

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Jonaki Ray: Three Poems

Jonaki Ray · Tuesday, December 12th, 2023

Refuge

Blue shirt, navy salwar, white ribbons in hair braided and looped around ears.
From a distance, you are like any other government-school going girl.
But the menu you bring to the table is shaking, your hands
shivering like the ripples in a pond, once a stone is thrown into it, and the
orange plastic water jug topples. Your father rushes to the plywood table,
sopping the water, “Forgive her. She didn’t mean to.”

Your eyes—the exact shade of unripe almonds, look up at me. In their darkness at their center, I
see: Papers strewn, home abandoned, the impossible choosing of a life crushed into a suitcase, the
crouching at the—Afghanistan-Pakistan-India—interchangeable borders, the lines for the trucks
then trains, and then this room-split-into-two refuge that will never be a sanctuary.

Finally, you drop your eyes and take down my order: Two plates of Afghani *pulao*. You ask: Do
you want to eat here, or get it packed for home?

*

Divide and Rule

Grandfather

Walked across land flamed
Sipped only English Breakfast tea.
Disinherited his daughters.

by the war between men who had been brothers.
Loved discipline and ‘fair play’.
De-sheltered his neighbours during riots.

Said, *Don’t you think*

we were better off under the British.

*Said, Don’t ask me about the village, the pond,
the land across the river, the line
that is now a border.*

Said, Don’t ask me about home.

Don’t ask.

Don’t.

*

What Is Remembered

for the women of Chittorgarh, Rajasthan

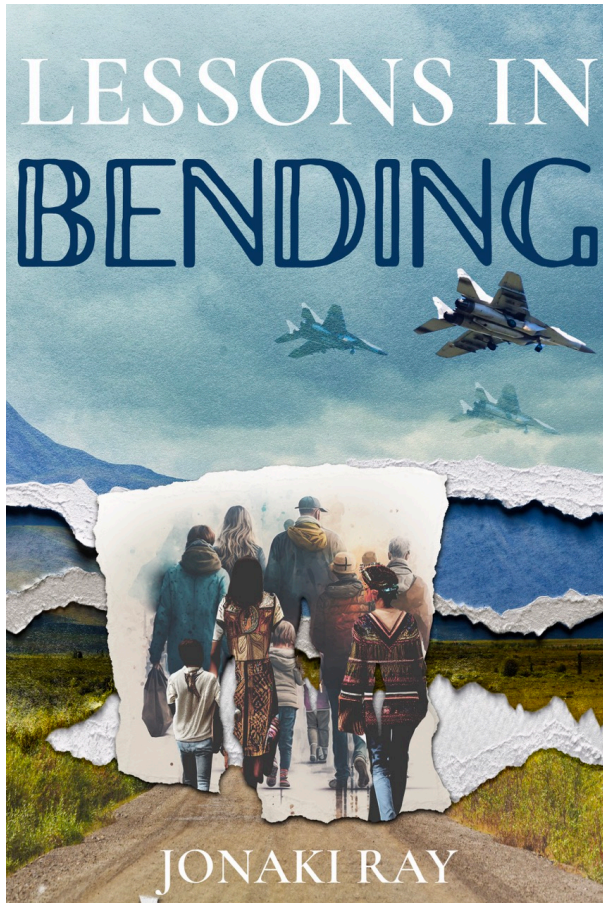
Today, no one asks about all the palace women who crisped to death
by leaping into the fiery pit on the east side of the palace parapet.
The castle gate had opened for the first and last time
And all the remnant men prepared to ride to defeat

By leaping into the fiery pit on the east side of the palace parapet
even the little girls sequinning in their skirts played with death.
And all the remnant men prepared to ride to defeat
while the air cemented with horse and human burnt flesh.

Even the little girls sequinning in their skirts played with death
following their mothers into the women-fuelled stove
while the air cemented with horse and human burnt flesh
as the sky caught fire, lighting the walls for the invaders.

Following their mothers into the women-fuelled stove
the singing river of women led by their queen flamed
as the sky caught fire, lighting the walls for the invaders
and the king preferred to heap the dead rather than surrender.

The singing river of women led by their queen flamed
because she believed that their smelting created honour,
and the king preferred to heap the dead rather than surrender.
Yet, today, no one asks about all the palace women who crisped to death.



Lessons in Bending by Jonaki Ray

Download *Lessons in Bending* by Jonaki Ray

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