



'Before the Battle': Karthika Nair in Conversation with Laetitia Zecchini

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Before the Battle: Laetitia Zecchini Interviews Karthika Nair



(Portrait of Karthika Nair by Koen Broos)

Before god

Before the dead

Before children

Before a world

Dance. [...]

Before god dies, smile trampled, a thousand arms crushed underfoot.

Before the dead return like moonlight, trailing white ash and regrets

Before children swap marbles for slugs and swallow darkness at meals

Before a world of straight lines and ironclad right owns your eyes

Dance, dance on vanishing shores between night and half-light

Return, return to nest like stacked spoons, lock chest with spine

Twine hip and thigh, knit ten fingers, purl the lips — once more

Before the battle¹

¹ Karthika Nair, *Until the Lions*, Constancy VI.

Karthika Naïr was born in Kerala and moved to France in 2000, subsequently working for several prestigious cultural institutions (Cité de la Musique, Centre national de la danse, Musée national de l'histoire de l'immigration, etc.) as a dance producer/curator, dance-writer or “dance enabler”, as she sometimes likes to define herself. Her closest associations have been with choreographers Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, and Damien Jalet. She was also the principal scriptwriter for Akram Khan’s award-winning dance-drama production *DESH* in 2011 (and its adaption for younger audiences, *Chotto Desh*, in 2015). Her organic and creative relationship with dance, with the visual and concrete choreography of words, is at the heart of her poetry, from her first collection *Bearings* (Naïr 1999) to *Until the Lions: Echoes from the Mahabharata* (Naïr 2015a) which won the Tata Literature Live! Book of the Year 2015 (for fiction), and was partially adapted by the choreographer Akram Khan²; to *Over and Underground in Mumbai & Paris*, which is a tale of two cities and four artists (the poets Karthika Naïr and Sampurna Chattarjee, the artists Joëlle Jolivet and Roshni Vyam). With Joëlle Jolivet, she also brought out a children’s book, *The Honey Hunter / Le Tigre de Miel* (Naïr and Jolivet 2013) which has been translated into French, German and Bangla.

Karthika Naïr’s poetry and biography constantly weave together a multitude of contexts, voices, artistic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. She also situates herself and her work inseparably in a world of texts, and in the turmoil of the political

² Akram Khan’s acclaimed eponymous piece, *Until the Lions*, premiered in London in 2016. An opera based on the book, scored by Thierry Pécou and directed by Shobana Jeyasingh, was due to open in March 2020 in Strasbourg at the Opéra National du Rhin. It was postponed to September 2022 as a result of the Covid pandemic. An American edition of *Until the Lions* was published in 2019 by Archipelago Books.

and social world. For instance, as David Shulman (2020) suggests, her poignant retelling of the *Mahabharata* in *Until the Lions: Echoes from the Mahabharata*, is “among other things, a passionate antiwar manifesto”. The epic is recast from the perspective of those who have been promised to erasure and are often the first casualties of war: the faceless, the nameless and unremembered by/of history, many of whom are women. But the “echoes” of the *Mahabharata* are not only the echoes of all the other *Mahabharatas* in whose lineage Karthika Nair places herself; the ocean of stories and (re)tellings to which the epic continues to give birth. Her poems’ unflinching confrontation with the violence of the world, and of India in particular, are about today. In the damaged and enraged voices of *Until the Lions*, we hear echoes of the struggles of Dalits, *adivasis*, women, Muslims, migrants, but also of all the other threatened minorities whose dissenting views or narratives infuriate the sentinels of cultural and religious majoritarianism: activists, journalists, students, artists, writers.

Another collection of intricate echoes is *Over and Underground in Mumbai & Paris* (Nair, Chattarjee, Jolivet and Vyam 2018), which not only weaves together the voices and gazes of four women artists, joining poetry lines, to visual lines and metro lines, but also connects Paris to Mumbai, joining north to south, east to west, and corners of the world to each other. It’s a collection that celebrates the life-throbbing, pulsating vigour of the city, the fragments of stories and memories, songs and “ripples of tongues”, wonder and mourning that attach themselves to the train tracks and metro lines over and underground.

In the following interview conducted over Skype, and revised over email in January 2021, which also continues previous conversations (including one conducted for a special issue of the journal *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* [Nair

2020a] from which some passages are excerpted) we talk about the different worlds and arts straddled by Karthika Nair; about the experience of diaspora and nomadism; about the city of Paris, and her relationship to her two countries, France and India; about how “home” can attach itself to certain specific spaces and places; about the “bastardized, eclectic *imaginaire*” she claims as her own; the partnerships and collaborations that sustain her writing and her sense of belonging; about the importance of dance and fable; how the experience of vulnerability and living with a “dysfunctional body” has impacted her writing; about literary activism and how literary texts can “respond” to violence, to terror and damage, can “give voice” to pain and also chronicle the wonder of living.

The interviewer, Laetitia Zecchini is a tenured research fellow at the CNRS (Paris). Her research focuses on contemporary Indian poetry, postcolonial modernisms and the politics of literature. She is the author of a monograph on the poet Arun Kolatkar, *Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India, Moving Lines* (Bloomsbury, 2014) whom she has also translated into French, and she has co-edited eight volumes, including "The Worlds of Bombay Poetry" (*Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 2017) and "The Locations of (World) Literature: Perspectives from Africa and South Asia" (*Journal of World Literature*, 2019). She is co-investigator of the AHRC-funded project "writers and free expression", and is at work on a monograph around issues of literary activism and struggles for cultural/literary freedoms in postcolonial India.

Laetitia Zecchini (LZ): Perhaps we can start with your first collection, Karthika, *Bearings*, which has a section called “Terra Infirma”—and maybe you could explain the title for us?—which

largely revolves around exile, but here, as often, you debunk the clichés associated with migration or diaspora, and with ideas of “home” and identity. You write for instance that home can be a dubious notion for anyone, not just for diasporic or migrant writers. But you also write that your poetry springs from a “changeable, patched ground”, and that uprootedness has been a way of life since childhood. I was wondering if you could talk to us about that foundational uprootedness, and perhaps explain how it influenced your writing ...

Karthika Naïr (KN): *Terra Infirma* was a deliberate twist on the expression *terra firma*. I wanted to emphasise—at the outset of the section—that the ground beneath the feet (of the narrative self) was not stable, that it was prone to heaving, buckling, to giving way. And, that by extension, the associated themes of belonging, home, identity were just as labile.

Now, I think this sense of nomadism has been integral to my being, primarily because my parents were nomads themselves, they did not have a settled existence. When the Indo-China war happened, my father joined the army, and they spent their first major chunk of their lives, before middle age, as professional nomads. They never stayed more than two or three years in a city, and when they had me, that didn’t change. So, during the first 14 years of my life, we were constantly moving, every 2 or 3 years. And as you know, in India moving between states also means moving between languages, worlds. So that sense of movement has been perpetual. Being diasporic is just one more step. Of course, there is a difference between being in India, and being in Europe or in the US. But when you move to another state—in the microcosm of the world that I consider India to be—you are already experiencing a lot of what would be central to diasporic existence in terms of the change of language,

the change of cuisine, the change of customs, religious practices, societal expectations—and the loss of belonging. For instance, to the teen that I was, the move from Shillong to Trivandrum in the late 1980s was a more severe culture-shock than the one to France in 2000.

LZ: And that mobility, or the forced dialogism in a sense, between worlds, explains the multiplicity of forms in your poetry, right, but also the freedom it gave you, or that you gave yourself, to use, just like Kolatkar's crow (with which I think you identify), to take or recycle from anywhere, and anything.

KN: Yes, completely. I always say that I prefer the analogy of Kolatkar's crow—one of my favourite "fictional" animals (probably second only to his Pi-dog, who remains an enduring inspiration!)—to the analogy of the magpie. The crow builds his nest from everything it can find—anything and everything its gaze falls on, and it can get its claws on. I am not really a nest builder, though. Writing may be the closest that there is to a nest, and, yes, everything goes into that, whether dance or cinema, or a pantoum, or a ghazal, or what I grew up with, like the worst of the Hindi cinema's pot-boilers and Malayalam arthouse cinema, for example! *Everything is fodder*. And I think the forms that I use are not so much a nest as a collage or an assemblage. Ownership is not interesting; what is interesting is chronicling, that may be what I try to do every time I write. The act of writing itself is that of chronicling.

LZ: That might be why you are so fond of Salman Rushdie! Of Rushdie the story-teller, the chronicler ...

KN: Oh yes, because inventing is also a way of chronicling, and that's why I love the fable. Dakkhin-Rai in *The Honey Hunter* is as much a chronicle as an essay I write on Dance and Otherness, or a poem on the Metro Line 3. And that's something I first learnt from him, from *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (Rushdie 1990), long before I knew I would ever write.

LZ: That reminds me of something Edward Said was saying, that in Latin, "inventio" is to find again: "It's not creating from nothing, it's reordering". That means that you are always assembling or starting from the voices, the words or the fables of other people?

KN: Yes, and that again brings me back to Larbi (Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui), like so much of my work does. Because when I first started writing poetry, when I hadn't yet been published (which was just around the time he and I began collaborating), I remember that was one of my existential crises: everything has been already done and said so beautifully, what's the point of my writing? It's something John Steinbeck develops beautifully in *Sweet Thursday* and I blurted that out to Larbi once. He replied that this was true for everything, for every art and discipline. He pointed out that what you can bring in—the only thing, really—is your gaze. That makes the difference, nothing else, at the end of the day. Our individual gaze. That's one of the many things we have in common, the thing we strive towards, Larbi and I, we are both really curious of what has been done, in different points in time, in various parts of the world, in different disciplines, whether pop culture or "high art". There is a constant fermenting that is triggered by other things, other people, by the past and the present.

LZ: Returning to that question of belonging, there is a city you belong to, today, and that is Paris. In one of your poems in *Over and Underground in Mumbai & Paris*, you write of “the Paris I’d grown to wear like second skin”, which can also be taken almost literally, right, Karthika, because Paris has given you a second skin ...³

KN: Yes, and it’s not anodyne that I use the analogy of skin.

LZ: Just a side question here, Karthika, did the knowledge of Paris also being a place of medical expertise and excellence, play an important part in your decision to come to Paris?

KN: It’s actually the reverse process. I did not come to Paris knowing that I would get the most extraordinary medical care and the most stable life that I had ever known, despite all the administrative difficulties and the loops I’ve had to jump through for work permits and for “legitimacy”, so to speak. But I’ve actually never had a life as buttressed as I have in Paris. So I didn’t know that I would find the kind of medical home I did in Saint-Louis.⁴ And once that happened it was very clear that I would do everything to stay. That I could is thanks to the Parc de la Villette and the Cité de la Musique. As I often say, I am

³ Epidermolysis Bullosa, specifically, in Karthika Nair’s case, RDEB, Recessive Dystrophic Epidermolysis Bullosa is an incurable, often fatal condition that affects the skin and mucous membranes. It is caused by a lack of collagen protein in the skin, which makes the skin extremely fragile, and leads to blisters and lesions at the slightest friction or knock. So anything as banal as a sneeze or inhaling household cleaning products can prompt blisters in the mouth, the throat, the oesophagus, as can actions like twisting keys to open a door or tying shoelaces.

⁴ Hôpital Saint-Louis in Paris, a national referral hospital for EB treatment and research.

extraordinarily and *doubly* privileged, because I had extraordinary employers who did everything they could to help me stay on in Paris, but an equally devoted medical team that intervened actively, that defended the medical reasons of my need to stay on.

LZ: In the same collection, *Over and Underground*, you have a poem called “Homistan” where your two “homes” (France and India) collide. So “you” are returning from India and fall asleep in the metro, and you are besieged by the threatening image of fluorescent cows. And at the end of this poem, we are given another image: “you” panicking about being late for a performance Porte de la Villette, and when you arrive, these are the words, transcribed in the poem, of your friends and colleagues: “No sweat, we’ll sneak you in through stage door, stretch the first door or something”. And you add: “Yes, here is where and why I belong”. I love that line...

KN: Thank you. Actually, I had just returned from a performance in the Canary Islands, not India. But yes, at the airport—which is where the poem begins—I was on the phone with my mother, who always frets about my getting home safely! Well, the Villette is really home. I think the Villette is how (and why) I fell in love with Paris. It wasn’t the Louvre, it wasn’t l’Île Saint-Louis. No, I fell in love with the Villette. Even before I first came to Paris, I had heard of the Villette as a cultural mecca through my boss in India, Ashok Adicéam, who is French but of Indian origin, and who was the director of the Alliance Française in Trivandrum at the time, where I had also studied. He pulled me into the whole cultural management stream. He often said that the Villette was the place where he would love to work, and, funnily, it was I who began my career in France there! He also used to call the Villette, Mars. So,

you know, I had that image of an incredible place which would be the ideal destination for anyone in my field. And although I've never planned anything in my life because of EB, I did have that clear goal that this would be the place where I'd want to do my internship.⁵

I mean, just imagine, you have the abattoirs (i.e. "slaughterhouses") of Paris in the 19th century, which become an industrial wasteland across 20 or 30 years in the second half of the 20th century, a completely dilapidated, decrepit place, infamous for mugging and prostitution and drug peddling. And then François Mitterrand decides that he is going to turn it around, and he transforms these 55 hectares into the most amazing, the richest cultural/artistic hub you could imagine. Look at the number of theatres and art organisations! There is a conservatory, now a Philharmonie, which was already a cité de la musique with a museum of music, Trabendo for electro music and jazz; and there was the Zenith for rock, and the Cabaret Sauvage for "world music", a big top for visiting circuses, and then this amazing modular shell called the Grande Halle de la Villette which can be an exhibition space, a two-story theatre, a concert hall for rock—anything, really. I was in fairy land! Or Alice in another Wonderland, but without a Red Queen!

LZ: When I listen to you talking of Paris, I'm (re)discovering my city through your eyes. A bit like in *Over and Underground*, where Paris (and the Metro) are pictured as places for outsiders, for tourists, for foreigners... And both Paris and Mumbai come alive,

⁵ Karthika Naïr came to France to pursue higher studies in art management and cultural policy, at the Université Lyon II and ARSEC. The course, then called a DESS, included a 3-month internship in a cultural organization during the second semester.

and are reinvented through the gaze of outsiders - so Bombay in the eyes of Joelle Jolivet, and Paris in the eyes of Roshni Vyam.

KN: It was really important for me when Larbi and I started working together, to take him there. And when he discovered the Villette, he was equally keen on being there, because this is a place where a child of the suburbs, or of immigrant origin can come and see a performance, while they would not necessarily feel able (or sometimes welcome) to go to in a theatre in the heart of Paris. And they can see the same artist and they can say, I can become that man or that woman. And I always tell Larbi, there is no greater dream to share, to hand on... So, now, we've been taking Larbi's work there regularly since 2010. It's a partnership I am truly proud of.

LZ: Returning to the question of belonging, and your belonging to Paris—or rather to certain spaces in Paris, like La Villette, or the metro, there's also this constant feeling in that specific collection that if you can belong to Paris (or to the Metro), it's because it's precisely a place where people “from all shades and stripes” (those are Sampurna Chattarji's words) come together. In what ways does being an outsider allow you to write? Sorry it's a bit of a trite or very general question, but in what ways does this “outsidedness” allow you to write on Paris, in what ways does it define your relationship to India, and perhaps transform the way you write about India?

KN: I think the reason why I like Paris, is that it's almost antipodal to India. My non-Parisian (mostly French, but also Belgian) friends hate—that might be too violent a term; let's say they are wary of—Paris for the same reason I love it. It's a very rough city. It's not polite like London, it's not courteous like

Brussels or warm like Antwerp is (I'm talking about cities I know best). But the wonderful thing for me is that it's the city where I discovered freedom. It's a freedom I never had in India, as a woman, as a disabled person, as a person belonging to a certain family, because in India you are always identified by your genealogy, for better and for worse. I am not denying that it brings lots of privileges as well, especially for me. But it comes with its shackles. Wherever you are, you do not exist as yourself.

LZ: But you could have gained that freedom anywhere outside India, couldn't you?

KN: No, not really, no. I could be in the UK, or even in the US, and there would be fewer people who know me than in India, but those countries still contain a lot of family, diasporic communities that often have fixed expectations. So that was specific to France. The people who knew me, knew me because I was a professional. They didn't know me because of my parents, or my relatives, or a caste name or ... or...

LZ: Yet sometimes this "foreignness" is hurled back at you ...

KN: Oh, all the time. Or rather, all the time outside my milieu—performing arts, which is the most important part of my life. So this feeling of outsidership was very frequent at the beginning when I was living in France, because I had to get my papers renewed sometimes after 6 months, sometimes after 3 months. In the everyday, outside, administrative world I was reminded that I was a foreigner. But in my professional, my personal life (and both are totally interconnected), I never suffered because I was "the outsider".

LZ: Yes, and in *Over and Underground*, there is this line where in the metro you overhear two passengers talking about the composer Carlos Ott, another immigrant who built Paris, “though one with the rare sense to leave when his job was done”... Does this often happen, this overhearing of blatant anti-migrant remarks, this experience of everyday racism?

KN: Well, the metro is also a great place for that! And, you know, I may be a crow or a magpie, but I am also a shameless eavesdropper!

LZ: In a previous discussion together, you’ve said that the one force that the COVID pandemic has helped is the force of authoritarianism, that it’s the rights of the most fragile sections of society which have suffered during the lockdown. And you talk specifically about refugees, with whom you seem to identify—or at least, since your positions are also very different today—empathize. Is that something that you still live with today?

KN: Oh absolutely. I was a day away from being an illegal immigrant. With all that support, with the privilege I had of knowing the language, and with some amount of capacity to navigate administration! This was 20 years back, and I had the full support of two state theatres, both of which were doing everything they could to keep me in the country. But still. It takes so little to lose that belonging and that legitimacy. For a great number of people that you are faced with when you are an immigrant, and very often for those who are sitting on the opposite end of a desk, whether it is to renew your work permit, whether it is to decide whether you are worthy of citizenship, there is no such thing as an immigrant who is worthy enough. And this whole question of who belongs “where” and who has

the right to be there is something that troubles me constantly. So even when I am very, very privileged, I am equally aware that all it takes is an accident, a natural disaster, a war, things beyond one's control, to go from privileged, established, to completely devoid of rights...

I remember being in Monoprix in Pyramides (as you know, a department store in a very rich neighbourhood in the centre of Paris) one day, where there was a food bank drive for homeless people and refugees, and in front of me in the queue stood a mother and a son. The child asked his mother if they were going to buy anything for the drive. And the mother said very clearly: "non, on ne veut pas de réfugiés, nous" (we don't want refugees). These words really stuck in my head. That sense of invulnerability is something I dread, completely. Perhaps part of me envies it too?

LZ: Going back to etymology again, vulnerability is the capacity to be wounded, right? And this vulnerability, along with the fragility of the body, of the skin's surface, which is linked to your everyday personal, autobiographical experience, is omnipresent in your work. For instance, in the poem that you wrote to commemorate the 70th birth anniversary of India, "Pro Salute Patriae" (Naïr 2017), you talk about India's skin, which you describe as hardened, "impervious to tenderness and touch, / fresh breeze and clement rain, or warm earth". And that brings me more specifically to the way you relate to India.

KN: You know I relate to both of my countries, France and India, in the same way. I am fiercely critical of them, and of the directions they are taking, but also really grateful for the person they've made me, because both have, and also very defensive of

the founding principles of both countries, principles that are laudable and vital, and were, for long, successful against all odds.

LZ: In the same poem you write, “We’re strangers / now: you can’t recall me, and a dog in the manger / I’d be named if you did”...

KN: Well, I don’t recognise the nation India is becoming, one where there is volitional mass radicalisation. I mean, I know, and recognise what is happening on a cerebral level, but emotionally, it is wrenching to believe this is what the country that I grew up in, is transforming into. I had no illusions about the scale and depth of injustice, casteism, misogyny, structural communalism... but I did believe in *some* of the secular instruments the Constitution provided, the press and the courts, to some extent. My earliest memories are of the Emergency, so I also remember the resistance there was to it. The dog in the manger bit is a commentary on the criticism I get from some readers in India: their argument being that since I don’t live there anymore, I do not have the right to protest or comment.

LZ: You’ve just said that ownership was not interesting, and in an earlier interview, that the good thing about scripting for dance is that it teaches you that your words are no more and no less than raw material for others to be used. I’d love to follow up on that idea with you, because of course that goes against the Hindutva attempts at “governing those who undertake the telling of stories”, to cite the poet Jeet Thayil (2015); and goes against all those who want to decide on which story is true, or legitimate; who has the right to tell it, or claim custody over it. I know you’ve spoken about this before, but since *Until the Lions* was also about

challenging majoritarian narratives, would you like to tell us again how it was connected to that specific context?

KN: Let's put it this way. So many people have said it so much better than I ever can, but the *Mahabharata* is part of a tradition that has thrived in its multiplicity. There are *Mahabharatas* all across Asia. Characters change, equations change, morality changes. What's wonderful about the *Mahabharata* for me, is that it's much more revelatory of the time and place in which it is told, it really mirrors the preoccupations, or the defences, or the reclamations of that particular localized humanity. And for me all these *Mahabharatas* are valid. And the attempt that every majoritarian power, every totalitarian regime has, which is to homogenize narrative, has to be resisted at all cost.

Until the Lions was primarily driven by the desire to show that the landscape changes depending on where you stand. Like I've said, when you are at the rim of the battle, it looks very different from where you are at the thick of it, surrounded by bodies. It's a very different vision of "glory" or "heroism" than it is for someone who is sitting on a throne and just listening to a narrative of how much has been gained or lost, or someone who listens to this victorious poem 2000 years later and decides to reclaim it because there is some golden past that they want to connect to. So, the poems are about that as well.

LZ: But when you were writing *Until the Lions*, were all the controversies surrounding those who like the painter M.F. Husain, or the writer and translator A.K. Ramanujan, have retold these epics or celebrated their multiplicity, and have been hounded or censored for those very reasons, at the back of your mind?

KN: All that was there. But when I wrote *Until the Lions*, I needed to be true to each voice, to inhabit all these different voices. And you know the India I grew up into was so much more plural than it is now... But I guess it helps to live in France, with a government whose default position is not “you should be behaving yourself as a writer”. It’s great not to have strictures about what you can, or cannot write. Yet, once again, while I was writing it, it was a process of immersion and the only thing that inhabits each poem is hopefully the voice of the person it should be. Now, is that person in an a-historic and insulated world? *No*. For me that person could be here and now. And Sauvali⁶ is a Dalit woman today as much as a mythological character in a non-existent kingdom. And when I wrote Sauvali was I thinking about all the *Adivasi* women whose rights to their own bodies have been violated? Yes. Actually, Sauvali could also be an upper-caste woman who is told that she has to bear sons.

LZ: You said many times that you also belong to a stream of imagination, and that you consider yourself an heiress, who is “only” continuing that stream of imagination. Would you say that this kind of belonging also defines your relationship to India—as the foundry of so many narratives?

KN: That is indeed what I say in the introduction to the American edition of *Until the Lions: Echoes from the Mahabharata*. I called this book the “mutant, happily illicit child of so many ancestors, with varied provenance”.⁷ And I am too! You know, for instance,

⁶ Sauvali, one of the 19 characters and voices of *Until the Lions*, who is chosen as a concubine and raped by Dhritarashtra, speaks in the poem “Bedtime Story for a Dasi’s Son”.

⁷ “Until the Lions: Of Myths and Men”. The whole passage reads as follows: “Vyaasa himself, whose Mahabharata contains something as

as I said, I grew up learning three languages simultaneously, and my *imaginaire* (that's one of the most beautiful words in French which has no real translation in English, perhaps "creative ethos" would be the closest), was initially formed as much by Russian fairy tales, because those are the things you read as a child when you lived in Delhi in the late 1970s, as by Kunchan Nambiar, an amazing Malayalam poet and humourist who created this satiric art form called Ottamthullal where you could criticize the king or priests or other authority figures, or by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, and Hindi cinema, and so many others. So, mine really is a bastardized *imaginaire*!

LZ: So, you claim this bastardized, eclectic collective *imaginaire* and you place your own voice in that stream of voices, past and present. That also leads me to the collaborative or dialogic dimension which is so omnipresent in your work. Writing is almost never a solitary business, even in *Bearings* or *Until the Lions*, so when you are the only one authoring the book, you include a multitude of footnotes, acknowledgements, even bibliographical references. You always summon all these other people, voices, and texts. And the *renga* (a Japanese form of collective poetry) in *Over and Underground* but also in your present work with the poet Marilyn Hacker, is a form you privilege. The poem becomes a kind of letter addressed to a

radical as an entire book - the *Stree Parva* - chronicling the laments and tirades of the grieving mothers and widows of both warring clans in the wake of the final carnage. Ovid, with his millennia-old *Heroides* ... Amir Khusrau, who could sing to his spiritual master in Persian and Braj, alternating languages within the same couplet. Andal of the fierily sensual poetry for her beloved deity, Perumal. Bhâsa, who - almost two thousand years ago - adapted plays from the epics, ones where the motives of the gods are openly challenged, ones imagining alternative scenarios [...]. The 9th-century Tamil poet Perunthevanar ..."

fellow poet, where you write for someone, just like you do for dance. I wonder if you could reflect on this dialogic dimension. What do you find in these collaborative ventures? Is it also the pleasure of being able to speak to someone in particular, the pleasure of being read by one privileged interlocutor?

KN: I hadn't thought of that, but that's a really interesting question, because a lot of my poems are written to a "you", even if that "you" keeps changing. So I'd say that the dialogical is intrinsic to pretty much everything I write. Yes, even when it's not a collaboration, there's definitely always a "you" involved, either a you that is evoked through the poem itself, or there is one privileged reader that I am usually thinking of. In a sense, there is always a conversation involved. And as far as the collaborations are concerned, that may be because even though I am not a dancer or choreographer myself, the artistic discipline in which I have grown, and in which I have spent my adult life, is dance, and that is inherently collaborative.⁸

LZ: Yes, and you start *Over and Underground* with a "Duet", right, between Bernard Maris and Dominique Seux, that was "tragically interrupted" by the Charlie Hebdo attacks.⁹ And so that leads me to the question of literary texts as responses to specific events.

⁸ "The good thing about coming to scripting / writing for dance after years of working in the field ... is that you are very clear that your poems and stories, your words, are no more and no less than raw material for each of the collaborators to transform into his or her medium. You are aware of the danger of retaining words just for your own" (source?)

⁹ Bernard Maris was a well-known French journalist, writer and economist who was murdered on January 7, 2015 when the Kouachi brothers stormed into the Charlie Hebdo headquarters, and killed 12 people, including many senior members of the editorial staff. He had a weekly radio program on France Inter with Dominique Seux.

You've written many poems that seem to articulate a kind of response, like your ghazal around Shaheen Bagh, or your texts on the Charlie Hebdo and November 2015 attacks in Paris in *Over and Underground*, or the recent poem triggered by a self-portrait of the photographer Khadija Saye (Nair 2020b), who was killed in the Grenfell Tower fire ... That made me think of a short newspaper column written by Adil Jussawalla ([1993] 2014) called "Poems after Ayodhya", where he takes issue with the fact that you should expect poets to voice their immediate protest or shock to the riots. And he has this fabulous sentence where he writes that "the state of the country is not a workshop that makes poems happen"...

KN: Bless him! But whether we like it or not, poetry is political. Take the Romantic movement, for instance, which all seems very innocuous, but for me was intensely political as well, because you were taking the divine out of the established places and the realm of religion, and placing it in nature for instance, or within the discovery of a wider world. But I agree completely with Adil and do get uncomfortable with poems that are for example titled "Kargil" or "Palestine". And very conflicted about what one could call a form of disaster porn. But it's sensitive, isn't it? And I always think of something Larbi (Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui) told me: *should me no shoulds*, in other words, let there be no rules on what can or cannot be tackled by art. So, I also think that everyone responds as he or she can, and the poem will speak for itself. Nothing should come between that compulsion to speak and the page, if you see what I mean. My own take is that I try to situate it in the intersection between the personal and the political and that's the way it's been for Charlie Hebdo for instance... Even today, I mourn Bernard Maris like somebody I

knew. And so I write also from a very personal space, of what I lost in that bloody massacre.

But it took me months, even I'd say an entire year, before I could articulate how I felt to begin with, about Bernard Maris. And it took me about two years before I could talk about what happened on rue de Charonne, and again it's about the guilt of not being there, because I was supposed to be on that street with Damien,¹⁰ and the poem is about him. So, it is about a person in my life who is fortunately still with us, but could so easily not have been. And it's actually a chronicle of the precise events that led us to not be together at that particular moment in place

LZ: You've said that Manichaeism is the poison of epics, because they give form to many shades of human nature, and dissolve the predictable binaries of "black" and "white", heroes and villains¹¹. And I was thinking that the vocation of the writer is also to nurture complexity, to produce works of art that are open to an inexhaustible plurality of interpretations, or gazes as you say, and perhaps also to struggle, I am here paraphrasing the writer Amit Chaudhuri, against visible, definite or content-driven markers... So how do you reconcile the writer and the activist within you, and is that a question that you find relevant, if at all?

KN: I never feel the need to reconcile the two because I don't make a distinction, for myself. But once again, those are personal choices. When Arundhati Roy talks about the hyphenated writer, i.e. writer-activist, and says that it is a tautology for her, I

¹⁰ Choreographer and dancer Damien Jalet, whose earlier work Karthika Nair produced.

¹¹ See, amongst other interviews, the very interesting two-part conversation between Jai Arjun Singh and Karthika Nair (Nair and Singh 2015).

totally get that, and, in a sense, abide by that. Because, you see, for all intents and purposes, *The Honey Hunter*,¹² which is in principle a children's book, is no less political than *Until the Lions*. *The Honey Hunter* comes from a very localized cosmogony, which for me is as important as "majoritarian" Islam or Hinduism; it is a syncretic story, it's about a land (the mangrove forests of the Sundarban) where a Goddess can be Hindu and Muslim at the same time; it's about a land which is extremely fragile, which is between fresh water and sea water, which is both land and water, and which is the first line of defence against external dangers (cyclones, floods) but is also increasingly vulnerable (from oil spills, from new coal plants polluting the river...) and, we humans are utter jackasses if we don't recognize that. And if I can say that to a child without at any time "pamphleteering", my job is done.

The story also raises the question that if we need to redeem ourselves as a race, we need to, at least in some ways, undo the damage that we've done to the planet, which is what the child in the story has to do. Of course, solutions have to be found which are not as simple in our lives as in a fable, but the little boy in the story has to undergo a transformation and a great deal of suffering to try and compensate in some ways for the destruction that he's brought. So, you know, how is *The Honey Hunter* not political?

LZ: I also wanted to evoke the place of pain and damage in your poetry. In our last conversation together, you said that more than anything else, you believed in what Jeannette Winterson said, "which is that poetry can give pain a mouth". And in a

¹² For a short, animated preview of *The Honey Hunter* in French, see: <https://vimeo.com/76849166>

section in *Bearings* called “Damaged Goods”, you write that it’s a relief to see this section as only one among several, because, initially, “poetry threatened to be solely an inventory of damage”. One of the poems in that section is called “Pillowtalk”—where the dialogue is not with love or a lover, but with death...

KN: It’s funny you should mention that one poem, because “Pillowtalk” was actually the first poem I ever wrote, as an adult. And it was triggered by that very specific moment and image, when I was really sick one night and a childhood friend came to visit. We met up after 15 years because he was spending a year in Paris. He had known me since the time I was critically ill, in my teens, when I could not swallow and I had what I used to call my “second mouth”, a gastrostomy, etc. And he was sitting by my window sill, rolling and smoking a cigarette. And I thought that we keep on picturing death as this ugly, horrible thing (often a crone), but perhaps death could be this really charming young man who knows you so intimately that he is not going to make it tough for you.

LZ: You’ve also said: “I may not even be writing if it weren’t for dance, and a dysfunctional body” (Naïr 2015b). And if we just focus on that single sentence, it’s interesting it itself, because we usually associate dance with a functional, rather than a dysfunctional body...

KN: Actually, it’s not counter-intuitive. I’d say these words are, in fact, connected. Dance is the thing that allows me to transcend my body. I am not the one dancing but those are the moments when I can sense what the body is capable of. And it is indescribably invigorating to know that the body is something other than the source of incapacity, pain, or dysfunction—the

feelings I associate most with my own body. And dancers are also aware of how blessed and transient that sensation is. Dancers have very short lives as dancers. They actually know what it is to have a fragile body. So, oddly enough, I am surrounded by people whose bodies are their art, whose bodies have to perform near-superhuman feats and they are the often the ones most sensitive to my dysfunctionality.

Now, I can't dance, but what I do is facilitate dance, whether as a producer in the early years, or as a writer now. To help make that happen is probably the most empowering thing I can do. And when I write, it is also making that permanent because like I've said once, dance is "calligraphy on water". It is the most impermanent of all the arts. It only exists in the moment. And when I write, it is also an attempt at chronicling that moment, or what that moment meant to me.

LZ: Would you say that perhaps writing is also chronicling a victory over pain...

KN: I think it's a constant negotiation, not a victory.

LZ: But pain is not completely disabling then. For instance, another poem that you say was triggered by pain, by rage and by helplessness, is the dazzling poem "Mohini" (in *Until the Lions*)...

KN: Well, it's the only good thing that can come out of it, in my case!

LZ: That is also what I find extraordinary in your poetry, Karthika, and I have told you that before, but that even when your texts are chronicles of violence, pain, or loss, there is always as well an exultation in movement, in rhythm, in language. That

is perhaps why I was talking about victory (over death, over silence, over immobility), and why I always feel the irrepressible desire to recite your poems out loud, to hear your words sing... There's also a dimension of survival. And you have a whole poem in *Over and Underground* around the Charlie Hebdo and November 2015 attacks, where your words are woven around the city's motto, "Fluctuat nec mergitur" (Tossed by the waves but never sunk) which was defiantly splashed and proclaimed in the streets of Paris in the aftermaths of terror ...

KN: You know, I think there are two things, there is chronicling, and there is celebrating. Now there is a lot of stuff to celebrate. Even in the renga sequence with Marilyn in the midst of the bloody lockdown, there were friends who were coming to see me, and bring me things to eat, for instance, dishes they had cooked with ingredients they had procured with some difficulty (there was a shortage of many items we'd ordinarily take for granted). The chronicling can be of survival, but the chronicling can also be of wonder, and I think that is one of the things that dance but also all of the last year reminded me of, constantly. And *Over and Underground* is a lot about that, as well: everyday wonder.

LZ: Yes, of course I wasn't downplaying that dimension of your work when I was talking about survival. There is also so much palpable delight in words, in movement, in stories, in Paris, in the Metro ... And there is so much humour as well actually, in *Over and Underground*.

KN: This is a collection which I am really fond of, because what I've done is document everyday memories, and it's not something I feel we pay enough attention to. And in Paris we

encounter more of this everyday wonder in the Metro than anywhere else.

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