Kavya Bharati

a review of Indian poetry

Number 1, 1988

CONTENTS

Kavya Bharati is the literary publication of the Study Centre for Indian Literature in English and Translation, P.G. Department of English, American College, Madurai 625002, Tamil Nadu, India.

Kavya Bharati is a review of Indian poetry.

Kavya Bharati welcomes contributions of poetry, essays on poetry, translations of poetry and review articles. Please enclose a self addressed stamped envelope with all submissions, which must be original typescripts, or else they will be returned. Utmost care will be taken of manuscripts but no liability is accepted for loss or damage.

Manuscripts from abroad must include a self-addressed envelope and an adequate number of international reply coupons.

Opinions expressed in *Kavya Bharati* are of individual contributors and not those of the editor.

All manuscripts, queries and orders for the journal should be sent to: The Study Centre for Indian Literature in English and Translation, P. G. Department of English, American College, Madurai 625002, Tamil Nadu, India.

Subscription: In India, Rs 25/ Foreign, $ 5 U. S.
Single Copy Price: Rs 20

---

edited by Jayanta Mahapatra

MEENA ALEXANDER

THE STORM

a poem in five parts

'Every spirit builds itself a house,
and beyond the house a world, and
beyond the world, a heaven'.

Emerson.

1. AFTER THE FIRST HOUSE THERE IS NO OTHER

1

Father's father tore it down
heaped rosewood in pits
as if it were a burial

bore bits of teak
and polished bronze
icons and ancient granary:

the rice grains clung
to each other
soldered in sorrow,

syllables
on grandmother's tongue
as she knelt.

She caught the stalks
in open palms,
bleached ends
knotted in silk

cut from the walls
the stained
and whittled parts of fans
that cooled her cheeks

in the aftermath of childbirth

in the hot seasons of the soul
    when even the silver boxes
she kept her brocades in
seemed to catch fire
and burn.

2

Through thorn and freckled vine
I clambered uphill
following the fragments
of the first house.

When I stopped
at a stone upturned
or split mango bark
swarming with ants

I glimpsed the bluish sky
flashing in places

as if the masts
of a great ship wrecked
had pierced it through
the sun glittering in bare spots,
the voices of family
all near and dear
crying from the holds.

The ancestral hillside
the long gardens of our dead
across the swollen paddy fields
moved as if with a life
utterly beyond recall

a power of motion,
a fluent, fluid thing
that slipped and struck
against my childish fears
and turned me then all muddy
and green and fearful

into a child who shivered in broad heat,
sensing her flesh as sheer fall:

the cliffs of chalk
hanging by the river,
the pungent depths of waterholes
where buffaloes crawled
light invisible in the well
at the very base,
blade and fractured eggshell
revolving in tense silence.

3

In noonday heat
as pigeons massed the eaves
and the rooster bit
into a speckled hen beneath
I slid the iron bolt,
I crept from the house on the hill
its pillars painted white
walls wired with electricity.

I slid down the slope
all chalky and bruised:
gooseberries ripped themselves loose,
vine scrawled on my thighs
freckled black and bloodied.

In ravines cut by rainfall
in patches where cloves
were dug out in clumps
and the ground let stand,
I saw wild ants mating in heaps.

Acres of sweet grass
thrashed by the heat
scored back, refused to grow
in the burnt and blackened place
where the first house stood.

4

Night after night
on pillows hemmed in silk
stitched with rows of wild flowers
I dreamt of bits and pieces
of the ruined house: rosewood
slit and furrowed turning in soil
teak, stuck from the alcoves
where the icons hung
bent into waves
blackened vessels
filled with water
from the disused well,
a child's toy
two wheels of tin
on a stick, swirling
as if at midnight the hidden sun
had cast itself down amidst us,
the golden aura whirling
and voices of beings who might
as well be angels
crying
Ai
Ai, Ai,
Ai, Ai, Ai ,
Not I. Not I
Meaningless thunder
lightening from what one presumed
to be the abode of the gods
shaking us to our knees.

5

Through sugarcane stalks
thick and bawdy red
the graves are visible

grandparents end to end
great uncles and great aunts,
cousins dead of brain fever

bald sisters sunk into rage
their brothers-in-law
without issue

ancestors all
savage, sinless now
their stones stung white with heat.

I peer from the rubble
where a first house stood
the centuries swarm through me.

A king crawls out
on hands and knees
he stamps his heels

he smashes the golden bull

'Come catch me now'
he sings

'I am born again
I am whole !'
He leaps

through mud
and sugarcane stalks
squats low and bares himself.

Through monsoon clouds
rays dip
and crown his blunt head.

6

Neither king nor clown
I am hurt by these tales
of resurrection.
I can count the grey hairs
on my head, heavy lines
on my palm

natural occurrences
I cannot command
cannot dispel,
casting art to the edge
of an old wooden theatre
where I wait in the wings
with the two-bit actresses,
the old man who fumbles
for his wig,
the eunuch adjusting
the hem of his sari,
rouge burns on his cheek
as he watches the young child
rock feverishly
on a wooden horse.

II. THE TRAVELLERS

7

A child thrusts back
a plastic chair
rubs her nose against glass,
stares hard as jets strike air
the tiny men in their flying caps
with bright gold braid
on their shirts
invisible behind the silver nose.

Is there no almanac
for those who travel ceaselessly,
no map where the stars
inch on in their iron dance ?

The gulls that swarm
on the sodden rocks
of the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aquaba
cry out to us in indecipherable tongues,
the rough music of their wings
torments us still.

Tears stream down the cheeks
of the child voyager,
from the hot, tight eyes.
The mother combing out her hair
behind a bathroom door
tugging free a coiled hem
cannot see her eldest daughter.

A mile or two away
guns cough and stutter
in an ancient square,
through acres of barbed wire
shutting off shops
and broken parlours
they bear the bodies of the dead

Pile them in lorries
and let the mothers
in their blackened veils approach.

Some collapse
on the steep slope of grief,
crawl on hands and knees,
piteous supplication of the damned.

Others race to tear
the bloodstained cloth
gaze at stiffened brow
and shattered jaw,
parts without price,
precious sediments of love.

In Baghdad's market places,
in the side streets of Teheran,
in Beirut and Jerusalem
in Khartoum and Cairo
in Colombo and New Delhi,
Jaffna and Ahmedabad and Meerut
on the highways of Haryana,

in poorly lit cafes
to the blare of transistors

in shaded courtyards
where children lisp
we mourn our dead

heaping leaves and flowers
that blossom only in memory
and the red earth
of this mother country
with its wells and watering places
onto countless graves.

8

I sometimes think
that in this generation
there is no more violence
than there ever was,
no more cruelty,
no greater damnation

we have hung up white flags
in refugee camps,
on clothes lines
strung through tenements,
on the terraces of high
walled houses.

Peering through my window
at dawn I see
the bleached exhausted faces,
men and women knee deep
in mud in the paddy fields,
others squatting by the main
road to the sea
break granite with small hammers;
sickles are stacked
by the growing piles of flint,
the hammers draw blood.

Children scrabble in the dirt
by the hovels of the poor,
in monsoon rain

they scrawl mud on their thighs,
their lips are filled with rain.
I see the movie theatres
built with black money from the Gulf,
air-conditioned nightmares
bought for a rupee or two
the sweaty faces of the rich
the unkempt faces of the struggling
middle-class.

Next door in a restaurant
food is served on white cloth
and the remnant flung to the crows.

Let me sing my song
even the crude parts of it,
the decrepit seethe of war
cruelty inflicted in clear thought,
thought allied to brutal profiteering,
the infant's eyes
still filled with sores.

9

Consider us, crawling forward
in thunder and rain,
possessions strewn
through airports
in dusty capitals,
small stoppages
in unknown places
where the soul sleeps:

Bahrain, Dubai, London, New York,
names thicken and crack
as fate is cut and chopped
into boarding passes.

German shepherds sniff
our clothes for the blind hazard
of bombs, plastique

knotted into bras,
grenades stuffed
into a child's undershirt.

Our eyes dilate
in the grey light of cities
that hold no common speech
for us, no bread, no bowl,
no leavening.

At day's close
we cluster
amidst the nylon and acrylic
in a wilderness of canned goods,
aisles of piped music
where the soul sweats blood:

Migrant workers
stripped of mop and dirty bucket,
young mothers who scrub kitchen floors
in high windowed houses
with immaculate carpets,
pharmaceutical salesmen
in shiny suits, night nurses
raising their dowry dollar
by slow dollar,
tired chowkidars eeking their
pennies out in a cold country,
students, ageing scholars,
doctors wedded to insurance slips,
lawyers shovelling guilt
behind their satin wallpaper.

Who can spell out
the supreme ceremony
of tea tins wedged
under the frozen food counter?

Racks of cheap magazines at
the line's end, their pages
packed with stars

predict our common birth
yet leave us empty handed
shuffling damp bills.

10

A child stirs in her seat
loosens her knees
her sides shift
in the lap of sleep,
the realm of dream repairs

as if a woman
often glimpsed through a doorway
whose name is never voiced
took green silk in her hands,
threaded it to a sharp needle
and drew the torn pleats together

a simple motion
filled with grace
rhythmic repetition,
supernal care in a time of torment.

In the child's dream
the mother seated in her misty chair
high above water
rocks her to sleep
then fades away

the burning air repeats
the song
seagulls spin and thrash
against a stormy rock
rifts of water picket light
a fisherman stumbles
upright in his catamaran.
As darkness slits the opal
clouds flicker into waves
waves mass in air
then slip inwards through space.

O green tiptilted rose
of all my longing,
great, watery theatre
whose depth no brush can line
or colour load,
where all our sons give up their swords
and daughters dream and flourish.

III. SITA'S STORY

11

All during the night journey
hyenas wailed in guttural tongues,
monkeys clawed at banyan bark
then crisped their tails
and leapt
fighting breath with fiery signs,
a prelude to ruin:

Lanka laid waste,
the water that severs our lands
swarming with death,
thousand eyed monsters
from the depths,
Kaliya puffed with poison
darting his hoods.

Despair, trepidation,
sullen words of rage suppressed,
lips sore and scabbed,
the ragged edge of loss
tied down and knotted to her waist
as she waits in a hillside garden

Pale Sita
whose palms flutter like wings
cut from a bolt of blue.
She kneels in the dirt,

she touches a tree,
a muddy rock, a shrub
whose incandescent scent
almost recalls a furrow
where a king, her father
found her.

12

In the overheated carriage
I watched them wander
two blind brothers,
the one behind, held tight,
his knuckles knotted
to the other's shoulder.

We sped through blackened tunnels
with the whistle blowing,
billows of red heat
curled from the engine room,
the music from their mouths,
a jewelled song
hung in the clammy air.

The wheels churned on,
the ocean's clashing water
glimpsed through tress,
a luminous stretch of sky,
a fisherman's hut
all misted over in
a bluish crust
that covered the singers' eyes.

They sang of Rama
and of Sita too,
of war and love,
impenitent loss
sucked up and swept away,
divinity's designs on us,
gods who tremble in their

lust and rage,
an arrow quivering
in the tiger's eye,
a swan's throat shut in death.

13

In her gaze
the planets swimming
in the moonlit sea
double their light
as flaming syllables
scrawl into smoke
in the Southern sky.

She clings
to her grassy slope
utterly still
watching the monkey god's tail
slip and thrash and knot
wild roses of shame.

A father's house,
a mother's fragrant bed,
a husband's sword
that grazed her cheek,
quiver and hang
as if in ether,
suspended between heaven and earth.

14

You took me
to a room
by the sea,
your body
was like light

When you kissed
my breasts
tight buds

fled into bloom,
spray blossomed
in the fish's mouth.

15

Let me whisper this:
I want to draw
you into me
head first,

dark mouth
beard
lidded eyes
black in ecstasy

I want to give birth
to you
all over again.

16

I crouch
by the wall
a shadow now
widowed by memory
It is possible
you know
to love a shadow,
we ourselves
being shadows. . .

Note: The second stanza of 16 (in italics) is a quotation from Eugenio Montale's poem *Xenia*

('Ma e possibile, lo sai, amare un' ombra, ombre hoi stessi')

—Eugenio Montale: *New Poems*, N.Y., New Directions, 1976.

17

Stealth
is not sin,
it is love's counterfeit
to scare away theives.

Yet something
is knocking
at the cage
of my ribs
and will not be stilled.

What burrows
in my brain?
What mole of truth?
What scavenger of rage?

18

A woman in grey blue
descends the steps
she has am umbrella
held against the sun,
her feet are not visible.

Subtle angel,
she steps
over train tracks
unscathed.

When I cry out in torment
she hastens to my side

When they set out milk
and bread for the wild snakes
of Kariavattom to come and roost
she kindles my flesh again.

She knows
I embraced you
under the seal
of tons of water,

There is no help for this.

IV. RETURNING HOME

19

In darkness, the curtains drawn
a table covered in white
by a mother's bowl of sugar laid out
a father's restless feet
pacing as fever loads
the infant's cheek.

This life led in torchlight
and lamplight
under mosquito nets
and the shelter of high ceilings,
desire thrusting and breaking
at raw faces,
the ocean daring its burden of waves
the rage of spent foam
against the young swimmer
whose tired limbs float loose
and senseless

till bread and bowl and table
straight-backed chair
four-poster bed
held firm by a mother's
outstretched hands latch
and take hold again,
and the house resurrects itself.

—O the bloodshot eye
pearly lids twitching,
trapped in sunlight—

I am dashed
against sharp rocks, she cries
these bits of old teak furniture,
my arms are stuffed into a meat-safe

my thighs locked to the refrigerator.
Where is the bridegroom to rescue me?

20

I hear my sister's voice
I tremble as I listen.

How shall I share
these abrupt departures
arrivals in secret
at the crack of dawn,
migrations without forethought

the afterthought consumed
by ferocious loves that cannot
hope for long, sucking up sense
evicting memory.

Sunlight darts into storm,
a torn leaf blackens on
the water's rim,
struck to a bleak, vertiginous source
all her limbs blurring
she races into the paddy field

a small child
gripping a windmill
made of silver toffee papers
in her hand.

How can she know
the blade
flying at the bent neck
the beggar's ceaseless thirst?

Parasurama's axe
at his father's command
drunk with blood
from a mother's gentle neck,
she was arched like a swan's throat
her eyes astonished in death:

maternal murder
brutal heat of a sacrifical ground
whose cyclic turns unfather us,
a son betrayed by dharma,
crying out in rage
as roosters crow in the tabernacles
of Kerala,
Abraham's face contorted
as he hauls his Isaac
up Mount Moriah,
through thorn and burning bramble
no ram in sight
the father's blackened mouth
and bloodshot eyes
'It is my will' he cries
'Do you understand?'
He pants as if the bursts
of breath would scald
his Isaac's tiny lungs.

21

These tales we tell ourselves
at nightfall, under high ceilings,
or at the road's edge, by bonfires
lit to keep the cold out,
human calamity thrust to the brink
of a black rock,
below the ocean boils its seastorm.
Our voices, my sister
find no stopping place.
The rooftops and archways
of this mother land are driven
by rain clouds, windows
lined in teak rip free
of the walls and swirl,
backwaters rise and swell
fishes erupt onto black sand.

The voices that cry
from the sweltering rocks
of Kovalam and Kanyakumari
come from ourselves, our living and dead
returned in lightning and hail,
the fever of maternal loss
paternal agonies heightened
till the warrior's sword
stings the thigh
and a slow dance
the ritual summoning begins,
with deliberate strumming heels
painted mask, curling palm
eyes fierce and reddened.

Such songs of agony
ravish our hearing.

It is almost as if in a meditation
in a time of war
we turned to pluck
the strings of dusty lutes,
the fallen harp surrendered its grace
to our impenitent fingers,
and the ancestral houses of our dead
and these ceremonial motions of the damned
healed us of ourselves,
all exile ended, the faces
in lamplight rejoicing.

V. CODA

22

Subtle after spent fire
the storm shivering itself out
a sweetness in the air
rock, hill and shrub
and moist garden on the hillside,

each blade of grass
with its own density,
each pebble and root
clarifying as line after line
unpacks into sight.

I stoop
I touch the soil
of my homeland
I taste it on my tongue.

With the bleached mesh
of roots exposed after rainfall,
my bitten self cast back
into its intimate wreckage:
each thing poised, apart, particular,
lovely and rare, the end
of life delved back
into the heart of it all.

Mist blows from the paddy fields
from the river that winds
past the graves of my dead,
the waterwheel on stiff sand,
the pauper's shirt blown clean,
mangrove leaves in the swamp
all split and bloodied.

Sometimes I watch in a light
that quivers as if in heat
a shimmering sense,
a surcharge of love
vivifying desire through a time
ever more about to be.

Or as if I gazed through her eyes,
self-poised to reflection,
without compunction
without bitterness either
in the white walled room

he made for her with rosewood chairs,
silk shaded lamps, tables cut in marble,
heavy and blunt, set free
in a surge of endless gravity.

[This poem is for U. R. Anantha Murthy].

S. NAGARAJAN

SAROJINI NAIDU AND THE DILEMMA OF ENGLISH IN INDIA

Sarojini Naidu began her public life as a poet though the writing of poetry was not perhaps the most important aspect of her achievement. It is doubtful whether she herself attached the greatest importance to it. She will be remembered in the history of India as a great fighter for India's freedom, for the unity of Hindus and Muslims and for the rights of women. She continued to take part in the public life of the country long after she had ceased to write poetry. Her last book of verse, *The Feather of the Dawn* was published posthumously in 1961, and it contains poems that she wrote in 1927; she lived for twenty-two years thereafter. Nevertheless many of her poems continue to be read and enjoyed, and no anthology of English poetry written by Indians can be representative or comprehensive without a few of her poems such as "Bangle-Sellers," "Palanquin-Bearers," "Indian Weavers," or "Coromandel Fishers." These poems are deservedly loved and remembered for their rhythm, metrical dexterity and exquisite phrasing. Sarojini Naidu's poetic output was small. Besides *The Feather of the Dawn,* there were three other slim collections: *The Golden Threshold* (1905), *The Bird of Time* (1912) and *The Broken Wing* (1917). The poems do not show any significant development. When Sarojini Naidu started writing in the 1890's the poetic fashion was all for mood, musical phrasing and the evocation of a dream world. The serious social and moral questions of the day which had occupied the attention of mid-Victorian poets such as Tennyson and Browning were generally eschewed as a contamination of the pure poetic spirit. One of Sarojini Naidu's

two mentors was Arthur Symons who himself wrote poetry—the other mentor was Edmund Gosse—and Symons said, "Life ran past me continually, and I tried to make all its bubbles my own." While it would be misleading to identify Sarojini Naidu with the style of the 1890's, she belongs to the same era. In her poems also it is the mood and the musical phrase that matter. The thought is relatively unimportant. Even those who otherwise admired her poetic gift remarked upon this feature of her poetry. For instance, Mr. A. R. Chida, himself a Hyderabadi who edited an anthology of Hyderabadi poets in 1930, wrote in his introduction: "There is no depth of thought in her compositions. . .They please the ear, but make no deep stir in the heart. They are sensuous, and at times sense-less, melodiously senseless." The indifference to the intellectual aspect of the poems is seen in several ways. One feels, for instance, that Sarojini Naidu did not take sufficient pains to exploit the thematic possibilities of the subject. For instance, she wrote a poem on the Indian soldiers who died in the First World War ("The Gift of India" in *The Broken Wing*) and if we compare it with an admittedly minor poem that T. S. Eliot wrote on the Indian soldiers who were killed in Africa in the Second World War, one feels that Sarojini Naidu's poem was a poetic chore for her, though in actual fact, it was Eliot's poem that was an "occasional" piece. He would not have even preserved it if Professor Bonamy Dobree had not liked it and urged him not to destroy it. Sarojini Naidu's poem is rhetorical and declamatory. Eliot's homelier style brings these humble dead soldiers closer to us. Compare Sarojini Naidu's metaphor of "the drum beats of duty" with Eliot's easy and appropriate reference to *The Bhagavad Gita* and the pun on action."

> Is there aught you need that my hands withhold,
> Rich gifts of raiment or grain or gold?
> Lo! I have flung to the East and West
> Priceless treasures torn from my breast,

And yielded the sons of my stricken womb
To the drum-beats of duty, the sabres of doom.
Gathered like pearls in their alien graves
Silent they sleep by the Persian waves,
Scattered like shells on Egyptian sands,
They lie with pale brows and brave, broken hands,
They are strewn like blossoms mown down by
chance
On the blood-brown meadows of Flanders and
France.

(Sarojini Naidu: "The Gift of India")

This was not your land, or ours: but a village in the
Midlands,
And one in the Five Rivers, may have the same
graveyard.
Let those who go home tell the same story of you:
Of action with a common purpose, action
None the less fruitful if neither you nor we
Know, until the moment after death,
what is the fruit of action.

(T.S. Eliot: "To the Indians Who Died in Africa")

In general Sarojini Naidu does not exploit the resources of Hindu myth and legend as fully as she could have. For instance, she has several poems on the lotos. We know that the lotos has a rich symbolic significance in Hindu and Buddhist art and legend. The Hindus regard water as "the maternal procreative aspect of the Absolute, and the cosmic lotos is their generative organ" (H. Zimmer: *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization,* ed. J. Campbell, New York, 1946, p.90). In Buddhist Mahayana art the lotos is assigned to the female personification of the highest wisdom, *prajna-paramita* which leads to *nirvana.* In Javanese consecration figures the commemorated person, usually a prince, is portrayed as a divinity sitting on a lotos and

holding another lotos in his mind. This has been interpreted to mean that all beings are brought forth from the divine creative essence and are virtually parts of the Highest Being. The meaning of the rising lotos, for the Hindu, is that *Prajna* the highest wisdom, has always been with us. Against this background if we look (for instance) at Sarojini Naidu's sonnet, "The Lotus" (*The Broken Wing*) after a not unpromising start the poem disappoints us with a pretty fancy.

O MYSTIC Lotus, sacred and sublime,
In myriad-petalled grace inviolate,
Supreme o'er transient storms of tragic Fate,
Deep-rooted in the waters of all Time,
What legions loosed from many a far-off clime
Of wild-bee hordes with lips insatiate,
And hungry winds with wings of hope or hate,
Have thronged and pressed round thy miraculous prime
To devastate thy loveliness, to drain
The midmost rapture of thy glorious heart. . .
But who could win thy secret, who attain
Thine ageless beauty born of Brahma's breath,
Or pluck thine immortality, who art
Coeval with the Lords of Life and Death?

Lines 5-10 attempt a come-back, but the attempt, to my mind, is not successful because the lines do not have the precision and clarity of the traditional image. (The same disappointment awaits us in the other lotos poems that Sarojini Naidu wrote or lotos references she makes. The use that Eliot makes of the lotos image in the opening paragraph of "Burnt Norton" is well known.) Likewise Sarojini Naidu's fragmentary poem on Nala and Damayanti is an inert dramatic monologue which provides a glimpse of a romantic heroine, but there is no evidence that the myth has stirred the poet's imagination. A good example of the creative use of the same myth will be found in the poem "In Hospital: Poona" of Alun Lewis, the Welsh poet who was

stationed in India during the Second World War. I quote the relevant lines:

> Last night I did not fight for sleep
> But lay awake from midnight while the world
> Turned its slow features to the moving deep
> Of darkness, till I knew that you were furled
>
> Beloved, in the same dark watch as I.
> And sixty degrees of longitude beside
> Vanished as though a swan in ecstasy
> Had spanned the distance from your sleeping side.
>
> And like to swan or moon the whole of Wales
> Glided within the parish of my care:. . .
>
> My hot hands touched your white despondent
> shoulders
>
> —And then ten thousand miles of daylight grew
> Between us, and I heard the wild daws crake
> In India's starving throat; whereat I knew
> That Time upon the heart can break
> But love survives the venom of the snake.

Lewis sees the myth as a cyclic event which is re-enacted in the separation of lovers. The myth had entered his life.

We may perhaps interpret the poetic life of Sarojini Naidu in terms of the distinction that T. S. Eliot draws between the early Yeats and the later Yeats (see T.S. Eliot: *Selected Prose*, ed. John Hayward, Penguin, 1953, P. 186-197). Yeats also started writing in the 1890's and a poem such as "When you are old and grey and full of sleep" is an anthology piece.

> WHEN you are old and grey and full of sleep,
> And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
> And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
> Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

And bending down beside the glowing bars,
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

"In any anthology," writes Eliot, "you find some poems which give complete satisfaction and delight in themselves, such that you are hardly curious who wrote them, hardly want to look further into the work of that poet" (P. 189). There are other poems, not necessarily so perfect or so complete, which carry the stamp of a unique personality. The poet has succeeded in retaining the particularity of his experience and at the same time has made that experience a general symbol. Yeats began writing poetry of the first, anthology kind in the 1890's and went on to write poetry of the second kind. As he himself put it in a letter to his friend, Katherine Tynan, in 1898, he was writing poetry of the dream world, but he hoped, he said, to write poetry of wisdom and insight. As an example of the second kind of Yeats's poetry, Eliot cites the introductory verses that Yeats wrote for his 1914 volume, *Responsibilities*.

Pardon, old fathers, if you still remain
Somewhere in car-shot for the story's end,
Old Dublin merchant 'free of the ten and four'
Of trading out of Galway into Spain;
Old country scholar, Robert Emmet's friend,
A hundred-year-old memory to the poor;
Merchant and scholar who have left me blood
That has not passed through any huckster's loin,
Soldiers that gave, whatever die was cast:
A Butler or an Armstrong that withstood
Beside the brackish waters of the Boyne
James and his Irish when the Dutchman crossed;

Old merchant skipper that leaped overboard
After a ragged hat in Biscay Bay;
You most of all, silent and fierce old man,
Because the daily spectacle that stirred
My fancy, and set my boyish lips to say,
'Only the wasteful virtues earn the sun';
Pardon that for a barren passion's sake,
Although I have come close on forty-nine,
I have no child, I have nothing but a book,
Nothing but that to prove your blood and mine.

Out of the particularities of his ancestry, Yeats creates a symbol of the personal sacrifice that a poet has to make for the sake of poetry. In the case of Sarojini Naidu, this progress did not take place. She continued to flutter till the end among the pages of anthologies. She was more deeply involved in the public life of her day than Yeats was in Irish politics, but she continued to write like the precocious school-girl whom Gosse and Symons had petted and patted. For instance, in her political speeches, she spoke out boldly of the need to liberate Indian women from their home-bound roles and make them equal partners of men in the national struggle, but in her own poetry, she presented women as panting doves. Her public experience and her poetic personality did not merge. Even the poverty and misery of an old beggar, for instance, ("The Old Woman" in *The Bird of Time)* were romanticised and made "charming." She was India's *bulbul* and India's croaking reality was too harsh for her soft throat.

Perhaps if she had kept in touch as a poetical practitioner (to use T. S. Eliot's significant phrase) with post-1914 developments in English poetry, she would have had an instrument to cope with the Indian reality of which she was certainly aware. Alternatively, she could have developed her own style, taking help from native traditions. It is possible that she was misled by the advice that Gosse and Symons gave her. Gosse advised her that what her readers wished to

read was "some revelation of the heart of India, some sincere penetrating analysis of native passion, of the principles of antique religion and of such mysterious intimations as stirred the soul of the East long before the West had begun to dream that it had a soul" (Quoted by K. N. Daruwalla on p. xvi of his introduction to his anthology, *Two Decades of Indian Poetry*, New Delhi, 1980). She wrote about an India that *they* would instantly recognize as India. She used *their* eyes instead of her own to see her country and her countrymen. Thus it came about that the picture of India that she presented in her poems lost its relevance soon, and the style also became outdated—except in the "anthology" poems. In writing poetry the pull of the prevailing poetic idiom is apparently irresistible except by a man of genius. Sensibility, says T.S. Eliot, alters from generation to generation in everybody, whether we will or no, but expression is only altered by a man of genius. "A great many second-rate poets, in part, are second-rate just for this reason, that they have not the sensitiveness and consciousness to perceive that they feel differently from the preceding generation, and therefore must use words differently" (*Selected Prose*, p. 154-55). For example, critics have noted that the prose of Matthew Arnold is distinguished for its manliness, critical intelligence, controlled passion, ironic wit and variety of tone, but his poetry, in spite of his awareness of the deficiencies of the Romantic style, falls into the late Romantic mode having the Romantic nostalgia but not the Romantic vision. This gravitational pull, as we may call it, of a dominant poetic style is probably derived from the much deeper level at which words in poetry work as compared with words in prose. As Arnold put it in a much misunderstood remark, genuine poetry is composed in the soul and not in the wit. (Surely it is no accident that the more considerable creative writing in English by Indians has been done in fiction than in poetry; for, the tradition in fiction is less compelling.)

I come now to the dilemma of English in India. In the preface to his novel, *Kanthapura* (1938) Raja Rao described the dilemma largely as a linguistic and stylistic one. (Incidentally, Mr. Raja Rao, as we in Hyderabad would do well to remember with pride and gratitude, is also a Hyderabadi and I understand that Sarojini Naidu regarded his novel as the finest novel to emerge from the Gandhian movement.) Raja Rao wrote that the telling of the story of his novel had not been easy.

> One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word 'alien', yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up—like Sanskrit or Persian was before—but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will some day prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. Time also will justify it.
>
> After language the next problem is that of style. The tempo of Indian life must be infused into our English expression, even as the tempo of American or Irish life has gone into the making of theirs. We, in India, think quickly, we talk quickly, and when we move we move quickly. There must be something in the sun of India that makes us rush and tumble and run on.

That was written nearly fifty years ago, and it is very likely that Mr. Raja Rao sees the issues somewhat differently now.

For instance, he might not wish to maintain that Sanskrit is the language of our intellectual make-up only. In his next novel, his most important one, *The Serpent and the Rope,* he praised Sanskrit as the language in which the soul of India had tended to express itself and he tried to recapture the rhythms of that language in several passages of the novel. The whole distinction in fact between the language of one's intellectual make-up and that of one's emotional make-up does some violence to the several sorts of work that language does for us. Only the most severe scientific or technical use of language can be described as the language of our intellectual make-up. When a sharp distinction does manifest itself as it did in the case of those Indians who learnt English at the expense of the vernaculars the distinction may well be a symptom of what Eliot called "the dissociation of sensibility." ("They thought and felt by fits," said Eliot of the post-Metaphysical poets of England.) Such a distinction is particularly difficult to maintain in the poetic use of language, which as I. A. Richards pointed out often, combines several functions of language. Nevertheless although Raja Rao's statement of the dilemma may seem to call for qualification, his plea for an English that is distinctively Indian will be endorsed by many Indian writers of English and translators of Indian works into English. Raja Rao is also right in pointing out that more is involved in Indian English than words. Rhythm and movement are also vitally important. Rhythm is an experience, and it depends, not so much on the regularity of syllable and stress, as upon an immediate perception of the totality of the verse-unit; of "a group or unity in a sequence of impressions, together with a differentiation of the component members of the group" (D. W. Harding, *Words into Rhythm,* Cambridge, 1976, p. 6). The verse-line must be felt as a unity, and it is this unity which constitutes the source of the pattern that we feel when we read the verse. "Just what patterning is invited," explains Professor Harding, "depends upon speech-rhythm, with pauses dictated partly by the auditory

and articulatory shape of words and phrases—the basic usages of English—and partly by the sense. It is these factors that establish the syllabic groupings that we rhythmise as we read" (ibid., p.78). Sarojini Naidu did not depart from the basic usages of English, but she could not avoid the echoes of the rhythms of earlier English poets such as Shelley or Swinburne. Compare for instance, the rhythm of

> "Sweet is the shade of the coconut glade
> and the scent of the mango-grove
> And sweet are the sounds of the full
> O' the moon with the sound
> of the voices we love"

from Sarojini Naidu's "Coromandel Fishers" with Swinburne's

> "Sweet is the treading of wine, and sweet the
> feet of the dove;
> But a goodlier gift is thine than
> the foam of the grapes or love'
>
> ("Hymn to Proserpine")

Scope for freedom from the echoes of the rhythms of English poets with the concomitant freedom to create one's own rhythms is available in free verse, and this may be one of the reasons why Sarojini Naidu's successors have given up metrical verse. What the speech-rhythms of Indian English are, it is difficult to say, since Indian English has its own variety, its substratum being in the Indian regional language which is the speaker's first language or the language of his environment. Indian languages are "essentially syllable-timed and in most of them the rhythm is determined by long and short syllables. English, a stress-timed language has its rhythm based on the arrangements of stress and unstressed syllable (Braj B. Kachru: *The Indianization of English,* Delhi, O. U. P., 1983, p. 180.) While this of course is undeniable, it must be remembered that rhythm cannot be

isolated from sense, particularly in poetry; how a thing is said is part of the thing that is said. As Professor Ramanujan, himself an accomplished poet both in English and Kannada and a distinguished translator of Tamil and Kannada poetry, put it, "the meaning is in the form. . .The how is as much the what as the what" (interview with Chidananda Das Gupta, published in *Span*, U. S. I. S., New Delhi, November 1983, p. 33.) The rhythm is part of the total movement of the verse-passage, interacting with sense, grammar and line ending. Consider, for example, the rhythm of the following stanza from Jayanta Mahapatra's poem, "Grandfather" (*Life Signs*, Delhi, O.U.P., 1983, p. 19.) A headnote informs us that "starving on the point of death, Chintamani Mahapatra embraced Christianity during the terrible famine that struck Orissa in 1866."

> For you it was the hardest question of all.
> Dead. empty trees stood by the dragging river,
> past your weakened body, flailing against your sleep.
> You thought of the way the jackals moved, to move.

The pauses in the lines control the rhythm and contribute to the meaning significantly. In the first line the rhythm is suited to the matter-of-fact tone of a statement; and the last line is first quickened and then slowed down after the pause to import a sense of menace into the meaning of "to move"; the jackals have sensed the approaching death of the man and are closing in. The next stanza maintains the basic rhythmic continuity but, the pause is varied to make some rhythmic changes.

> Did you hear the young tamarind leaves rustle
> in the cold mean nights of your belly? Did you see
> your own death? Watch it tear at your cries,
> break them into fits of hard unnatural laughter?

The rhythmic unity of the first line agrees with the continuing flourishing of the young tamarind leaves in spite of

the famine. The unity is contrasted with and set off against the line, "In the cold nights of your belly?" The line-break in "Did you see/your own death?" strengthens the sense of "your own death?" The rhythm is also picked up again in what follows.

If my perception of the rhythm of these two stanzas is not mistaken, it seems reasonable to suggest that the rhythm has been influenced by the semantic needs of the poem and not by any obvious speech rhythms of Indian English. In another poem the rhythm may well be different. For instance, here is the first stanza of "The Lost Children of America" in the same volume, *Life Signs*.

> Here
> in the dusty malarial lanes
> of Cuttack where years have slowly lost ther secrets
> they wander
> in these lanes nicked by intrigue and rain
> and the unseen hands of gods
> in front of a garish temple of the simian Hanuman
> along river banks splattered with excreta and dung
> in the crowded market square among rotting tomatoes
> fish-scales and the moist warm odour of bananas
> and piss
> passing by the big-breasted. hard-eyed young whores
> who frequent the empty silent space behind
> the local cinema
> by the Town Hall where corrupt politicians still
> go on delivering their pre-election speeches
> and on the high road above the town's
> burning-ground
> from which gluttonous tan smoke floats up
> in the breeze, smacking of scorched marrow and
> doubt.

The rhythmic groupings are different here. For example "Here" is paired with "wander," and "in the dusty lanes..."

is paired with "in these lanes..." These groupings agree with the line breaks and the grammatical groupings.

The conclusion seems justified that the rhythm of poems in English whether written by Indians or others is determined, as in all good poems, by the semantic needs of the poem. I believe this is true of the Indian English poems of Mr. Nissim Ezekiel also. If we look at Mr. Ezekiel's other poems, there is little evidence in them to distinguish them by their rhythms as Indian. Nor have I seen such evidence in the poems of Professor Ramanujan. In the *Span* interview he has stated, on the contrary, that if a poem comes to him in Kannada, he cannot write it in English. "If I do, it ends up by being a completely different poem. . . languages have systems of their own. They don't have the same grammatical patterns, idioms, not even the same consonants. Besides, the experience in each language is different" (p. 34). Another Indian poet, Mr. R. Parthasarathy has claimed that he tries to write "a coloured English poem," i.e. an English poem that sounds like a rendering in contemporary tone and idiom of ancient Tamil poems. He gives the third section of his poem, "Homecoming" as an example:

> And so it eventually happened—
> a family reunion not heard of
> since grandfather died in '59—in March
>
> this year. Cousins arrived in Tiruchchanur
> in overcrowded private buses,
> the dust of unlettered years
>
> clouding instant recognition
> Later, each one pulled,
> sitting crosslegged on the steps
>
> of the choultry, familiar coconuts
> out of the fire
> of rice-and-pickle afternoons.

Sundari, who had squirrelled up and down
forbidden tamarind trees in her long skirt
every morning with me,

stood there, that day, forty years taller,
her three daughters floating
like safe planets near her.

This is certainly an English poem, but whether it is a Tamil poem in English dress, I cannot say.

If the poems I have referred to are basically English, a paradoxical distinction nevertheless must be made. They are in the English language, but they are Indian. What makes them Indian is not any particular feature that we can isolate as quintessentially Indian but their entire physiognomy, their total personality as poems. The concept of Indianness is, and must remain, a federal concept, whether in politics or in culture. We resemble one another as members of a family, but none of us can claim that he is the Ideal Indian. The question of "Who is an Indian?" is an invitation—Raja Rao, for instance, has treated it as such—to make an inward exploration of oneself as a living product of history constantly called upon to choose one's ends and means. It should not be treated as an incitement to propound a totalitarian orthodoxy or dogma. Thus what makes a poem or novel Indian is a complex of factors: its vocabulary, its imagery, its landscape and its references to nature; its use of Indian myth and legend and history including contemporary reality; its thematic preoccupation; its stated and unstated cultural assumptions; its mode of awareness of time, its use of personal relationships, etc. Judged from this comprehensive criterion, Sarojini Naidu's poems are only partially or superficially Indian.

The dilemma of English in India as a literary medium should not be interpreted restrictively as a linguistic or stylistic dilemma without referring to a broader historical

context. When Macaulay encouraged Lord William Bentinck to spend the available fund for the propagation of European learning through the medium of English, he hoped to create an elite class of brown Europeans who could use their knowledge of the vernaculars to spread that learning among the people and set the country on the path of progress. Macaulay had no use at all for the traditional learning of the country and denigrated it. However, later in the 19th century, a more favourable view of India's heritage came into vogue even though the new appreciation may have been rather romanticised. . to answer to Europe's cultural and political needs.

(This is still a subject of debate.) A new aim was set for Indian society. It should be a new society with a new civilization combining the best elements of Hindu, Islamic and European civilizations. Unfortunately the administrative policies of the British Government encouraged Indians to take to English and European learning because these policies promised employment in Government and British-dominated industry. What was in effect achieved was not a grand integral civilization but the civilization of "the marginal man" lost between the past and the present, the old and the new, the relatively unchanged traditional culture of his country and the culture of Europe based on different assumptions and distribution of emphases and observing a different rate of change. The new Indian needed, but failed to acquire what Eliot calls "the historical sense," an awareness of the pastness of the past and the presence of the past. His cultural plight included his indifference to, sometimes frank rejection of, his obligation to the people as an intellectual. That such a division might come about had been apprehended by some of the British administrators. For example, as early as 1868, the Hon'ble Mr. A. J. Arbuthnot (who had obtained a Cadetship in the East India Company on the strength of a testimonial given to him by his Headmaster, the famous Dr. Arnold of Rugby and

eventually rose to become a member of the Viceroy's Council) said in his convocation address to the graduates of the Madras University; "It is sometimes said that a wide separation has taken place between the comparatively small section of the native community who have been educated through the medium of the English language and the masses of their countrymen, that the former have become denationalised. . . Whether this be the case or not at the present time, it is clear that this must be so eventually if the learning of the West shall continue to be confined to those who are able to acquire it through the medium of what must ever be an unknown tongue to the millions of this land." Lord Mayo was also of the view that the so-called 'filtration' theory would not work. The educated Indians were interested only in their own prosperity and not in educating their less fortunate countrymen.

The cultural dilemma thus created by English was that it was felt necessary, on the one hand, to bring about the progress of the country, but in the circumtances of its introduction and propagation it tended to bring about individual and social maladjustment. This dilemma which is one of the preoccupations of modern poetry especially in English written by Indians does not seem to have been felt by Sarojini Naidu. Certainly it does not seem to have interested her as a poet. It was probably mitigated for her—if it existed at all—by her active role in the political life of the country. Her poetic style could not in any case have accommodated this corrosive theme. To judge from those who have treated of this theme, it seems to favour a wry mocking self-deflationary, ironic tone. The theme occurs in the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra and A. K. Ramanujan, for example. I have already referred to Mahapatra's "The Lost Cnildren of America." He writes:

> We gaze at each other in silence, the lost child and I;
> who knows who is playing a joke on whom?

What can drive me from these mean, sordid alleys
where I live?
Who is the one among us misled by vision
more real than real,
that has filled homes with tremulous ash
and has brought from hunger unassuaged
the haunted wood and the hunted myth?...

In this time of darknesses the lost ones and I
will dim like lamps and go back to the moments
we caught once in the uncertain light of dawns;
to balance ourselves in falsehood,
in the colour of dead leaves on the earth,
falling upon the unreal world of simile and
metaphor
glorying in hyperbole
as we wait to be allowed our manner of quieter joy,
and silencing the world with borrowed voices
of the dead that sing homage to clay
in crippling ennui:
echoes of an isolating idolatry.
And now we will endure the pain
when the words of our songs droop like lilies
in the dark without standing in judgement,
passing by the abandoned cocoon
through the stench of blood over the pure dawn wall
across the stinging smoke of burnt-up doubts:
perhaps like ageing men
in their bitter-lemon gaze who look up wearily
from their doorsteps when the truth-light of day
is levelling. . .

So to find the time among us,
here on earth
when history does not reverberate any more
with the pulse of the drum
or with the chant of the tide on a sacred Puri shore—

but with the echoes of a bruised presence
lying like a stone
at the bottom of the soul's clear pool,
feeling the virtue that is there
in the refracted light, the earth-sense
of what pleases us and of what is lost
forever beyond us
as the burden of ununderstood things billows upward like smoke. . .

The theme of the marginal man who is not at ease in either Indian or Western culture also appears in Ramanujan's poetry. In the early poem, "Conventions of Despair" (*The Striders)* he opted for the "archaic despair" of the cycle of births, a belief which is an identifying characteristic of Hindus.

No, no, give me back my archaic despair.

It's not obsolete yet to live
in this many-lived lair
Of fears, this flesh"

In the 1981 poem, "Death and the Good Citizen" (published in *Poetry,* Chicago, November 1981, reprinted in *Span,*) Ramanujan seems resigned, on the whole, to his fate as a marginal man, and prepared, though not without some ambivalence, to consider his body as a machine that can be dismantled at death and the parts used elsewhere.

I know, you told me
your nightsoil and all
your city's, goes still
warm every morning
in a government
lorry, drippy (you said)
but punctual, by special
arrangement to the municipal
gardens to make the grass

grow tall for the cows
in the village, the rhino
in the zoo: and the oranges
plump and glow, till
they are a preternatural
orange.

Good animal yet perfect
citizen, you, you are
biodegradable, you do
return to nature: you *will*
your body to the nearest
hospital, changing death into small
change and spare parts:
dismantling, not de-
composing like the rest
of us, Eyes in an eye-bank
to blink some day for a stranger's
brain, wait like mummy wheat
in the singular company
of single eyes, pickled,
absolute.

Hearts,
with your kind of temper,
may even take, make connection
with alien veins, and continue
your struggle to be naturalized;
beat, and learn to miss a beat,
in a foreign body.

If the absence of this cultural dilemma as a theme and an outdated poetic style make the major portion of Sarojini Naidu's poetry rather irrelevant. the lack of the satisfactory resolution of the dilemma diminishes the poetic satisfaction of post-Sarojini Naidu poetry, at least for those readers who think with Arnold that poetry has a high philosophic destiny. Rebuking his friend, Arthur Hugh Clough, for preferring

"The Scholar Gipsy" to "Sohrab and Rustum," Matthew Arnold asked: "Homer *animates*- Shakespeare *animates*—in its poor way I think 'Sohrab and Rustum' animates—'The Gipsy Scholar' at best awakens a pleasing melancholy. But this is not what we want" (*Letters to Clough*, ed. H. F. Lowry, Oxford, 1932, p. 146). We may side with Clough and maintain that the author of "The Scholar Gipsy" was mistaken about his own creation, but the general criterion retains, I think, some validity. Indian poetry in English to which Sarojini Naidu gave such a fine start has considerable achievement to its credit, but it has not yet become a poetry that animates.

NOTES

1. Mr. Ezekiel's Indian English poems are of course hilariously successful. They render exactly a portrait in dramatic monologue—one thinks of Browning's "Mr. Sludge, the Medium"—of a certain type of Indian. But it is doubtful whether the Indian English as illustrated in those poems can render other types of Indian character or bring out the dignity, tragedy or pathos of Indian life. For example, half way through the Indian English poem, "The Railway Clerk" *(Hymns in Darkness)* occurs the line "I wish I was bird." I must confess that I am not sure of the poetic intent of the line and of its placement in the poem, but I find that my response to the lines that follow is different from the earlier response. The claustrophobic existence of this absurd little man, the airless atmosphere of the trap that life has laid for him, his longing for freedom, are all summed up in the line—in spite of its lack of an article! And I find myself sympathising with the man. I wish I could, however, be sure that to evoke sympathy was the poet's intention. Mr. Ezekiel's other Indian English poems do not display any gift for compassion or sympathy. Of course Indian English cannot be restricted to the uses that Mr. Ezekiel has put it to, and those who speak ungrammatical English are not subhuman.

NILMANI PHOOKAN

POEMS

1

From here
The waters stretch
Far beyond the horizon

When you reach out
The plantain leaf trembles
When you let fall your hair
The rains descend

In my heart
Sprouts a seed
Left behind by careless men
Who have eaten and
Forgotten

A dove comes flying
A blade of grass in its bill
Or is it a jasmine garland

Now no one is dying anywhere
No child
Nor old man

From here
One sees the sun going down
And
The moon rising

From here
One sees on opening the door
Eternally turning
An earth warm with love

Ageless
Those two women
At the gate of Da-Parbatiya
In a gesture of welcome

From your feet
Stretch the waters
All the way
Far beyond the horizon

---

* Da-Parbatiya: A little known village near Tezpur on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. The remains of a temple in the Gupta style here contain a relatively undamaged door-frame with two river-goddesses on either side.

2

Travelling
with a child
By train

The darkness gathers
The shadowy way
Left behind

Distant trees of dreams
Move past
Between us

Travelling
By train
With a child

The world of evening moves
Down to iron rails

On two cold iron rails
The frozen breath
Of despoiled heart

3

Like a burning candle
The afternoon sun melts
Into the shoreless waters
Again roars the Arabian sea
Hurled back by the Rocks

Where had we been
And where are we going now
—To the watery horizon
Of the land
In the basilica
St. Francis remains

Where are the fishermen
What is it they were seeking
What fish unknown to them

Their young wives
Naked and lonely
Saw them on the sea
Nevermore

•

In a house of winds
We are huddled
Or perhaps hanging in the air
With a life-belt round our necks

Our past
All forgotten

The same thought on all our lips
They would never know
They would never know
Not even the sea knew

Their lips were sealed with salt

4

A path winding by the river
Like a serpent half buried
A woman has returned
Her hair uncoiled
Down the path

A woman
The goddess of an extinct star
And behind her
Cold footspeps
Of a mute child
Pointing to the moon

[Translated from the Assamese by Hiren Gohain]

ARVIND KRISHNA MEHROTRA

ANNUAL

Begin, begin; the year ends;
Time adds a new ring to its bole;
The cage of the unlived mind
Resounds with the passing-bell.

Retired men sit on culverts,
There's no shade in young trees;
Sparrows hop to the edge
And whirr off balconies.

The tower has unequal steps,
How many, who can tell?
Quicker a fall to the bottom
Of the dark stairwell.

IN SWICH LICOUR

More than green
And less than yellow,
A flame of sound
With veins of ink;
In the lamplight,
In morocco,
I want to see
The leaf outside.

Bring the vessel
And my eyesight,
Set the bottled
Spirits loose;
Shut the window,
Draw the curtain:
I want to see
The leaf outside.

AT SEASONS

In the close heat of summer,
Winter assails me;
Sunlight on counterpane,
Street dark and empty.

In winter, the rains;
3-D clouds, the air heavy,
Light melting on the ground,
Herons nesting in the bo-tree

In the ten o'clock sun
The surrounding walls incline,
And anticlockwise run
The seasons of the mind.

THE FATAL THREAD

Tomorrow the kingfisher
Will sit on the pole,
The bell ring or someone yell.

Tomorrow the squirrel
Will cross the yard,
And mongoose test the snake.

Tomorrow the sun
Will not rise nor set,
Nor time extend the fatal thread.

BRAMHARAJAN

MAN WANDERING ON THE SHORE

A town, a man, a book,
a name or a saint,
you do not understand what I say.
Looking at a speck of immensity
you get ewildered
as though
it has the facets of a diamond.
In the cosmic space
embracing the
celestial equinoctial latitudes
music waits at the door
like a mediaeval soldier
keeping guard.
This music
to you
is nothing but
an empty noise of the wind.
The album of records
un-ridden by
the diamond-tipped needle
like unopened books
emits the odour of the museum
in your room.
You are ready
to stuff your bag
with the words that spill out
of anyone's mouth.
They resemble the garland
woven for the beggar's neck
all too rarely.
And ever new images

will arise when
lightning flashes
then ceases.
You receive only
the shadows of sleep.
Oh man
wandering along the
sandy shore
with torn nets
the waterfall
rolls always
down the edge
of the mountain crag
in the midst of leaves
in silence.

MEN WHO REALIZE THE PAIN

This roof
at any time
tears itself.
Especially
the left corner.
Pain,
a red throb
a fiery erect nail
abruptly
inserts
protrudes
sometimes.
Even if the nail is
pulled out
or the roof is
repaired
to withstand
coming onslaughts

the nail
pierces
the anodynes and
the stiff pressures
of the fingers.
Time passes'
in repairing the roof.
The pills are exhausted.
The pleasant vibrations
of the violin strings
go to sleep.
The pressure of the fingers
decreases.
The hole in the roof
grows enormously.
The blue sky/the thick darkness
is visible
through it.
The luminous pains
of the throbbing stars
are sighted.
The dry winds of pain
reddens Mars.
Now
stare into the boundless sky
removing its entire part above.
Even then
from some cluster of stars
can be seen
the sharp
the red hot
nail.

IN THE SILENCES OF THE VILLAGES

The paintings
he had left behind him

curtained the fissures
in the walls of my room.
From them
always
the slogans of the toughs
carrying an orb of fire
on their heads.

The music
elaborated in a low tone
becomes
a yellow-breasted bird,
flies in all directions,
cleaves the sugarcane leaves
and weaves a nest.
At the time of hatching
these walls
will cease to be mine.

A pair of his shoes
in a corner of the room.
The sacred rats play
and tear up the web
spun by the spiders
in the shoes.

The *morha* he sat on, is now
upside down:
Inside it
his possessions—
Books
Rejected manuscripts
The ball-point pen.

He
like the salty sea breeze
corroding the iron railings,
like the horse
bristling up its mane

in the lashing rain
and dashing out
tearing away the railings,
somewhere
in the silences
of the villages.

THE PROBLEMS OF RETURNING

Streets have become narrow.
The cloud of amnesia
lengthens.
Like a bird's-eye view
the village appears
in patches.

A woman's pockmarked face
asks me
to lie in her lap
once again.

The drum
in the temple courtyard
pulls the nerves.
If the dancer's legs
lose control
how can there be
a dance?

The dancer's stage
disappears.
The sound of the flat drum
chills the backbone.
The stage is removed.
Legs lose their control.

The light of the moon
on the floor

through the holes in the thatch
of the hut—
like scattered coins.
The tattered sack
—how can this be
your shelter
asks the voice of the father.
Knocking, knocking
finding its way
goes
the walking stick.

Memory,
Do ask for
the lone track again.
At least ask the glow-worms.
They lie imprisoned
in the wet clay nets
of sparrows.

A wrong has been done
The tape has been erased.

A LETTER FROM A JOURNEY TO. . .DAUGHTER

The blank space
which would describe you to me
you had better fill it up.
I have to change trains
:I with those here
to see their friends off.
A throng
at the stuffy station.
A region remote, dusty;
its language
usage

strange
incomprehensible.
Seated on a bench with a broken leg
I place a paper on my knees.
I write.
Your 14th birthday slipped
from my memory.
I forgot to send you a birthday card.
The sun's rays piercing
the tall trees
in the deep woods.
Thoughts of Paul Valery,
his 18-year long silence.
I purchased a statue of Buddha in marble
a replica of a replica of a replica
found at Bhedar Ghats
$6\frac{1}{2}$" high, Rs. 132/-
at Sathna railway station.
I dusted my trunk, opened it,
paid the amount.
In my brown shirt
(maroon coloured in your language)
the soft dust of the white marble.
The porter said, "The stone
is not the right sort."
When it mellows
the boats in the Narmada
with sweat
will disappear.
And you will travel
with the aid of an atom oar
or whatever it will be
in the future.
You will not hear the moaning
of the depths of the river.
The rotting putty dreams will dissolve.

The long nervous agitated brush strokes
in the self-portrait of Van Gogh.
The face of Buddha carved out of wood.
Between the two
I.
A few more days:
I come back with
the absurd lines of verse
a blue bouquet
a preoccupied mind
along the destined road
the music of the Gwalior gharana
winding through the wheat fields
the used train tickets
(the stations without
the ticket collectors)
the sleeplessness
trembling in the eyes
the worn-out shoes
the impressions
of the sculptures of Khajuraho
that Gandhi said should be destroyed
the ship that has come ashore
the sea
the vastness and

[Translated from the Tamil by M. S. Ramaswami]

SUKUMARAN

THE EMPTY ROOM

Life
is not like
what is taught
or what is learnt
:it is the soul
that the magician
in the children's story
had hidden somewhere.

Some books
some memories
the record-player
that soothes the wounds
the stinky sweaty shirts
the imprints of relationships—
with all these
the room is
still empty.

I am a corpse
cut up vertically
from the head
down the backbone.
The soul
flies like a parrot
dashes against the wall.

In the locked box:
the face prepared for a livelihood
the smile that has become a bruise
the skull of the God that is dead
the cloak got by casting lots

the flute of hope
the greeting card
sent by my love

With all these
the room looks still empty.

Between the blood
trickling from the flowers
and the index finger
stretched out to wipe it
the parrot
flies
stumbles.

OOTACAMUND

Like the bird coming to the sanctuary
I come to this hill-station
again and again.

Like a pimpled human face
this town has changed.
And yet
the memories of my younger days
have dissolved in the air
thick with the scent
of eucalyptus oil.

To tell you
of my love
the language I use
with a thousand year patina
is helpless.

You—
who told me stories
walking along the paths
covered with blue-coloured mayflowers,

You
who spoke to me
about men
along the train-tracks
that lengthen
bewtween rocks
wet with seepage—
are not here
now.

I am the trembling heart
caught in the talons
of the flying vulture.

You
with withered dugs
are now
with government files
brittled by
the droppings of silverfish
with sooty vessels
dented at the edges
with your child's diaper
wet with urine.
The purity of your love—
like the water
scooped from
the mid-river.

THIS CENTURY—I

Trees have been felled
like men.
At the root of
the truncated trees
blood trickles still.

Yesterday
this way

a rare dawn:
At the mountain rim
for the sun
the aboriginal's smile
the twitter of the birds
the mercy of the shade
wave upon wave
of the ocean of leaves
the din of flowers
by the side of the wind.

Nature—
the primeval delight of man.

Today
this forest
burns like a desert.
Heat howls,
roams
through the felled trees.

In the wounds of the trees
the silence of the innocent
In the official papers
the haughtiness
of the village undertaker
Between trees and man
the lightning of the axe.

On this wasteland
anxiety
flutters.

THIS CENTURY—III

The sight of that city
fell down from
the hands of death
and broke.

The stench of corpses
all over the place.

The last toll of the church
shrouded the anxious cries
The God
that never moved
from the pedestal
shut his open eyes.

The birds
that returned to their nests
untimely
dropped
dead.
Animals froze
as they were found last.
Trees and plants
perished
without the least stir.

Science advanced
to the next stage
dragging dead humans.

Death jumped
on the wheels of the wind
and drove on.
In the legs of people
the cataclystic leap
of life.
Day dawned in that crematorium;
The sun that greyed
in the poisonous clouds
The innocence of fire
in the heap of corpses.
Another statistics
in the headlines of the news.
The conceit of the mortician

in the official papers.
The invisible net of death
wanders everywhere.
The loud wail of loss
merges in all directions.

People were found
stacked like
logs of wood.

THE DAY AFTER I FAILED TO DIE

"Dying is an art
Like everything else."

Sylvia Plath

After swallowing the last pill
the waves of the mind became still
and death approached me with mercy.
No more
the travails of waking hours.
Nor
the tears
the ever-oozing wounds
the knocking-about.
Nor
the bitterness of lies
the stink of rotten smiles
the self-pity.
Nor
fear
eternal emptiness
unfriendly moments.
Nor
Time Space Symbol.
More than these
no more
life, its nausea.

The waves of the mind turned still.
The music buried in memory
spilled over.
The waves of the mind turned still.

Morning.
Light came, called me.
I woke up,
went out
to gather fruits
for my parrot
as usual.
Devoid of
joy and sorrow
my mind became heavy
like the bladder
full of urine.

[Translated from the Tamil by M. S. Ramaswami]

LANDSCAPES AND INSCAPES

M. K. NAIK

Landscapes by Keki N. Daruwalla (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1987, 72 pp., Rs. 30)

Daruwalla's is a kind of poetry that generally seems to need encapsulation by—to use his own phrase—a'membrane of fact'. It is therefore hardly surprising that human character and a clearly visualized setting play important roles in it. The present volume is aptly entitled *Landscapes,* since, as the blurb tells, "finding himself often accused of being too much a landscape poet, Daruwalla readily admits the charge".

The collection is divided into two parts: Part I, entitled "Landscapes", comprises poems with an Indian setting and in Part II--'Oxford and After', the scene shifts to England, Yugoslavia, Sweden, Russia and the U. S. A. But in spite of its title, the book offers us much more than merely descriptive verse in the conventional sense of the term. Daruwalla's mind is continuously busy establishing meaningful relationships between Nature and Man, in various ways and in different contexts and it is on the working out of these relationships that the success and the failure of these poems would appear to hinge. The poet's best moments are those in which he can give us fresh perceptions and new insights on Nature and Man and Society, or enliven his lines with wit and irony, incisive comment, apt and fresh imagery and virile and vibrant verse. In the absence of these, at places, what we get is conventionalities, banalities and trivialities, matched by well-worn images and an uncertain mix-up of free verse and irregular closed verse patterns and botched rhymes.

Among the successful poems, 'Gulzaman's Son' projects an intriguing shepherd character against the back-drop of sheep-folds and high pasture huts. Taunted by his friends on his lack of virility, Gulzaman picks up a new-born lamb and declares proudly, 'this is my son'. In 'Ruminations at Verinag', the mythical story of the origin of the stream at the behest of a thirsty Parvati is significantly linked up with the modern lover's characterization of the waters as his mistress's 'thirst-killing, thirst-renewing passions flowing from under the rock of your love'. "Fish are speared by Night' wittily juxtaposes two contrasted pictures : fishermen spear fish by night, netting them by day, while in cloudy weather, they 'spread their fishing nets on the ground and spread their women over them splay-legged'. In poems like "Mandwa' and 'Migrations', the contemplation of landscape is attended by an active social awareness. Viewing Bombay from a near-by coastal village, the poet suddenly becomes aware of the fact that the *'Urbs Prima in Indis'* is actually two cities in one—'the vertical city of the rich keeps rising/grotesque heads on unsteady shoulders./ The slum-city of asbestos/squats at its ankles,/huddled behind a smokestack".

A ruin is only a ruin, unless a creative imagination can bring it to life. 'The Fall of Mohenjo Daro' and 'Of Mohenjo Daro at Oxford' illustrate the truth of this. In the first poem, we find a powerful historical imagination at work, as the poet sees with his mind's eye the deadly Aryan assault on the ancient city of Mohenjo Daro: 'Of Mohenjo Daro at Oxford' has another dimension to it also—the dimension of satire on academia. The Oxford archaeologist in the poem ruefully confesses that he did not write on Mohenjo Daro because 'Tutankhamen was the rage then/. . . who cared about the Indus'?

In 'Green Shoots at Volgograd' there is an interesting tension between the speaker's admiration for the heroism of those who fought the epic battle of Stalingrad and his equally strong and typically modern cynicism which

continues to find there something which is 'a bit too sentimental and something else which appears to be 'a bit too heroic'; but in the end admiration triumphs and the speaker declares, 'This field is a poem./You need not write it'.

There are also poems in which Nature is seen primarily in the context of the animal kingdom, as in 'Lambing' (here the speaker is 'a mother-sheep), 'Wolf', 'The Last Howl' and 'Requiem for a Hawk'. And the poet appears to be as well at home here as he is while contemplating the ruins of Mohenjo Daro or the battlefield of Stalingrad.

A lambent by-play of wit enlivens many poems in the collection. The poet admires how the small bustard 'evades both the hawk and the printer's devil'; the sheep in 'Lambing' sadly remembers how her 'first-born had vanished/when his/(the master's) prodigal returned'; and talking of islands, the poet observes, 'Every island is a paradise/until you end up as one'. In fact there is more evidence of wit in this collection than in all Daruwalla's earlier books, in which a sharp irony is rather the most characteristic note.

Daruwalla's poetic universe has always been action-oriented, even the contemplation being about action, at most places. Hence disease and violence have always provided his most typical images. In these poems also we encounter 'soul's gout', and 'the sun's bloodshot eye', while the Bombay coastline becomes 'a wall of rotting muscle'; and 'a lung of night' is 'pierced by a glass sliver'; flashlights 'stab' the sea; the night 'grows teeth' and the wind becomes 'a switchblade'. Occasionally there is also an unusual image like: 'I feel a bead of moisture move across/the rosary of my spine'.

But Daruwalla has not always succeeded in giving adequate poetic validity to his landscapes. The lovers in the six Season poems ('The Round of Seasons') remind one too strongly of Marie Antoinette playing at being a milkmaid in the garden of her palace to be entirely convincing

and the vignettes of London in Christmas time ('Christmas Eve Walk'), Skopje, the Earthquake city in Yugoslavia and Suomenlinna in Sweden offer more of traveller's trivia than creative perceptions. The four Roethke poems at the end fail because the poet seems to be hopelessly out of his depth in them in trying to recapture the mystic experience the poet Roethke was said to have had. In fact, it is rather amusing to find Daruwalla, who once condemned Sri Aurobindo as 'nebulous and verbose' (and that too, on the strength of a single poem of this mystic poet, which Daruwalla had read- as he himself cheerily informs us, elsewhere) now writing a line like : 'Eternity was manifest'; (p. 72). Even a casual student of Indian English poetry will agree that this line will fit like a glove into a poem by any of Sri Aurobindo's (minor) disciples, in view of its abstract, Latinate diction, its heavy texture and its leaden-footed rhythm. But then that is how 'the whirligig of time brings in his revenges'. The telltale use in a traditional way of the traditional images of light and darkness, and sound and silence in these poems is highly revealing; and if a worn-out image is only the outward manifestation of dulled artistic perception, it is hardly surprising that most of the hackneyed images appear in the unsuccessful poems: e. g. Suomenlinna island glitters like (what else ?) 'a jewel' in the sun; the night is as black as (of course) 'a raven', and 'the ice at river's edge' shines like (you have guessed it) 'crushed glass'. In such poems as these, even the control of rhythm appears to be lost. 'Christmas Eve Walk', for instance, begins confidently with a four-line stanza with perfect alternate rhymes but the poet gets out of rhythmic breath after five stanzas, and gets hopelessly out of step, botching both stanza form and rhyme. This happens in 'The Cross at St. Giles' and 'Skopje: The Earthquake City' also, in contrast with the easy, assured movement of speech rhythms in the more successful poems.

Nevertheless *Landscapes* does contain, as already seen, many poems which unmistakably show how Daru-

walla's talent is still as distinctive and vigorous as earlier. In fact, the recurrent note of wit is a promise of further development in a new direction, as is the new variety of setting.

Second Sight by A. K. Ramanujan (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1986, 89 pp., Rs. 40)

If Daruwalla is a poet of landscapes and the human drama that takes place against them, Ramanujan's poetry is primarily concerned with what Robert Frost calls 'inner weather'. *Second Sight* is Ramanujan's third book of poems and it has appeared exactly ten years after his *Selected Poems* (1976), but the thirtynine poems here evince the same major preoccupations that marked his earlier poetry, viz. familial and racial memory, ancestry/and heredity, roots and the Hindu world-view. The familial memories centre, as earlier, around childhood impressions and experiences. These include the shock of fear at 'a certain knock/on the back door/a minute/after midnight/thirty years ago'; 'a tiny/ white lizard.../flattened to a foil/in the crease/of my monkey cap'; grandma's 'maggoty curds'; father's broken umbrella and 'magic carpet story'; uncle, 'who would never hurt a fly', suddenly striking 'our first summer scorpion/on the wall next to Gopu's bed'; our three red champak trees' bursting into flower and giving mother her 'first blinding migraine/of the season', and 'the look of panic on sister's face/an hour before/her wedding'.

Ancient Hindu myths and legends are recalled as the poet alternates with consummate ease between the past and the present. The sight of a pomfret 'in the fisherman's pulsating basket' brings to his sensitive mind the story of Shakuntala and the Recognition ring found in the belly of a fish; and in recalling 'The Dead in My Lai 4', a childhood grasshopper sacrificial rite and Janmejaya's serpent-sacrifice in the *Mahabharata* are meaningfully juxtaposed.

Ramanujan's fascination for questions of ancestry, heredity and roots also continues to be as strong as ever. The protagonist in 'Elements of Composition' tries to analyse his own identity and the elements that have gone into its make-up, while 'Drafts' is a gloss on how 'The DNA leaves copies in me and mine/of grandfather's violins and programmes/of much older music'. And the Hindu world-view constitutes the ambience of many poems here, as the poet alludes to Hindu ways of living and dying ('they'll cremate/me in Sanskrit and sandalwood').

Second Sight thus indicates that in spite of his three decade long sojourn abroad, the springs of Ramanujan's creativity continue to lie in his Indian roots and this is a reassuring thought, since an art rooted in a heritage will always remain vital. At the same time, the discerning reader might feel that the book hardly registers any progress in the areas of thought and insight and that it remains a case of 'the mixture as before'. A major limitation of Ramanujan's poetry has always been his tendency to avoid (why exactly, one can't understand) a direct confrontation with the centre of his Hindu experience and to remain mostly satisfied with merely more or less casual and peripheral contact with it. *Second Sight* provides no evidence that ten years later the poet has overcome this unfortunate tendency. (The title poem, 'Second Sight' is a copy-book example). In fact, it is disappointing to note that the present collection does not contain anything comparable with Ramanujan's earlier successes such as 'A River' and 'Another View of Grace'. He confesses in another context, 'My truth is in fragments' ('Connect'). These words seem to have a much wider import than he intended.

In fairness to Ramanujan, it must be admitted that there is a much larger range of international reference in *Second Sight* than in the previous collections; but unfortunately, his insights here appear mostly to remain confined to the predictable planes of ironic observation and passing satirical comment as in 'Highway Stripper'.

The experiments in prose-poetry in 'Zoo Gardens Revisited', 'Moulting' and 'Looking and Finding' represent another new development, but one remains sceptical about their success. In view of Ramanujan's perfect control of rhythm and word-music in the best of his earlier work (one particularly remembers 'Another View of Grace' in this connection), one is not sure that a more open form could be a definite asset to his art. In fact one is left wondering how he can now concoct a veritable tongue-twister like 'panic's zenith' (p. 76).

The old mastery of image and witty phrase is, however, still very much in evidence, as in 'Reuter eyes', 'Penguin nuns', 'the flat metal beauty of whole pomfret' and 'national smells and international fragrance'.

At the same time, one is seriously disturbed to find lazy echoes from Western poets still haunting Ramanujan's art at this stage of his poetic career. For instance, his 'Time's hurrying chariots always behind me' (P.69) have obviously been stolen from the Andrew Marvell-T. S. Eliot museum, and the 'herons playing at sages' (P.74) have evidently migrated from the Dylan Thomas zoo on 'the heron-priested shore'. This reinforces the impression that *Second Sight* shows few signs of fresh insights and the kind of quest for untrodden paths which a mature poet's renewed utterance after a decade of silence might lead the reader naturally to expect. It only presents the poet up the family tree once again. It is perhaps time Ramanujan realized that a single tree does not constitute an entire landscape.

MAKARAND PARANJAPE

ROACH TRAP

They saw it at K Mart
with Mohammed Ali, fist clenched,
On the glossy exterior,
Promising to eliminate their cockroaches
Without harmful sprays or messy squashings.
They peeled the polythene wrapping
And examined the contents gingerly:
A small black cardboard box,
Openings funnelling inward on both sides,
Met their curious eyes. Inside,
Stripes of adhesive ran parallel
Breadth-wise; in between
A dark, odious substance
Emitted what they presumed
Was the insect attracting odour.
Bold lettering in white
Added the advice,
"Keep out of reach of children."

There were two traps to a carton.
They placed one atop the kitchen cupboards
The other in a corner
Next to the air freshener
On the bathroom shelf.
A few days later they spied
Two roaches blockaded in the box,
Silently writhing hour after hour in toil.
Then, all legs broken,
Bellies flattened,
They lay still.

Only their feelers flickered
Indicating that they lived.
At last, all motion ceased, and
Completely sealed in glue, they perished.

Soon the trap began to fill.
Again and again
They witnessed the insects' passion
Played to its inexorable conclusion.
Sometimes a roach would dodge a layer
Only to be stuck in another.
One, preferring freedom to feet,
Even nibbled into a fastened limb
Until nearly free. Just then,
He lost his reserve, and in panic,
Lurched mandible down to his doom.
Once within, none escaped or lived.

SHREELA RAY

THERE IS ONLY ONE TRIBE

White gloved hands reach in
so far in,
    the heart revolving
on its axis, can be torn out,
be crushed like a handkerchief,
or flutter
    like a flag
in a man's fist

The doctors are always surprised
Why are you crying?
Does it hurt?
    For sure
there are worse things I've known
In my life
in all its unladen spaces
new cargoes sound the grayest depths
until fluke and crown gapple
the one truest homeland.

There is no form by which I
can desert this world
And though to be silent and to speak
amount to nothing equally
I choose to speak. . .

2

Of what are you made America?

This April morning with
    the yellow primroses
    sparkling
    the rain light,

was it truly a woman who dropped in to say
"I'm off to South Africa and know
what to pack from watching
the riots on TV"?
She laughs
and his laugh is shrill.
"Everyone is in t-shirts
They're either too poor or it's hot down there".

And tell me why America.
a Brighton schoolgirl can commiserate
with her hostess
but not the maid
caught fondling the lace curtains
and sighing without guilt or shame
"One day, these will be mine."

Does she resemble a Bantu girl
who may be strong in Scripture
and cross stitch—
which won't get her to Witwatersrand
to study medicine,
or to London
for economics,
or to Harvard for corporate law?
Or was she a school girl such
as even I was
some 35 years ago,
a little up and way east of Durban
assured of heaven and my heart's whiteness
by none greater than William Blake,
whom I still love and those others—
philosphers, poets. adventurers,
missionaries, painters, pirates, saints, etc.
who scorned my people
and knew nothing of our ways

Will this American girl become
a woman even as I am,

malformed, with the bones of a minnow
and an elephant's memory?

Let me remember the maid
A Xhosa girl—
In a garden of her own
filled with all the flowers
her country has given the world. . .
ericas, plumbago, gerbera
below her own window,
waving,
America.

3

Years ago, buried in The New York Times
I read of how a tryst ended
one night in Johannesburg—
a city of orange blossoms and bougainvilleas,
where the sun always shines
on cool, white-washed houses. . .

—of a black girl dragged out of a car
and taken to a hospital,
her male companion scolded and sent home. . .

did she wish that she'd never been born
or that she'd died when she was young?

It it is possible for you to know
human fear America,
pray the ballast
in the hearts of the poor
is purest mercy—God's.

ROBIN S. NGANGOM

ODE TO HYNNIEW TREP

Solitary light
on eastern hills,
evening bells
tender rivulet,
sad widow
forgotten rambling rose
poised
for the renegade's hand.
The wind plays
on your duitara.

Far away green
and brown carpet
woven with gentle woollens
of rain and fog,
elusive downpour,
elusive sky,
raindrop
shattering in the eye.

Hills with spires of churches,
hills with rice-fields for siblings,
hills with genial steps
where earth's tribes
intercourse.

Woman with hair of pine,
girl with breasts of orchid,
woman with mouth of plum,
girl with feet of opaque stone.

Tiny waist of hill resorts
with misty loin-cloth,

cool descending
stream of soil
to rainforests darker
than sky.

Shimmering cascade,
nude twilight
leaning into the eyes,
root of arterial rivers.

Crucible of hearts.

Deep-burning
ancient rice wine.

Note : "Hynniew Trep" literally means "Seven Huts" in Khasi. The Khasis call their hilis the Land of the Seven Huts.

NILIM KUMAR

WATERS

The waters call the stars

All-a-tremble
Numberless breasts of waves

The stars descend
And swarm all over the sands

Down comes the moon
To nip at oysters' lips

But no one enters
The waters

No one trusts
The waters

The fishes fret
And restless the porpoises and alligators

The waters call the stars

All-a-tremble
The waves' numberless breasts

TETHER

I keep my heart
Tethered

Or it runs wild
Breaks fences
Devours flowers
In other men's gardens

In the evening I bring her home
And gently tie her up
In the shed of my chest

Or off she goes
To wine shops
In search of fodder

But tethered, she is now trouble
She eats nothing
Not even my salt tears
and the blood congealed in the shed

She does not look
does not move
And silently she sheds
A passion of tears
Love

I do not know
What to do

Shall I untie
The rope on her neck

Shall I set free
In the open field
You,
O my heart!

[Translated from the Assamese by Hiren Gohain]

R. RAJ RAO

THE WALL

I lie with my eyes transfixed on the wall.
At places where the plaster has peeled
I see shapes that chill the bone:

A pointed face with skeleton teeth:
The whites of eyes:
A whiplashed body's bloated breasts:
Circumcised phalluses.

A map of Ethiopia:
A hand with fingers
Splayed in earth's craters:
A corrugated nose.

I scratch the gangrene of the wall
And feel a shiver in my spine
As I toss on the floor with burning fingernails.

DESMOND L. KHARMAWPHLANG

AUTOPSY

Slipping quietly into the raw dawn
With the beating of heavy wings—
Poetry on the lips of the earth.

A tree with swirling branches,
a jagged darkness against the sky—
Winds cutting the morning with a knife sharpened
in an uneasy night of crimes and stars.

You call me and I hear
Here, where your voice lives,
I dream with empty hands and a sadness runs clear
between memory and being.

Time is pinned to the wall
Along with a thousand words
and a heart weeping in the midst of broken music.

But today you are here with me
Curtains draw, and the silent screams of
Christ weeping blood in Gethsemane.

RANIKOR, 22nd November, 86

How could the sweat and tears
of my forefathers escape these hills
to form silent rivers on
the plains of the Surma ?

Here life is hard. The men
are as starved and mangy
as the dogs on the river-side.

The cry of love for this earth is painful.

Sand slips through my fingers like time.
Again this memory that sits on my soul—
the flight of wild ducks from
Bangladesh, defying man-made borders,
the sun flirting with the waters
over a green cliff.

HERE

Here, where waste is laid like a curse,
blue skies white skies—
tangled rag winding and unwinding on
top of trees.
And the wind laughs herself shrill in certain months
shaking her belly among flowers.

History becomes a bond tied by blood.
Gods visit, bringing measles
and doors are barred,
and tales of every waterfall is about
the tragedy of women led to suicide.

Here, where rice wine is sweet and the
people hungry.
Perhaps the lament is too deep,
and the ones most bitter are silenced.
Laughter like that of death is everywhere.
I still haven't learnt the language well.

MICHAEL KELLY

POEMS AFTER DARD

In the night party I looked from your beauty
into the candles'light and found
they lacked any radiance

man has no wings
but the angels do not have his joys

I nurtured my grief for you
every wound in my heart
turned ulcerous

disapproval, repression, censure,
fell into drunken euphoria
in the wine-arbour of your heart
breaking the glasses of their reserve
in their broken-hearted abandon

*

A drop of sweat fell from the hair
of the dawn on to her face—
so dew falls in the sun!

by contamination of purity the dewdrop
turned on the fire petal of the rose
into a red spark

spirits rise without physical means—
where has the dew flown
for all the closeness of your gaze

*

Do you take offence
because our clothes are wet
saturated with sin

go deeper:
when we wring them dry
with our repentance
the angels themselves
will use that distillation
for their own ablutions

•

No rose can last
we know our transitory nature
why is it we long so
for the colours and scents
of this earthly garden

my considered advice
is that all the wise and holy
should come and quaff the ascetic message
of my wine jug

•

Why rush to extinguish the beauty of a candlelight
each little flame destroys itself
as surely and almost as quickly as a crocodile's jaws

why should I rejoice in the love of Christian maidens
life is as cruel as Christian charity

it is the time for buds to blossom
each time I go into the garden
to see how things are coming along
they have already changed

•

Like a new lit candle
we start weeping at the top

almost burnt out
we leave this life's party
wet through and through with our sinfulness

who are all these people
where did they come from

where did we go to

*

Her eyes pierce mine
like tear-multiplying wound-opening
sharp weapons

my heart must not rant
about against her unfaithfulness
these things happen thousands of times
and happen

POEMS AFTER MIR

Your absence quite snuffed the brilliance
of last night's party
neither the candle nor the moth
showed their charades
no-one to see no-one to be seen

*

The wealthy are wrapped in silks and furs
this naked impudent lecher
also survived the night

the skull I trod on crumbled to dust
shaming my lack of observance
it used to be a head of proud life of proud speech

*

How much of my youth I wept away
black and juicy nights

in my old age I fell asleep
restful grey whitening into dawn

*

The holy old man
naked in the place of prayer
only last night
was in his cups in the wine-bar

it was his drunkenness
that provoked this unwordly relinquishment
of clothes

*

It is now
that she should unveil her beauty

what good
if she shows herself to everyone
when my eyes are blind
in death

*

Endless alternations of black and white
weeping until morning
blinking until dusk
what use the colours of this world
what patterns do we make

*

I have left harsh abstract religion
now I worship God in beauty
in a real temple
sitting my real body in a real prayer

*

One day
she walked past
her beauty proud
in clinging swinging clothes

the prayers
rolled up their mats
put them away

my heart was once a palace
once upon a time
how did its ruin happen

look at the little heaps
of dust

how long can we face looking at love

blood runs down our faces

night after night
I spent in vigil
a misery not completely free of pleasure

I have seen dawn

who cultivates obedience
when the wet season
of love-making and passion
sets in

that's the time
O holiness to sin
if you can

*

Stain your garment of purity
with earthly wine
justify the insults
of drunks and carousers

even a slight reserve
is out of order

now is the season
for roses to flower
hearts to warm

put the bottle by a stream
lolling in the shade of roses

hold the glass confidently
shining the colour in the sun

ensure yourself a thoroughly bad reputation

how long are you going to hide
in Chapel and monastic retreat

go one morning into a garden
stay there until evening

all the night has passed
listening to this nonsense

perhaps there is a time to rest

•

I am drunk
so
you will have to excuse me
make sure the glass is empty before you give it to me
just the occasional sip
don't fill my glass again
my words wander
your turn to call me names
give me the respect you would a glass of good wine
help me to walk a little way
I apologise for staggers and wandering
can you be angry
the time for religious devotions is well ahead
wait for me to join you soberly
I am quite hypersensitive
treat me with the respect
the sensitive quiet
you would offer a glass of good wine
which is what I am brimming with

*

I have wrapped myself in withdrawal
teaching my heart to die

the spring of life was a close neighbour of mine
I have polluted it with my dust

*

Should I weep all the time
should I laugh and play and sleep
the treasure is undiscoverable
a life should not be wasted lamenting

*

We suffer every day
from morning to night
our eyes are blinded with tears of blood
for us to drink

this fragment of a moment
is called life
it is by dying
that we have endured it

*

I saw the holy man shouting his conviction
in the place of prayer
I saw the drinkers out of their minds
in the taverns and stews
I saw one place of quiet in this world
where the dead are

CHANDAN DAS

ON THE WAY HOME FROM PLAY

Each nightfall, at slow lamplight
I turn to watch the old moon breast the sky
And cup my hands to hold the blessings of his light.

Having known what it is die
A little in another's death, known life's glad cry
Pause secretly to fight for breath

I must stop to touch the twilight's flowers of grass,
follow each minute's eternity with
longing eyes

Of the old, bright moon flooding with slow loveliness his
autumn skies.

PRABHANJAN K. MISHRA

HEIGHTS

I fear heights.
The balcony on the third floor
used to scare me
till the sparrows moved in.
When we changed
to the sixth floor of a high-rise
I avoided the balcony
and the windows. Sometimes
to impress critics
I would walk to the balcony
and scan the denture of the horizon
and slyly avoid looking down.

Perspectives change during an air travel.
Floating in a landscape of clouds
the ground is a picture-postcard.
The height is no more real
than the houses are toys.
The world zooms
distant and diffident.
Among the maze of roads
tiny puppets of faceless humanity
move as jigsaw puzzles,
their fragile purposes
being lost to me.

I grab a handful of sky,
hold it firm in my fist
to take down to see
what height does to the void
and to perhaps understand why

the rich disdain the poor,
and their porcelain pride.

THE RUBICON

Was it you? The knock
was so much like yours; not
in terms of any code
that binds us in a nexus.
Only the nuance of familiarity,
its impatience between the pauses
and the proud deliberateness.

Like a mother absorbing the silent
kicks of her precious foetus
my little daughter's tiny hands
jerk in sleep about my listlessness
submerged in guilt of your thought,
so perfectly filial yet so much
like the unintentional razor.

Like the blood of puberty
when a maiden's body arches forward
to meet the way of flesh
and her mind hesitates
on the threshold of Rubicon,
my hands fumble at the door-knob.
But it's only the alluding wind,
or perhaps a distant woodpecker,
or could it be a Morse
from my conscience?

CONTRIBUTORS

Meena Alexander is spending the summer as Writer-in-Residence at Columbia University, New York. She has been teaching at Hunter College. *S. Nagarajan,* till recently Dean of Humanities at Hyderabad University, is away in England at present. *Nilmani Phookan* is the distinguished Assamese poet and Sahitya Akademi award winner. *Arvind Krishna Mehrotra* teaches at Allahabad University and is one of India's leading poets in English. *Bramharajan* teaches at a college in Ootacamund and is the author of two collections of poetry. *Sukumaran's* mother tongue is Malayalam but he writes in Tamil. The 30-year-old poet has recently published *Summer Notes.* The translator of the work of the two Tamil poets is *M. S. Ramaswami,* who has appeared in many leading journals, here and abroad. *M. K. Naik,* the distinguished scholar, lives at Bombay after his retirement. *Makarand Paranjape* teaches English at Hyderabad University and is active as a poet. *Shreela Ray* sends us her poem from the U. S. A., where she lives and writes. *Robin S. Ngangom* is a young poet living in Shillong. *Nilim Kumar* is a young Assamese poet. All the translations from the Assamese in this issue are by *Hiren Gohain,* Professor of English at Gauhati University. *R. Raj Rao* has recently edited an anthology of poetry from Bombay. *Desmond L. Kharmawphlang* has been publishing in various magazines. He lives in Shillong. *Michael Kelly,* who sends us these versions of the Urdu poets Dard (1721—1785) and Mir (1722—1810) from Senegal, West Africa, has published his poems and stories in many many magazines. *Chandan Das* is studying English literature in a Cuttack college. He is our youngest contributor. *Prabhanjan K. Mishra* lives and writes in Bombay.

Set, printed and bound by hand at Mamata Press, Cuttack.