

TEMSULA AO

Mothers...

She sits crumpled on the bare earth
of the ramshackle hut
her youngest is tugging and nibbling
at her shrunken breast
whimpering and crying
because it has nothing to offer.
She wants to slap the child
when the tugging hurts
but there is no energy
even to lift her listless hand.

The other two have language
so they are crying "gruel", "gruel"
as they have learnt to adjust
their vocabulary from rice to gruel
ever since the hapless father
managed to die in a cave-in.

The owners refused to pay
even the funeral costs, saying
it was not their fault
that he was not wearing
his cane helmet

when he descended.

Since then the mother fished
for small fish in the streams,
gathered the wild herbs
growing in abundance
and some days would come home
with juicy crabs caught hiding
beneath loose stones.

Some of the treasures of her daily foraging
would fetch a little rice in barter,
on such days rice gruel swimming
with herbs and fish
would be their feast.

But soon the streams turned brackish
where the black dust seeped in
the herbs turned yellow and died
and the fish and crabs rotted
in their hiding places.

Her last recourse was
a patch of wild plantains
with their rounded, purplish buds;
they were heavier to carry home
but they too were a relish
and could be bartered
for a handful of rice.

But on her last foray to this patch
she found the patch dug up

and the plantains scattered
in haphazard pieces
their milky hearts turning black
in the burning sun.

Stripped of all hope
she gathers her hungry brood
and staggers out to nowhere in particular,

Some distant hills seem to beckon
and after a day's mad meandering
the deadened group stops on a ledge.

Squatting there she tries to scream,
"Mother, why have you forsaken us?"
but what she achieves
is only a hoarse whisper from a parched throat.

She waits for some response
but only an eerie silence
greeted the anguished cry.

Then an apparition like swirling mist
approaches from the horizon
and sweeps the ephemeral silhouettes
off their perch from mortal vision.

From the vacant space now emanates
an outrageous scream
of another tormented mother;

"O you children of an un-heeding generation,
how long will you ignore my pleadings?
How long will you flay me
spread-eagled on your lust for lucre?

You have denuded the foliage of youth
from my head,
stolen the gems from my eyes,
robbed me of the timber
from my limbs,
drilled into my heart relentlessly
for the Midas fount.

You have burrowed deep
into my bowels
for the black gold
and are now hacking
between my thighs
for the grey metallic treasure,
leaving me naked and desolate.
no longer able to sustain
the hungry and the needy
who call me mother.

I weep and mourn for the mothers
who've lost out to your depredation
but they are better off dead
than alive on a doomed earth.

But no matter how much
you rob, hack and deplete me,

I am indestructible,
for I am immortal.

And even if my present form
disintegrates into a million pieces,
out of the void will emerge
a brand-new planet,
and become another
nurturing mother-earth.

So if I mourn now, it is only for you,
O you children of an un-redeemable race,

Woe is unto you for whom
there will be no other life,

for you have squandered
your mortal time
demolishing the only one gifted to you."