

Two Poems by Archana Sahni

To all the Lizards I have known

*In Honour of Goddess Durga on Vijayadashi,
September 30, 2009*

Context and Notes: Footnotes explaining culturally-specific ideas and words, in my view, take away from the enjoyment of a poem as they require a break in reading. Hence I'd like to describe culture-specific context and ideas at the start of this poem. I started writing this poem on International Peace Day on 21st September, when a group interested in sharing thoughts and poems on peace met in the context of an event arranged by the Transformative Learning Centre at OISE (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education), University of Toronto. At the end of the session we were asked to pick a folded piece of paper and write a poem on the topic scribbled inside that paper. I got: lizard. I knew instantly that it was no mere co-incidence. I have a mortal dread of lizards! The events mentioned in the poem are true. I wrote the poem over the several next days while the nine-day Hindu festival of *Navratri* meaning 'Nine Nights' in honour of the warrior Goddess Durga was going on (but in some parts of India other forms of the Goddess are worshipped, and simply called *Devi* or *Ma*). The tenth day is called *Vijayadashmi* which means 'the tenth day of victory' which is when the Goddess vanquishes 'the demon of egoism and ignorance' often depicted as half-man, half-bull.

Vahana means 'vehicle' or 'carrier'. Most Hindu deities are associated with an animal or bird on which they ride or which is pictured beside them. The *vahana* bears a complex and subtle relationship to the deity. Some of the qualities of the *vahana* are reflected in the deity, while some of them symbolize emotions or qualities that the worshipper needs to control or overcome. The *vahana* of Goddess Durga is a lion or tiger symbolizing valour and majesty.

Egg-shells and peacock feathers are traditional ways used in India to ward off lizards. I tried them all, but they didn't work.

I.

One of your kind fell on my face
early morning and stuck to it,
then jumped onto a wall. 'Be grateful
your mouth was not open,' a friend joked.
It was the mating season. You
must have lost your grip, and fallen
from the ceiling fan where I've often
seen you and your partner fooling around.
You enter from beneath doors and
through chinks in windows
and colonize my house in the guise
of performing a clean up job.
You creep up next to my face
on the side table when I'm sleeping.
After midnight you pounce
on live cockroaches on the kitchen floor,
go 'crunch crunch', then spit out the wings.
You make my stomach churn.
Some day you will kill me with fright.

II.

You fell on me yet again. Since then
I've shown you no mercy. I save
storm-beaten birds but I kill you. I save
kittens but I kill you. I cannot sleep in
the same room with you.
I called in Shikha's husband
to kill you. When he failed, I chased you
with a broom but only managed
to break off your tail—your tail
that wriggled mockingly at me.
Kill or be killed—this is what
you've brought me to!
What on earth are you?
You are the reptilian brain
inside my brain. You are a reincarnated
spurned lover determined to terrorize me.
You are the nemesis of my Indian summers.
I keep killing you, you keep coming back.
I don't want to, you make me do it.
I want to save the world, but kill you.
Mice, roaches, spiders I can stand,
but not you.
Some day you will kill me with fright.

III.

Nothing can kill you—
No pesticide, no egg-shells, no peacock
feathers. If your dead tail can wriggle,
how much life in that little body
you must have.
You survive the winters hidden
in a crevice of the wall.
What on earth are you?
This *Navratri*, a thought comes to me:
I make you Devi's *vahana*.
I divinize you.
I admit I see in you
primal terror and endless awe,
the majesty of the dinosaur.
I've killed so many of you
I know I will certainly
be reborn as one of your kind.
Soon I will join you in the hunt for flies,
the flight from the broom held in a human hand,
the search for a small space in a home.
In the paradise of your winter
away from the fumes of pesticides,
when we meet face to face,
I will finally know
that on the other side
of your mindless mind,
lies the purer poetry
of pre-historic fronds untouched
by the human hand;
that on the other side
of the terror you evoke, lies
peace.

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Kalighat Revisited

22nd Feb. 2003

I.

Nothing has changed, not that it can
or should. Foot soles blacken and small
stones get inlaid where ruptures are,
as I walk the distance to your open door.

The same urgency ringing in the bells.
The same red and black of you
blurring into blue misty mountains
looming behind you O *Vindhyavasini*¹
when scaling slopes of melting ice
I feel my body lifted by grace.

Billowing clouds are tongues of flame
Coals are ice
whenever my eyes meet
your eyes –

II.

Carrying hibiscus from my garden
Pushing aside pandas² who cannot
swerve my faith
Torn where only you can see
I come to you
from a place close to Kurukshetra
Bless me Mother before I the cross the seas –
Even though you know
I shall forever journey to your door
carrying back to you scattered parts of me
till I am whole
With a blinking of your lids
let me know
that you will come to me again
like you did before
as I sit still
gazing at the red blood thread
tied to my wrist
in a land heavy with snow

1. Goddess who dwells in the Vindhya mountains
2. Priests