

## Antyesti

*Hindu funeral rites for the dead, when a body is cremated and the ashes are dispersed in the Ganga, where it is customary to bathe an infant as a rite of passage*

I do not pretend to be housing pearls  
under skin of dirt,  
no seeds to meet water  
under layers of farmland

on this side of the Atlantic  
protest is 7 o'clock news:  
white noise to douse  
conversation

Nani's English never takes flight  
before our hands press together again  
her *hellos* are translated as *goodbyes*  
as if a Wi-Fi's hesitation

could hang the call. as if she is a match  
that will light her daughter's  
passage back,  
*ghar aa jao* (come home)

there, all the women put themselves on mute  
to hear my poems. see  
eyes spill. fill Ganga's streams  
like ash in macrocosm

even if they cannot disperse  
a word—  
or my mother tongue  
is stifled by their sacrifices

my eloquence is tribute. this lineage,  
burdened with drowning  
women. from the 1,500-mile stretch  
between Northern India

and the Bay of Bengal. our holiest river  
is swollen with bodies  
girls they could not marry  
could not carry their elements

back to origins. I will tell you a story  
in which they are at rest,  
now carried by remnant  
ashes and river-rocked to sleep

I have tasted their soot  
and struggle. we were birthed  
from universal womb,  
have bathed together

with each rite of *samsara*,  
(my mother once brought  
me to bathe in the riverbeds,  
long before I could walk)

to the collective, unbecoming act  
of cleansing from his fingerprints  
how pure we are,  
and no one is looking

believe me. there is nothing beautiful to make  
of the burning,  
of wearing white  
to the pyre,

of an aisle unrolled by flame, of a vow  
afloat a bitten tongue, of a body  
reclaimed entirely in backstroke  
I will swim home

in any language I can cauterize  
*aap ki kahaani / kae kaanon tak / jaye gi*  
(your story will reach many ears)  
until we meet again