timoneer: From the French timonnier, is a name given, on particular occasions, to the steersman of a ship.*

An **acrostic poem** is a **poem** where certain letters in each line spell out a word or phrase. Typically, the first letters of each line are used to spell the message, but they can appear anywhere.

---

### Learning objectives

- The language used in the poem is standard English.
- The immigrant poet uses the metaphor of sailing to convey the act of immigration. Crossing the seas as a phrase is explored linguistically and symbolically in the poem.
- Readers should notice the use of diction to convey fluidity, displacement, and shifting identity.
- The poem employs a variety of nautical terms to convey passage and immigration. The poet imaginatively explores these terms and compares them to displacement and identity.
- The form used is acrostic allowing the form to become the medium for the subject. Each line adds to the thematic meaning of the title.
- Why is 'scuttlebutt' the title? How does it relate to the poem's content? How does the poet imaginatively achieve this effect?

---

### Know the poet



**Usha Akella** earned an MSt in Creative Writing from the University of Cambridge in 2018. She is the founder of *Matwaala*, South Asian Poetry collective and festival ([www.matwaala.com](http://www.matwaala.com)) She has read at numerous international poetry festivals.

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For further rights, readings, workshop, interviews and talks please contact [usha.akella67@gmail.com](mailto:usha.akella67@gmail.com).

**Further reading: Usha Akella**

This is just to say  
to William Carlos Williams

I have not eaten the plums  
nor has my daughter.

The mangoes win, gluttonous yellow,  
plump with scathing summers,  
childhood's innocence,  
moist memories  
of dead grandmothers,  
bellowing grandfathers,  
the sweet homesickness,  
a sticky dribble on the chin.

The plums are prudish,  
slow to ripen, a bit stiff,  
in the back of the fridge,  
they are not delicious or sweet  
though cold, I admit.

Your plums Carlos,  
Where do they come from?

Refer <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56159/this-is-just-to-say>

---

**Editorial comment**

Usha Akella has composed poems in many forms. This includes a staged song drama. Along with Ravi Shankar, students should study in Usha Akella, how diaspora poets frequently write about wider range of subjects in many forms testing the language, as in this poem, still only to be identified in the diasporic context.

## Ralph Nazareth

### Pure Indian

Pure is as pure does.  
As for the rest, there is blending  
in ports at the forks of rivers.  
Confusion in the synapses.  
Enzymes mix as saliva  
is exchanged between races.  
Sperm and egg conjoin colorblind  
in the amniotic dream.

Pure is as death does  
as it lies in state beyond division.  
Even sworn enemies show up  
to lay down a wreath  
though some of the blooms may drip  
the blood of your clan.

It's with some difficulty  
I say these words:  
I am Indian  
and wish to be seen as one  
composed and taken apart  
at the meeting and parting of worlds.

---

### Learning objectives

- "Pure Indian" is in standard English. While discussing the poem, it would be fruitful for teachers and students to examine the assumptions underlying notions of "pure" and "standard."
- Explore the relationship in the poem between the speaker's split identities.
- How does the poem convey the idea that "pure" is not merely an abstraction or a concept? Is the speaker of the poem ambivalent about being identified as an Indian? Why or why not?

- Written in free verse, the poem uses short lines and makes declarative statements. Yet a touch of hesitation marks some of the lines. Discuss the way the tone and imagery shape the complex attitudes reflected in the poem.
  - The poem should raise the important question of identity in a multi-cultural society. Does the poem suggest or offer a path to peaceful co-existence in a society that is becoming increasingly diverse?
- 

### **Editorial comment**

Instead of telling us a context directly, creating or showing one is where some poems excel. Notice how the poet prepares a canvas for the identity to stand out and make a statement. Discuss how it works here. As a striking feature, this poem creates two contrasting states of pure and diminishing boundaries. The experience in a photographic sense is without noise.

---

### **Know the poet**



**Ralph Nazareth** is an Indian poet who has been published, heard, and read in many parts of the world. He has taught for four decades in universities and maximum-security prisons in the U.S. The Managing Editor of Yuganta Press, he currently also heads GraceWorks, Inc., a non-profit based in Stamford, CT.

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For further permission contact: [ralphnazareth@mac.com](mailto:ralphnazareth@mac.com)

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## Ravi Shankar

### Immediate Family

-homonymic sonnet

1) Though it might not have been readily apparent, I saw my father, ever conscious of dollars & cents, filch toilet paper from a maid's cart. Not a parent-like thing to do, granted, nothing that makes sense given his comportment. I wonder if he could choose differently or if he was just acting in a waking daze, a kleptomaniac stupor. Watching the way he chews his food sometimes, I puzzle what pleasure his days on earth might consist of & how I might be his son when his default mode of looking is to glare. Pried open, what dreams might orbit his heart as the sun harnesses planets to spin? All I see his dark pride. This stranger, my father, a Tamilian of Brahmin caste, remains elusive no matter how many lines I cast.

2) Finding out she was betrothed, my mother bawled in the high branch of a banyan tree, uncertain whether to jump or to hide knowing she was to marry the bald man come to marry her sister but in the shifting weather of Vedic astrological charts, much better suited to hold her hand. She was 19, he 30 & they had yet to meet. That long first afternoon, she preferred to stay holed up until her father called to say the man ate no meat, was kind & came from a good family. God who knows best would want nothing more for her. So down the limb she shimmied, wiping away tears & her ringed nose on the sleeve of her salwar kameez. She was yet to limn the shape of her life to be in America, frying bread not from lentil batter. For that, she was not yet bred.

3) In Hindu myth, Yama, God of death, is no mere idol but incarnation of justice, dharma, who will plumb the deeds of a mortal life. Astride a buffalo, never idle, holding mace and noose, dark as a rotting green plum, he decides each next life in accordance with what's fair. As a teenager, I would sit in temple under an ornate frieze of gods, trying my hardest not to estimate the airfare it took to bring these sculptures to the winter freeze of Virginia from Southern India, my stomach in a knot while old Sanskrit slokas, rich with meanings I missed completely droned on. What's just? Shame? Why me, not you, stuck with smelly barefoot Indians? Then from mist, I saw a shape: myself looking back at me without lesson or reprieve in lucent outlines that have yet to lessen.

From "Immediate Family" published in *The Many Uses of Mint* (Recent Works Press, 2018) and *Durable Transit* (Poetrywala, 2018)

---

### Learning Objectives

- This sonnet explores issues of identity through the deployment of a singular American English idiom that also uses references to specific Indian cultural forms and mythologies. Discuss these linguistic decisions in light of the poem's themes.
- Homophones are words that are pronounced the same but have different meanings or spellings. The poet here uses this form of phonetic alteration to embody the way first generations of immigrants try to assimilate into a new culture, yet end up signifying something different. Them sounding the same as a native speaker compares to homophones.
- This poem by origin is familial and generational, describing the arranged marriage of the speaker's parents, and his own bicultural identity that develops in response to ancient Eastern customs transposed into a modern Western world.

- Students can discuss about one's own family and fitting in.
- The sonnet form has a rich history, and the author's poem is in conversation with those past forms and poems. It breaks new ground by using a rhyme scheme as original as Edmund Spenser's variation in the 16th century and content that is reflective of a multicultural society.
  - Because of the constraint of 14 lines, sonnets often engage in a "volta", or a turn in the middle. Study how the speaker grapples with the sense of his family's strengths and flaws while navigating a world different from theirs.
  - In this unique poem, words rhyme with themselves to use homonymic rhymes. The rhythm is colloquial, conversational and reflective, while the style fits the form and function of a sonnet while using a looser, more syncopated American idiom.
- 

### Editor's Note

Where possible, please teach and discuss this set of three sonnets as a unit. How Ravi Shankar has tied in three cycles of life and made them the interplay in his mastery of homonymic rhymes themselves creating a message will make a fascinating study in any learning environment.

---

### Know the poet



**Ravi Shankar** is an international research fellow at the University of Sydney and author/editor of 15 books of poetry/prose/translation, including W.W. Norton's "Language for a New Century" and the Muse India Award winning translation "The Autobiography of a Goddess." His memoir "Correctional" is forthcoming with University of Wisconsin Press.

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## Kalpna Singh-Chitnis

### Coming Home

Tangled up in a spider web  
I hold back my tears,  
Standing in rubble,  
Still wanting to call it home.

I see eight, bright shiny eyes  
Looking straight at me,  
Hanging upside down,

And from the distance of a thousand miles,  
My little boy shouts-  
“Black widow,  
Mama, watch out!”

But, I was destined to be bitten.  
Not many people will ever know,  
I am poisoned now.

This poem is a part of **Bare Soul** (Partridge, India), a poetry collection by Kalpna Singh-Chitnis. It is available on sale from all major online stores worldwide. Amazon link - <https://www.amazon.com/Bare-Soul-Kalpna-Singh-Chitnis/dp/1482850559/>

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### Learning objectives

- The language of this poem is conversational American English.
- Spellings are American standards.
- This poem is a non-verbal conversation between mother and child taking place in two continents, in two countries.
- This poem is about the loss of someone's home and country. It also reflects the bond a mother and child share, which allows

them to cope up with sadness and fear in each other's absence.

- The poem reveals the vulnerability of the mother resulting in fear of the child, who, on the contrary, possesses motherly instincts and wants to protect his mother. The sentiments are expressed in metaphors like Rubble, Black Widow and Poison.
  - This poem is a free verse.
  - Emotions like fear, vulnerability, and human instincts can be identified in this poem; anyone can relate to them.
- 

### Know the poet



**Kalpna Singh-Chitnis** is the author of four poetry collections and the Editor-in-Chief of Life and Legends. Her work has appeared in notable journals like World Literature Today, California Quarterly, Indian Literature, and others. She has received several awards for her literary work and her poetry has been translated into many languages. Website – [www.kalpnasinghchitnis.com](http://www.kalpnasinghchitnis.com).

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For further permissions, the poet can be reached at - [siletriberbend@gmail.com](mailto:siletriberbend@gmail.com)

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### Editorial comment

The simplicity of this poem is quite deceiving. Home as a concept has so many layers of meaning that one ends up extending its territory. This poem makes a great case for study of one ending up stung by memories that become home and hitchhike with the migrants for life. Those who complain about the Indians shouting in support of the Indian team at the Oval cricket ground may find the answer they are not looking for in this poem! Explore how.

## Pramila Venkateswaran

### Lighter Than

My daughter begs me to explain why she is darker than me, wondering if she has another mother hiding somewhere in the universe, coffee skin, ivory teeth against garnet lips, a shade darker than her mud-brown crayons tucked under her bed.

She wonders about her dark gums today.  
In answer, I stretch my lips to stare at my gums in the mirror for the first time, to observe their color: Pink, I state, which does not explain the question of connection vexing her young identity in a school flooded with white kids, where lilies and roses are the only similies.

Can you dye me, she asks, to a light shade?  
Light shade of what, I wonder.  
Lighter than this dancing spirit?  
Lighter than air? Lighter than water?  
Lighter than her ear-splitting questions about creation?

Published in Thirtha, Yuganta, 2002.

---

### Learning Objectives

In "Lighter Than," the poet explores how mothers deal with their children who grow up in a white-dominated geographical area. The mother is situated in a suburb of New York where everyone is white. In the poem, she ponders how to teach racial difference to the child and at the same time maintain her child's identity as brown. The poem is a vignette of a particular moment, which highlights the question of the child and the mother's physical action (of looking in the mirror) and her internal monologue. The poet uses the both interrogative and affirmative sentences to show the overt and internal conversation.

**Further reading:**

The Nest

For the first time last summer  
my father paints sunflowers,  
a cluster of hibiscus, fingers  
of bananas. My canvas is filled  
with so much snow, the trees  
are invisible, the sky absent.

He wants to let jasmine thrive on ice,  
fit one hemisphere into another  
like Indian steel nesting containers,  
mix ochre with blue, rhyme  
his word with mine,

unlike his father who draped  
the empire around him so tight  
he didn't notice the son hungry,  
waiting, always wanting more  
than the songs his mother fed him  
out of her emptiness.

He decides that his sunflowers  
will be teal. Grapes, coconuts,  
the road leading to his house,  
mango leaves are as water  
and sky, elemental.

(Published in Antiphon magazine, 2014)

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**Learning objectives**

The poet brings together different worlds in this poem: the physical separations of the family are a result of colonialism and migration; the father's childhood affected by colonial rule, the poet daughter migrating to the West, and their effort to bring their worlds together.

The poem operates using contrasting images seen in the father's act of painting. Words such as "invisible," "absent," and "emptiness" set the tone and mood of the poem. Although the act of the father painting is a happy act, the memories are not, and pulling worlds together is an effort. The water image in the end seems to indicate that the lives of the father and the daughter are as intangible as water and sky.

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### **Editorial comment**

In both these poems, the poet has deployed a play of the interaction taking place between different generations. Which common grounds the poet has used to thread the perceptions at odds? What are these perceptions? Discuss these perceptions covered. Discuss how the poet brings both poems to a closure.

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### **Know the poet**



Pramila Venkateswaran, poet laureate of Suffolk County, Long Island (2013-15), and author of *Thirtha* (Yuganta Press, 2002), *Behind Dark Waters* (Plain View Press, 2008), *Draw Me Inmost* (Stockport Flats, 2009), *Trace* (Finishing Line Press, 2011), and *Thirteen Days to Let Go* (Aldrich Press, 2015) is an award winning poet who teaches English and Women's Studies at Nassau Community College, New York. She won the Local Gems Chapbook contest for her volume, *Slow Ripening*. Author of numerous essays on poetics as well as creative non-fiction, she is also the 2011 Walt Whitman Birthplace Association Long Island Poet of the Year. For more information, visit [www.pramilav.com](http://www.pramilav.com).

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The foundation promotes South-Asian diaspora poets and writers by awarding them for their excellence in poetry.

Instead of a monetary prize, it helps them by working as a non-commercial agent, by organising reviews, highlighting their work in publications and magazines, organising readings and events, and placing articles and interviews where possible.

The foundation is a non-commercial thrust and believes very strongly in working with other likeminded stakeholders. It also awards them with a recognition plaque highlighting their efforts in diversity. Hence, our work is far from done. We can be consulted on improving the diversity in your programme. Do contact us if you are as passionate as we are about the equal opportunity for all.

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