

EUGENE DATTA

## **ANJAR, 2001**

The pyres go on burning like constellations from across light-years.  
The years, more than twenty of them now, haven't doused those flames.

In the makeshift tent, under layers of borrowed relief blankets,  
sleep played a reckless hide-and-seek with demented gusts of wind.

What did the young man say when we asked him about the body  
they were carting away? The midday sun scorched what was left of the place.

How can you cremate this person without knowing if they were Hindu?  
we asked. The shape of a human foot in the flattened flesh.

We don't know, he said. No one is alive to tell who was who. We cremate  
the bodies we retrieve, the Muslims bury the ones they find.

An odd balm to the fractured air gasping to the noise of hammers and drills,  
and excavators removing debris. We stood on a roof a metre or so high.

A cry had oozed faintly from beneath slabs of concrete until almost  
an hour ago. Only mangled toys in its place now; festoons of dusty, warped things.

Attar-scented fingers of a stoic stranger, pir-like, touched the handkerchiefs  
covering our faces. His family lay buried somewhere, or was cremated.

In a hotel room with cracked walls our last night stayed in the custody  
of a contraband bottle. We left with a life's worth of nightmares.