The Barefoot Queen of the Crossroads

1
She is dark as bitter chocolate,
the witch of Rampart Row,
the barefoot queen of the crossroads.

She has dominion
over two traffic islands
and three pavements.

She has the larger traffic island
all to herself at the moment,
if you don’t count the dogs.

Her title to the island is contested
only by a trespassing sunbeam
– just a wedge

that has grown
very fast into a corridor of light
that cuts the island in two.

But she’s not standing in its path
to challenge it,
or contest its right of way.

She has washed her hair this morning
and she’s standing with her back to the sun
to dry it

and the huge damp patch
on her clean white
but slightly rumpled petticoat,

which is what she’s wearing at the moment,
apart from a yellow choli above
and silver anklets below

playing hide and seek
in the scalloped shadow of her petticoat.
She has yet to wear her sari.
That damp patch is about the size of China;
but its borders that stretch
from her buttocks in the north
to the bend of her knees
in the south
are rapidly shrinking in the sun.

2
She whirls around, with a start almost,
as if the sun
had slapped her on her bottom – hard.

Her eyes close;
the sun explodes
and goes nova behind her lids.

The sun covers her face with kisses.
It flutters
like a hummingbird before her navel

and drinks up
a sparkling drop of water
like nectar from a buttercup.

She throws her head forward
to bring her hair from back to front;
all of her hair, in one black mass

leaps upwards into the air,
to come surging forward and fall
in front of her face like a black torrent.

Legs spread apart,
bare feet planted firmly on the ground,
she bends forward at the waist.

She stands there swaying from side to side,
shaking her head, rhythmically,
like a cow elephant in a trance.
She threshes her hair with downward strokes,
with the midsection
of a chunky towel, twisted over twice

and held taut between two hands
at both ends,
in what could be called a Nanchaku grip.

She scatters spitfire droplets of water
all around her;
they dart about like rainbow-tailed moths.

Then she straightens up
and, with a single toss of her head,
she sends her hair flying back again

— in one body,
like a well-trained circus animal
at the crack of a whip.

And then, wrapped around
and rolled up nicely in her towel,
untwisted now,

she piles up her hair
on top of her head in tight coils,
like a great white conch.

3
One end of her sari
(red like the city in May,
with all its gulmohurs in bloom),

say the downtown end,
wrapped around the petticoat, damp no more,
and secured at the hips;

and the uptown end arranged
over the left shoulder
and left dangling behind,
she holds the sari away from her
at arm's length
at a halfway point along the border,
from where it's a short walk
to the belly
for her three fingers and thumb,
as they collect the sari
along the way
in neat accordion folds

(flip flap, flip flap,
Dadar, Parel, Lalbaug, Byculla, Bori Bunder,
flip flap, Flora Fountain

and flip, we come to Kala Ghoda,
which is where
we've been, all along,

and tuck it in at the waist
about three inches below the navel
— which winks

as she sucks her stomach in
and out,
to airlock the sari in place.

4
She might as well be
at some place like the Queen's Step-well
in Patan,
or a courtyard in Alhambra,
surrounded by eunuchs
in 13th-century Granada,

for all she seems to care;
screened as she seems to be by
utter contempt
for the voyeur world revolving
around her
– the dirty old men with clean noses,

the bug-eyed painters,
poets with their tongues hanging out,
and other jerks and assorted arseholes.

And if that Peeping Tom,
with the rabbinical beard
and a Persian potentate’s turban,

sticking his head out of a hole
above the library archway
wants to ogle,

she neither knows
nor cares.
It’s no skin off her nose

or shin.