

KAVYA BHARATI

THE STUDY CENTRE FOR
INDIAN LITERATURE IN
ENGLISH AND TRANSLATION

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FOREWORD

In the past months Indian literature in English has suffered the loss of two gifted writers, Nissim Ezekiel and Krishna Rayan. Tributes to these two writers appear in this issue of *Kavya Bharati*. And now as we go to press we have news of another loss. Dom Moraes never published in this journal, but the passing of one who was so accomplished in both prose and poetry writing necessarily leaves us feeling still more depleted. We can only honour the work of these writers each of whom has so greatly enhanced the discipline in which we are involved.

But *Kavya Bharati* continues to look ahead. As announced earlier and in the following pages, our next issue will be focused on the poetry of expatriate Indian writers, and on comment and reviews related to this work. We are still receiving poetry and critical material for this next issue.

For our future issues, *KB* also is eager to have more poetry, articles and reviews from resident Indian writers. We always look for new friends in the world of writing, and are pleased that sixteen contributors appear in this issue for the first time. We are especially encouraged by the new translators who have sent us their work. This issue includes poetry translated or transcreated into English from four different Indian languages--Gujarati, Malayalam, Hindi and Tamil--as well as translations of Nepali verse. We are eager to look at all contributions sent to us that are translated from the languages of India or its neighbouring countries.

Despite our best intentions, *Kavya Bharati* is still running behind schedule. Our keen efforts to coordinate future issues with the calendar will continue unabated.

Kavya Bharati expresses its deep gratitude and appreciation to Dr. N. Poovalingam who has given us his portrait of Nissim Ezekiel for use in this issue.

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NISSIM EZEKIEL A TRIBUTE

Much has already been written about Nissim Ezekiel and his significance in general for Indian Literature after he was lost to us last year. What is written here are our more personal recollections of this great poet: his contributions to our journal, and to American College with which we are related.

Several issues of *Kavya Bharati* included original poems of Nissim Ezekiel. These were invariably of high quality: wryly mirthful, thought-provoking, memorable. Nissim Ezekiel's writing graced almost any enterprise large or small to which he gave attention. We remember this grace as we look back through the contributions that he shared with us.

We recall particularly a long and intensive day he spent with us on our campus almost fifteen years ago. For two full hours he read from his poems to a large, spellbound audience. Two more lively hours followed with our postgraduate students conversing, responding to questions, reading and re-reading with them--from "Enterprise" to "Scorpion" and all the rest. And afterwards a long evening with the staff of SCILET, *KB*'s sponsoring institute, listening to our plans, sharing ideas, advising. No wonder that at almost ten o'clock that night he suddenly exclaimed, with his trademark whimsical smile, "I'm tired!". This was Nissim Ezekiel at his best. He loved to give, and keep on giving until he was quite exhausted. Many of our country's other educational institutions could offer similar witness to his giving. And of equal importance was the encouragement and tangible assistance that he gave to other fine poets in the publication of their own work.

Nissim Ezekiel's poetry stands tall beside our country's best English medium writing of the past century. This valuation has been justly repeated in multiple tributes already given him. But he should be additionally remembered as one who **gave**: of his talents, his counsel and his enterprise to an untold number of students, colleagues and other poets. A mark of his greatness is the extent to which his influence and his impact is certain to live on in many of the poets and institutions of the new century in which we are now living.

KAMALA DAS

THE PASSING OF A TYPHOON

Hearken to the cry of crickets
In the summer air;
Crickets in bamboo groves,
Crickets in the ripened fields of rice,
Perhaps a forerunner,
This strident clamour,
Of the typhoons to pass my way
To the vast cyclone of the mind
Where cruelty ploughs
The bloodred soil
And ill winds from nether worlds
Sow nightmares to suit the age.
Emotions still exist
But battered out of shape,
Shallow sequestered pools,
A muddy waste that a past
Shared with offspring and a mate
Left behind,
Its meagre debris,
Its messages still undeciphered.

THE CIRCUS

This is my guess, right or wrong.
Words written out by poets
And prophets are wise
But wiser still remain the truths
That are not written.
Dig into the nest of tap-roots
To unbury the revelations
That sprout their heady bloom
On the other side of earth.
Travel inwards devouring Time
Burrowing into the myriad layers
Of the planet's body
Beyond the skin
Beyond the bones and the marrow
To the nadir of life
The hot, dark cellar
Of loneliness.
Old age is a distorting mirror
One cannot recognize oneself
In its glaze.
Who would have paid the price
To come as a tired spectator
Carrying the child within
To this ultimate circus?

TRADITION-BOUND

Grief has a logic inexplicable.
In the gaudy bazaars
Of the human mind
You tread on moist clammy dirt roads
That smell of butchers' wares.
And bits of tinsel
From bygone festivals
Ground in by the stamp of feet
Gleam, a tardy gleam.
And the glass bangles gleam
And scream out
A call back to tradition
Bangles for the brides
Bangles for the loyal wives.
The poor are always traditional,
Snug in the inherited memory
Of benevolent all-seeing gods
And chaste women
Sati, Savitri, Mandodhari, Sita....

V. Y. KANTAK

THE MUTED CALL

In the busy thoroughfare
You come upon a child
Standing there right before you,
Wrapped up in his own intense void.

All by himself vulnerable,
With nothing to shore him up--
Back, front, above, below,
Sideways...none.

For one ghostly moment
You stop in your tracks
To stare into that void,
At the quenchless *quaser* there.

He stands utterly propless,
Joining 'the First with the Last'
For you awhile, but would soon
Be hurrying headlong from himself,

Eager, unaware,
Riding his cockleshell
In the turbulent waters
Of our bleak, dubious day
Of nightmare acrobatics.

Not yet: he's whole still--inviolable.
Cherub-face lit with a glow and
Crystal eyes beam you a mute call:

"Come, find what truly you haven't lost,
What you had long thought forfeit
Growing a stranger to yourself..."

A joy hangs limp in the stale air,
Waiting for takers to light on--
Till the bestial daily round
Savages it away....

SHIV K. KUMAR

THE GARDEN

Far away from the metropolis, riddled
with pitfalls, we reside in a garden--
a replica of that other place
where once lived a man with
a woman created out of him.

One difference though. In this case,
I was fabricated out of Sheila's ribs,
just to redeem the gender bias.

When I first reached out for the apple
on our favourite tree, I heard no hissing.
Was it because I have enough
rhetoric within me already not to be tempted
by any fallen angel?
Or, maybe, this fruit didn't deny--
but affirmed both body and mind.
The body with its thousand appetites,
and the mind that always returned
to the rooster after its wanderings.

So we both live here in peace.
While I write verses, perched
on a boulder near the fountain of
nectar, she talks to the wind in a
language that only clouds can understand.

We have willed
that after we're gone only those
who are vegetarian shall inherit
us. Because flesh and bones
don't yield seeds from which sprout
buttercups, jasmines and chrysanthemums.

ADAM TO GOD

“Therefore the Lord God sent him forth
from the Garden of Eden” (Genesis)

O Lord Creator, here we stand before you,
Eve and myself, both disinherited.
But before we depart, may I say a word, please?
A dying man’s declaration, or a bird’s
last warble...Just an urge to clear
some cobwebs in my soul. Of course,
it wasn’t plagiarism, because you took
a leaf out of your own book--pulled
a rib out of my chest when I
was deep in slumber.
Nor was it pilferage as I was your own
creature to mutilate or recast.
Look at this woman you created
out of me. A marvel, isn’t she? A symphony
of design and aroma. A rose-bush grown out of
my rib’s seedling. Temptation even for your
angels to deny you, at least for a night.
Was it a sin if I pressed her to my bosom?
Maybe I was just reclaiming my lost rib.

I guess I am speaking a new language--not
the one we learnt from you--to communicate
through fruit and flower, wind and rainbow.
And now this lingo that the apple has taught us--
of the body’s rapture, of the burden of knowledge
that’s both pain and joy. If we stand here before you
camouflaged by fig leaves, it’s because of
the fear of full exposure--of body and mind.

We know the journey down to earth
is fraught with danger. Nightmare, disease
and death. Animals, birds and humans
eating up their own progenitors.

But, in spite of the enveloping gloom,
we know your compassion would
impel you to call us back some day.
Because divine grace punishes
to forgive and kills to regenerate.
Doesn't sinning carry within its womb
the seeds of redemption?

There, we already hear you say:
'Fare thee well!'

WHISPERINGS OF IMMORTALITY (Listening to Joshua Redman's Jazz)

Escorted by a cello's bass, the rumble
rises from the earth's navel, gently.
A confluence of two tributaries in
the uncharted waters to create sounds,
free-wheeling. No tyrant's baton
to regimen their ebb and flow.
A multitude of voices--wailing, gasping,
crooning and sighing. A leash on the
soul only impoverishes it. But freedom
too is not for everyone.

The music now caresses
my body's landscape. All the scars
have closed their eyes,
leaving no stains anywhere.

Time to release all the bonded slaves--
also to face the stark truth. So speak out,
love, if you're still with me.

WALL CLOCK

Midnight. Silence spilling over
from the room to the balcony.
Except for my cat's mewing,
and the sound of ticking on the wall.

In the muffled light of my bed-lamp,
I hear a heart-throb on the mantelpiece--
tick-tock. Time's footfalls down a dark hallway.
Did its journey begin with the first
cock crow, and will it end when the sky
descends to shroud the earth?

I see grotesque faces in the white space
besieged by the black numbers--
one to twelve. They're asking me to declare
all my assets.

But I'm already down.
This night, loneliness, and the walls
closing in upon me.

MEENA ALEXANDER

RUMOURS FOR AN IMMIGRANT

“Rumours for an Immigrant” was commissioned for Arc en Reve, Mutations Projects on the City, in conjunction with an exhibit of the designs of Rem Koolhaas, Jean Nouvel, Stefano Boeri, Sanford Kwinter (Bordeaux and Fribourg, Fall 2000) and published in *Mutations* eds Tazi, Obrist et al. (Bordeaux: Arc en Reve Centre d’Architecture, 2000)

1. FIFTH AVENUE PLAZA

Water slips down a concrete wall.
In the plaza, she touches a metal table, a chair, a notebook.

Noon already. Each thing swallows its own shadow
murmuring, I cannot flee you.

She loosens her hair, becomes a woman in a silk sari
on a high balcony, the trellis cut in bone.

Rumours clip the air, spread their wings
and swarm through the plaza.

Suddenly she feels hot.
Draws her hair back, a comb glistens in her hand.

She pulls out a pocket mirror puckers her lips.
She tries to make a small scale order

(two black eyes, dark skin, two nostrils,
that sort of thing) out of bristling confusion.

2. CENTRAL PARK

From mouth to shining mouth news darts.
In fields by the river indigo burns.

Gandhi enters Central Park, smoke in his palms.
He raises a charka, a dove coos, fluttering out of his dhoti.

Behind him, pots and pans lashed to bicycle rickshaws,
come the people.
There is no homeland anymore
all nations are abolished, a young man cries.

In the lake rumours flicker, make luminous habitation.
Allen Ginsberg leaps from the reeds

holding hands with a young man from Conakry,
dead already, turned into a star,

shot 41 times by police as he stood in his own doorway.
Gently loiter, he sings.

On his charka Gandhi strums a tune:

I stop somewhere, waiting for you.

3. NOTEBOOK

She has heard the rumour no one will have a homeland.
She opens up her notebook.

She wants to flee her past.
She thinks she can live on the white page.

Wo ist Heimat?
She murmurs this in a tongue she does not understand.

Wen Beitak? Naad evida?

Sitting very straight she writes in her best hand:

I have floated on the river Spree.
Seen Brecht's Theatre from the outside in.

Tucked my body into two suitcases,
with a hole cut between,

hung in a museum at Checkpoint Charlie.
Tired suddenly she stops writing, rubs her wrist.

4. BODIES AND SOULS

Three months ago she met a man with a hurt wrist.
He used to live not far from Mohenjadaró.

In her notebook she speaks to him:
I come from where Marco Polo turned.

As far Mohenjadaró, it is covered in dirt.
The invisible cities burn in me.

Here come under my ribs.
She claps her hand to her lips

lest the wind turn this into a rumour
that reaches Gandhi's ears.

She whispers the immigrant's name
adds, in her mother tongue *Ende priyen!*

She feels all her days and nights are etched
on his lonely skin

in script so exquisite and spare
no one has deciphered it.

In time she will be to him as the air he breathes
so he forgets her utterly

yet his mouth will be tucked to her ear,
marking a wild rose, her raw lips to his wrist.

“Rumours for an Immigrant” and the following “Listening to Lorca” will appear in the forthcoming book Raw Silk (Triquarterly Books/Northwestern University Press, 2004), and are used here by permission of the author.

LISTENING TO LORCA

“Listening to Lorca” was commissioned by the Royal Festival Hall London, for Poetry International 2002, in whose *Catalogue* the following note appeared:

“After the pain and shock of September 11th it was a pleasure to read Lorca’s ‘Poet in New York’ and reattach myself to place through some, and I stress some, of his words. At times his lines startled me’--If it isn’t the birds/covered with ash...’ (‘Si non los parajos/cubiertos de ceniza...’) I carried his poems with me as I rode on the subway, as I wandered about Central Park. One afternoon I sat in Sheep’s Meadow with a friend who read out the Spanish lines to me. I felt that Lorca was speaking to me. Lorca had come as a visitor to this island and then left. I had come exactly fifty years later and stayed on. Then it happened. I started to hear Lorca’s voice as I walked about the city. His voice in my ear. My response became these poems.”

Colour of Home

I met you by Battery Park where the bridge once was.
Invisible it ran between the towers.
What made you follow me, O ghost in black cutaways?

Dear Mr. Lorca I address you,
filled with a formal feeling.
You were tongue tied on the subway till a voice cried out:

34th street, last stop on the D.
It's the Empire State, our tallest again.
Time to gather personal belongings, figure out redemption.

You leant into my ribs muttering:
Did you hear that, you seller of salt
and gatherer of ash just as your foremothers were.

How the world goes on and on.
Have you ever seen a bullfight?
What do you have strapped to your back?

Then quieter, under your breath:
Let's survive the last stop together.
I knew a Hindu ballerina once.

Nothing like you, a quick delicate thing.
I walked with her by the river
those months when English fled from me

and the young men of Manhattan
broke cherry twigs and scribbled on my skin
till one cried out--I am the boy killed by dark water,

surely you know me?
Then bolt upright you whispered:
Why stay on this island?

See how it's ringed by water and flame?
You who have never seen Granada--
tell me, what is the colour of home?

Casida of a Flowering Tree

Go to Monticello, tell me who's buried
under the flowering cherry tree.
Is it Jefferson's daughter with honey coloured hair?
Or Jefferson's son who served his father
burst figs on a blue veined plate,
then crept into the old man's room
to stroke a coverlet seamed with silk?
Glass ornaments from Paris hurt his fist.
The house threaded with weights started to float.
The young man wept till his tears
flowered in Cordoba.
I have written about him in the song
you read as a child. The one with the line
--at five in the afternoon. Don't you recall?

Central Park, Carousel

June already, it's your birthmonth,
nine months since the towers fell.
I set olive twigs in my hair
torn from a tree in Central Park.
I ride a painted horse, its mane a sullen wonder.
You are behind me on a lilting mare.
You whisper--What of happiness?
Dukham, Federico. Smoke fills my eyes.
Young, I was raised to a sorrow song
short fires and stubble on a monsoon coast.
The leaves in your cap are very green.
The eyes of your mare never close.
Somewhere you wrote: Despedida,
If I die leave the balcony open!

HOSHANG MERCHANT

KONYA

A pilgrimage was promised me
by my horoscope
I dreamt of Borobudur but came to Konya
A pilgrimage is supposed to change you

I
So from Istanbul the bus veered steeply down
Past the thickly wooded Black Sea coast
Away from Trabazon's towers to the south

II
Already there was death on the way
As in the Mongols' day:
The way was sleeted over
And somebody lay dead

III
Who was it that lay dead?
The tourist pimps lay in wait
But a kindly cabman delivered me to my door

IV
Next morning I went in search of Rumi
I already know the shape of his tomb
And someone on the way pointed out the street
where he danced mad

V
First I visited his Master Shams
and then I visited the student
My student had called me
I had come

VI

And Master and student lay side by side in death
As they must've lain in life
But they were both teachers
 And their graves were topped by their hats

VII

And their rival Cheleb: who was jealous
 of the Master's other favourites
Also found a place in the capacious graveyard

VIII

For if someone were jealous in Love's court
Rumi courted him a few days
And moved on

IX

The tintinnabulation of the goldsmiths
 had driven him mad
The small hammer on the tympanum
 had driven him mad

X

And the dance he danced
Led him to the circles of the spheres
Like the stars reflected in the planetarium pool
 Led to the stars in the real sky

XI

Friend lies here with friend
Lover lies here with lover
Not to lie here is a lie

XII

And at night they close Rumi's museum
(for this is what they call his mosque since Ataturk)

And a Sufi in green praying at the door
Bought a poor vendor's entire store of tomatoes
So he would not sleep hungry
(And he wasn't even a Turk, he was American)

XIII

Everyone in the town knew
How F-16's bombed Iraq and Afghanistan
And how Rumi had converted one American heart

XIV

First one then ten and then ten million
Got converted on the dusty way to Konya

XV

I never dreamt of coming to Konya
But ever since I came I hear the goldsmith's
 tintinnabulation in my ear
I too dance with the celestial spheres.

VAIKUNT

(For Sujit Mukherjee)

Every 16 years
The doors of Heaven open
To let in the good
If they die a day later
They have to wait 16 years
Yudhishtira waited
For his dog to follow him to Heaven
The hero would not forget a friend even in death
Be wise live and learn
Teach and delve
So when you go
Your good deeds go with you
Like good children's prayers
Like Yudhishtira's dog.

MAYA

WIND

A man of many moods

Cool fragrant gentle breeze,
stirring romance on starry nights.
Grim, purposeful, determined
strong rain carrying winds.
Deep intense passionate
powerful gales hinting storm.
Provoked ire, avenging
typhoon wrecking calm.

Trapped
in a lady's dainty fan.

WATER

Female wiles, feminine charms

Nascent, warm, pure;
nurturing, cleansing rain.
Bewitching, beguiling, sky;
softly chortling stream.
Strong, passionate power;
rushing gushing cascade.
Vast fathomless eternal;
mystical, mysterious sea.

SKY

Endless, minute, ancient, new
A master's art, nature's view.

Pink streaked orange at dawn
Clear blue as the sun goes on
Purple tones 'fore night's born
Velvet black when day's gone.

Locking secrets of many hues
Silent sentinel leaves no clues.

FIRE

Red, orange, yellow and blue,
gaily dressed dancers
gyrating to a silent tune.
Rising and falling
like mocking laughter,
licking and leaping
hungry for slaughter.
Catching and spreading
like rumour on ears.
Cackling like a witch,
devouring like a demon.
Dying slowly
in muted whispers.

EARTH

Testing, tantalizing,
dancer of the veils.
Now luscious green,
fecund and ripe;
then damp mud,
fragrant with life.
Here scorching dry,
hiding all life;
there snowy aloof,
arrogant rife.
Holds a molten heat
that leaves a flaming trail
in its wake.

S.A. PRABHAKAR

TALKING TO ONESELF

Everytime, inside the bus
Full of strangers
I keep looking for known faces
Someone I could lighten
The journey with
Trading inanities on
Life's Sisyphean grind
Or trumpeting new acquisitions
Aware of sounding
Like the serpent
Selling the forbidden fruit
Even while saying it
All the time, both
Hiding the pain in lies
Pretending to be swimming
While being swept away
Living the same servile lives
Yet assuming sovereign airs
As the bus lurches, sways and surges
And I trade old words with him
I often feel as if I'm
Talking to myself
In a dream I've already had

THE UNSWEPT HOUSE

I turn back at the door
For a last look, once more
At my home, no more
All bare, bar memory's footprints on the wall
Where hung till yesterday
Frozen moments of fleeting joy
The toddler, the degree-holder, the newly-wed--
Two score years gone like a dream
Yet how harsh those summers were
Like hell's fire, burning without destroying
As fiery as the sun outside
I look at the floor
The landlady didn't want wiped clean
I lock the door--
Someday I will be leaving another home
On other feet, leaving behind not just dust
Some pain, perhaps, much relief and deathless verses?

SANJUKTA DASGUPTA

GIFT

With a cluster of red roses and poppies
I waited eagerly for you each day

You took the roses and poppies
Crushing your eager face into the soft petals

You breathed in the narcotic fragrance
Holding in your arms my gift of tender flowers

You smiled satiated, in blissful trance
With your smile a million suns lit up my sky

As the minutes ticked, something snapped shut
Promises elsewhere miles away

You left as swiftly as you had come
Turning so easily from where I stood alone

Waiting for you to reach out to me
Fingers entwined in silent dialogue:

But then you hadn't seen me at all
So ecstatic were you with my gift of flowers.

MIRAGE

What a roller coaster ride
Since that July afternoon

The oasis a mirage
Desire trembles in the poisoned air

The cacti does flower sometimes
Rare blossoms in a searing zone

Jolted, shaken, terrified
Licking wounds that open like crimson flowers

This is a tale of brambles and weeds
Not thorns in the flesh

This is a tale about a barren land
About acid rain, mushroom clouds

About fleshless bones and skeletal shapes
Implosion of agony and angst

This is a tale of midsummer's nightmare
Charred, twisted, ghastly and cruel

A danse macabre
Furious Shiva's *tandava*

Gyrations of living death
Self-choreographed

Really about round pegs
In square holes

The incorrigible mess
That we create ever again

Like installations by a conceited Narcissus
Artfully disarranged in callous zest.

MY BEST FRIENDS

This afternoon I wore my dead father's glasses
At once the world became greener all around

Unheard music spilled and spiraled the intense air
Rhapsody wafted like a healing balm

A bird beaked and bent cage bars
Flew like a bird possessed into the beckoning blue

I watched it soar into the blue field overhead
Seeing it truly, as I wore my father's glasses--

A tinkling of bangles on my left arm
My dead mother's gold bands clasp me softly

The rich metal, a glittering security
Their curled touch on my arm like a circular sigh.

Each time I am gored
I hear the tinkling of my mother's bangles

Each time I fall
My father's glasses put me back on track

Two invisible ventilators
A life-support system unmatched.

DECEPTION

No, no more lies.
No more reaching out without reaching
Meeting and yet not meeting
An endless hide and seek
Blind woman's buff
Swishing of verbal whiplash
Each wound screaming voicelessly
At the unfairness of it all.

Have you seen a dry-flower garden?
The darkness and brownness of it all--
Each shriveled bud, each dry twig
A ghastly shadow of what could have been!
Or a dazzling cluster of silk flowers?
So alluring and so lifeless!
Like a ribbon-stream engulfed in the sand
Muffled and gagged
Sadly dying a dry death.

No, no more lies.
Time now to re-enter the carapace
Pull down the shutters
Absorb the silence and the shock
The wild flower curling back into the bud
At its core nursing the scorpion
That stung it shut.

Why was all this necessary
How much hurt can one carry?

MEERA

In a trance Meera sways and sings
Arms outstretched, reaching out to the mesmeric flute-player
Playful, erratic Krishna-Kanhaiya surges within her love-lorn soul
In a cruel hide and seek game
A lifelong maze of doomed desire
Love-sick Meera sings of elusive tormenting spring
Meera could never say like a much younger poet
“Whether flowers blossom or not, it’s spring today”

Monsoon rains mingle with Meera’s tearful song
Meera dances in a whirl
Crazy in her breathless love
In a narcotic daze for her elusive playmate
The madwoman dances in her temple
Of deferred dreams
Dreams that tantalize and traumatize
Dangers that lurk and lure

A jaguar leaps out of nowhere
Like a streak of lightning
It lights up to darken a thousand-fold
The violent, dense dry darkness
The wasteland of bones and brambles
Pierce the soft soles of her dancing feet
Flowing blood reddens everything around
As mesmerized Meera sings her plaintive song--
“*Oh Lord, how to endure the days and nights
Without my Love Giridhar*”

Krishna, the relentless pied piper
Meera-lurer, tantalizer
Krishna of the many names
Giridhar, Govinda, Gopal, Hari, Murari
Weirdly has the last laugh
In all such messy cases.

CARDIOLOGY

A see-through glass jar stands there on the table
Filled with all the shards collected
From beds of thorns and shingles
The pebbles jangle and chuckle
When the jar is shaken even gently
Congealed tears like glass marbles in rattling chatter
Heart bits jangling in the see-through glass jar

Playing with the hearts of others is average sport
Playing with one's own heart is rare skill of course
Challenged heartbeats drum offbeat rhythmic strokes
More sensitive than any long fingered drummer's beats
It is a tonic percussion bracer for arteries and veins
No eco-cardiogram can trace its trajectory
No massive cardiac arrest can imprison it for life

The three hundred and ten grammes heart
Average weight of an average heart is no dead weight
Insistent on more than average dreams
Wings bravely above the walls and barbed wires
To the unmapped terrain that defies the cartographer's genius
To the rarified sphere that is breathless with passion and truth
While sinuous cesspools and sewers of lies surge and heave below

Shattered to countless bits
The pulverized heart renews itself
After the shock waves have done what shock waves do best
After the tired archer has exhausted all the poisoned arrows
This inexplicable reassembling is not programmed software
It tells the timeless real story of how an invincible heart invaded
and defiled
Beats powerfully as it strengthens itself to face the next blast.

TIMELESS

Time advances silently
As it always did
Through centuries and millenniums
It rings the alarm bell
When the memory cannot recall a name
So familiar and close
When tears trickle from the eyes
To welcome the cataract
When the sprightly long limbs
Sit bemused in pain
Creaking each time as the dry bones rattle
Within the body bag
When teeth tingle with shooting pain
As the dessert becomes sawdust

But moving time
Cannot plug the laughter
That gushes like a mountain stream
Thrilling every thirsty pore
A long forgotten song suddenly rises and moves the dry lips
Hypnotic rhythmic notes propel the arthritic stumps
To pirouette again on dancing feet
Arms stretch out, on tiptoe like the sad swan on the lake
Manipulated by the mesmeric strains of music
Long cherished like an anthem of freedom
The heart still beats with joy watching
The free bird in the blue sky
The ear still awaits that one tap on the door
Fingers still caress the blossoming rose bud

The fragrance of starry jasmine on a monsoon night
Narcotizes these age old aches
As the remainder becomes
As bittersweet as the beginning.

STORM AND CALM

Calmness muffles every tendril of the being
Like green moss, softly embedded
Till one day the passive mossy expanse
Just rolled off like a green magic carpet
As the sudden passion-storm wafted in

It tore through the slow sureness
Of the years, months and days
But the storm was weak and unsure
It stormed in but could not carry with it
What it had lured and devastated

Re-settling in the moss
Eyes eagerly wait for the gusty wind
To breeze right into the very core
To coax the sleeping seed
To bud and blossom as never before

This time too will the storm stop short
Or will the storm trooper claim
What it so relentlessly invaded
Storm tossed, tornado swept
Was it just a reckless juvenile sport?

Calmness of moss or the thrill of storm
A lifelong dilemma or maybe a Hobson's choice
As shadows of the long afternoon slowly shroud all hopes
Now it is just the fury of the burning ghat
Or the stillness of the dark grave earth.

GYPSY

The day she entered his home
They took her name away
But gave her another
Her own was so working class
Not what they wanted their lips to form.

They took her father's imprint on her too
Giving her a new surname
Her clothes were different they were new
Her new name and surname
Jangled strangely in a strange air.

She clung to his kindness
Like a scared creeper
What an unending trial for him
To endure a wild, helpless one
When just a care-giver would have done.

He never called her by her name
His grandfather called his wife "Ravi's Ma"
He never knew how eagerly her ears waited
To hear his voice call out her very own name
Some monsoon night or spring morning.

Yet there was laughter and joy too
To watch the saplings grow inch by inch
Tall, confident and spirited
Shedding both to grow up and be free
And those succulent kitchen triumphs that still go on.

Braveheart he to bear this cross
Caring for one who is never quite there
Mellowing and melting with each long year
The journey stretches from here to nowhere
As one by one loved ones leave forever.

Though it is more than ten thousand days now
When she first entered his beautiful home
She feels she is truly a Permanent Guest
As the plush club identity card calls her
Desperately memorizing the magic password "Adjust."

DELUSION

Every moment it nags within
As the chores go on
Escape only when the last breath expires
For a dream ineffectual
Looking for a rainbow
Archway to a real world
Receding every time
Mocking each forward step

Yet the dove spreads its wings
Every new dawn
Folding them too
The sky spews venom
Acid rain
Darkens the dawn
Skeletons in a frieze entwine
Like leafless, charcoal-black branches

The Garden of Eden
The *Vrindavan* of rapture
Shrivels and flattens out
Under the wheels of a relentless Juggernaut
Swift, sudden and very sure.

PROMISE

Again and yet again
This crouching in a corner
Dazed by another lightning flash
A desert just expands each time
Engulfed and muffled in a sand storm
Cries silently rise
As the sirocco blows
Hollows in the heart
Awaiting the sound of rain
Travesty of the moist and the lush.

And yet a grass blade writhes and wriggles
Shakes off the earth cover with rare zest
The green blade, tender and taut
Toughens its stand in the sun
So much pain
Makes dreams secure
Though nightmare pervades
No promises had been ever made
Still the green flag waves
Saluting a new dawn.

DARSHAN SINGH MAINI

THE MISERY OF WORDS

I lost my jewel-soul
In the woods of my thoughts,
And went seeking it
In big, erudite tomes,
Not knowing that words
Are not their own masters,
But slaves to some dark dreams
Which like white ants had
Eaten up the meat of my heart.

When desires carry the whip,
And the mind runs before the crack,
There's no knowing where the ride
Will take us, or drop us in a ditch.
Words can salvage only what
The wanton muses need,
A diet of white cheese
To reach the worms lodged
In safe, soft holes.

THE QUEST

When the spirit is under siege,
And the body a supine tool,
The clocks stare back at you
Their stone-fingers in siesta.
The mind unable to spin
New allegories and fantasies,
Like a maverick dark horse,
Takes the bit in its mouth,
And rebellious, incensed, raging

Barges into the Freudian woods.
All one can see, then, blinded
Is a complex of cobwebs,
Catacombs and labyrinths
Where the quest ends up
In a deep dark hole.

MY PASSAGE HOME

When poised on the ledge for a leap,
I think of the passage home,
I find the sun stop
As though time were but
A bubble or a drop.
And when I unwind
The machine of memories,
The ghosts rise and grin,
And I begin to retreat
Into those arbours of thought
Where once the nightingales sang,
And the Keatsian odes were born.
Ah, but dreams are whores,
And the call-sirens, the rocks,
Are not far from the storm.
And the wind rises, unawares,
And blows me off my perch
Towards an uncertain shore.
But no, I've seen the door ajar,
And, heart on hand, I could still arrive.

HER MOVES

Time was when she wrote
Reams of lavendered love,
And, wrapped in inscrutable alphabet,
The epistolary romance rolled on
Till she fell into an ennui
Of excess, and began to fumble
For a serviceable lexicon
That could still hold him,
And not push him over the cliff
She could see rising as though
In a fog on a sunny day.
Ah, but the game of chess
Too has its own cunning codes,
And she knew when to move
Her secret ensign to topple
A king caught in a blind.

SHANTA ACHARYA

VIGIL

All through the night memories of you keep me company;
you are steady as the flame keeping vigil over the family.

We lie grief-stricken, stunned as the earth,
explosions of pain shatter the epicentre of our lives--
as real as the earthquake in Gujarat that devastated families.

Silently we contemplate the meaning of our lives--
its quiet purpose in bringing us together
as father, mother, brother, sister,
the relationship of love knitting us through the ages.

Where do our deepest emotions come from?
Who brings us these tidings of love?
Are we like the beach yielding to the insatiable ocean,
being moulded into something new over centuries?

As I keep vigil through the night in meditation,
ensuring the lamp we have lighted will hasten
the ascent of your soul--onwards and upwards
in its journey to worlds unknown to us--
and will not flicker out leaving you in confusion,

I half-dream, though half-awake, of you in exquisite colours,
rich hues of crimson, maroon, golden, purple and blue,
transformed into icons in a sacred gallery.
I hear music as I float from image to image,
resting finally on your face, pure light, a vision.

HIGHGATE WOOD
(For Gwen Griffith-Dickson)

Unmistakable the freshness of fragrances,
pine, chestnut and honeysuckle,
as I pass the cottage along one of the entrances
to a wood that possesses a thousand and one faces.

A moment of jubilation when the sunlight
streams in startling the plants left to grow wild
in their coppiced sites regenerating the land.
Silhouettes stretch and chase each other in the bright
green meadow poised ethereally in the distance,
reflecting myriad perspectives in this exquisite gallery.

When the sun disappears surreptitiously
with its arms full of the mystery of the place
leaving me with the knowledge piecemeal of leaves
and trees, daughters and mothers, relationships--
I wander into the woodland's dark womb
seeking a sacred space to replenish my self,
letting the ancient spirit of the trees restore my soul...

I sit on the floor of this weeping cathedral,
the dripping wood blessing with rain.
The sun reappears, nonchalantly playing hide-and-seek
with creatures bursting out of their cocoons,
negotiating a tentative passage in the world;
the strongest learning first to stand together.

Above the chirping, twittering, whistling birds,
the arching double rainbow renews hope:
Est, ergo cognito: it is, therefore I think.
We are what others make us, so select your society;
pearls in a necklace, resplendent in company.

LOSING, FINDING

To know the true worth of our endowment
we must lose it first, unexpectedly,
perhaps through some minor personal neglect
to release the rich flavours from such experience,
without any hope of recompense--
else knowledge and time make loss-adjusters of us all,
we discount and rationalise the past, present and future.

During a lifetime we lose to gain gifts, legacies as dear
as innocence, youth, health, wealth, love, freedom or truth.
Even the knowledge of what parents, grandparents,
siblings, friends, lovers and enemies mean to us
can only be purchased at inexorable cost.

By the time we are able to take stock of a lifetime of losses,
draw up an inventory of our inheritance
before we venture forth to another world--
Life plays its inimitable part in compensating us
with each asset stripped off from the portfolio of our heart.

JOSEPH J. PUTHUMANA

NATURE MURDERED

Sir, please take me home in your auto,
my house was near the bridge
that spanned the court and the market,
favourite resorts of my village comrades.

Disappeared is the path that always took me home;
nay, the Canal has consumed it
the cannon of consumer culture
whose fury devours hillocks and pastures,
and carries the ghosts of the sylvan streams
to make a ditch of the blessed soil,
its vibrant vegetation a mere swollen corpse.
Swollen indeed!
A fitting denouement to the proud man's endeavour!

TEMPLE OR GUTTERS

Should I pitch my tent in this Temple
so imposing and majestic--
its blinding domes and dizzy towers
canopying the exalted Tabernacle,
guarded by its haloed minions
whose glossy virtues match
the diamond-decked, balmy-panelled,
fragrant-filled grandiose halls--
paradise par excellence?

Where is the roofless gutter
that harbours my hapless brethren--
wretched, sweating and stinking,
weeping and sobbing outcasts--
sunned and showered,
graceless but Grace abounding?

M. MOHANKUMAR

CLIMBING THE HILL

Want to climb this hill?
This bare brown hill?
There's no temple over there.
No church. No footprints left by
Sojourning gods or god-like princes.
No story has grown around it.
Except some granny's tale
To stop crying children with.
Haven't you heard the story of a man
Rolling stones right up to the hill-top
And rolling them down, clapping hands
Delightedly, every day of the week?
They laughed at him, called him mad.
Slowly, the message sank in but
The name stuck. You will see that hill
In the next village, a shrine on top
In his honour.

You want to climb this hill?
Well, go ahead. Hills are to be
Climbed; rivers to be crossed;
The skies to be conquered.
Follow the old fading trail as far
As you can. Beware of brambles and
Creepy things. Nothing else to look for
As you climb. Once I looked in vain
For the cave in the granny's tale
Of the sorcerer, how he lived there
For long, long years and was seen
Sometimes floating in the air,
Sometimes walking on the flooding river
And, enraged by the cries of children,
Letting loose a violent storm that would

Blow off roof-tops and little children.
At the top you will find peace, if nothing
Else. And feel the cool freshening breeze.
Through the thin translucent haze, you will
See the paddy fields like pasted
Postal stamps, pinheads of palmyrah
Trees, the river like a curled ribbon
And, farther, a train perhaps, toy-like,
Making its slow way on the bend.
Old people still say that if you
Listen carefully, you could hear
Sounds and sweet airs that would delight.
But I cannot vouch for it.

UNTITLED

Do you mean it?
Or are you just chaffing?
Do you mean it when you say
I have given you everything
Except love?
Whenever I came home laden with
Things much after your heart,
I could see your face light up.
I could see the sparkle of delight
In your eyes. Could you have missed
The scent pervading them all?
Did you miss it because it did not
Come as another packaged thing
Glittering on the surface?
Did you not feel it because
It was not a heady drink full of
Froth and effervescence?

No, you could not have missed it
And you do not mean
What you say.

KYNPHAM SING NONGKYNRIH

BLASPHEMOUS LINES FOR MOTHER

R.K. Narayan is dead.
Tonight he sits pensive
in his bamboo chair
talking of a “very rare soul.”

Suddenly I’m seized by a desire
to vivisect my own “very rare soul”
from end to end.

Let me begin by saying my mother is more
“plain-dealing,” more “truth-telling” than Narayan’s.
My mother is retired, toothless, diabetic and bedevilled
by headaches and a blinding cataract. In short,
she is a cantankerous old woman.

I remember the time when she was a cantankerous
young woman. When she took an afternoon nap,
she was tigerish: “You sons of a vagina!” she
would snarl, “you won’t even let me rest for a moment,
sons of a fiend! Come here sons of a beast! If I
get you I’ll lame you! I’ll maim you! ... Sons
of a louse! You feed on the flesh that breeds you!
Make a noise again when I sleep and I’ll thrash you
till you howl like a dog! You irresponsible nitwits!
how will I play the numbers if I don’t get a good
dream? How will I feed you, sons of a lowbred?”

And this fiery salvo would come hurtling
with wooden stools, iron tongs and bronze
blowers, as we ran for our lives and she
gave chase with canes and firewood,
her hair flying loose, her eyes inflamed
and her tongue lashing with a mad rage.

And we being but children would never
learn anything except becoming experts
at dodging her unconventional weapons.

I remember how, having no daughter, she would
make me wash her blood-stained rags. Refusal
was out of the question. So, always I would pick
them with sticks and pestle them in an old iron bucket
till the water cleared. But mind you, all this on the sly.
Seeing me not using my hands would be lethal.

Those days in Cherra we never knew what
a toilet was. We never had a septic tank
or a service latrine. We simply did our job
in our sacred groves. But sometimes
my mother would do her job in a trash can.
Then it would fall on me to ferry the cargo
to a sacred grove. Refusal was out
of the question. So, always I would sprinkle
ash upon it, top it with betel-nut peels
and things and do my best to avoid nosy
neighbours and playmates. Those who
have seen Kamal Hasan in *Pushpak*
will understand my stratagems.

I could cite a thousand and one things
to demonstrate how cantankerously
rare my mother is. And I decline
to tell you anything good about her.
I'm not a Narayan and I decline
to tell you how she suffered when
my bucolic father was alive; or how
she suffered when he died; or how
she suffered rearing her two sons
and her dead sister's toddlers
in the proper way. There's only one
thing commendable I will admit about her:

if she had married again and not been
the cantankerous woman that she is,
I probably would not be standing
here reading this poem today.

THE COLOURS OF TRUTH

A siesta phone call
oozes friendly warnings.

Insurgents have grown
incredibly urbane, these days.
The question is, must we subterfuge
to shield a pedagogic stooge?

I close my eyes
turn towards the sun.
The colour I see is
disgorging blood.

I close my eyes
shade them with my palms.

the colour I see is
life-erasing black.

These are the colours of destiny
of immutable truth
and the colours also
with which warring pawns
are daily decorating our towns.

AN EVENING BY THE SOURCE
OF THE UMKHRAH RIVER

By a lane winding through the hills
“I stroll at leisure”¹ along the Umkhrah river.
Incredibly clear is the water up here
The blue sky snoozes on its bed of white sand.
Patrolling its banks are occasional fishermen;
washing the clean earth from their sturdy feet
are country maidens, blushing and giggling
on smooth, swarthy washing stones.
The wind ruffles the deep grass
plays a tune with the head-swaying pines
fetches the cries of gambolling children
from a hamlet beyond the green hills.
Nobody cares that this limpid water,
the bashful maidens, the tuneful pines,
are rolling down to the city
where life itself wallows in the filth.

THE LINGUIST

Artificial hearts
artificial innards
artificial limbs
artificial lungs.
They say she speaks
an artificial tongue
and having gone to America
She came back with a twang.

¹Quoted from Yi Kyu-Bo’s “Along the Upper Reaches of the Nakdong River.”

PLAY OF THE ABSURD

Sisyphus eternally rolls his rock
to the mountain top from which
it eternally rolls down again.

Out of the ruins of a fallen revolution
Putin redeemed ancient glories.
He launched his fleet of scrap-metal
battleships into the Barents Sea
and hundreds of scapegoat archetypes
sank to the sea-bed, cocooned
in a derelict submarine tomb.

Somewhere in a forgotten little corner of the world
a hill tribe of one million, fearful of its extinction,
waged an arms insurrection against a nation
of one billion. Their motto:
“To dream the impossible dream,
to fight the unbeatable foe,
to bear with unbearable sorrow,
to run where the brave dare not go....”

Old Powder Keg, Chief Minister of the hills
lackey of the plains, ordered a fox hunt.
A band of their rebels and stray students
were immediately shot to shreds.

Bloated with super power pride Putin
wasted days of oxygen to extricate
sailors with “a technology gone mad.”¹

¹All quotations from this point onward are from Camus’ Nobel Prize acceptance speech.

When the curtain fell and the underwater stage was littered with corpses, he who had sneered at the world rehashed cobweb propaganda. He pointed to British saboteurs and withdrew behind the old iron wall.

In the forgotten corner, old Powder Keg, glistening with brand-new chief-ministerial pride simply fabricated clumsy, home-spun lies. The tortured rebels had risen from near death to challenge AK-47 *khaki* men in armoured vans to a bloody duel. They were armed with midget handguns.

The truth is, a wise man said, “mysterious, elusive, always to be conquered.” We have neither fleet, nor troops nor armoury-- tell us O, valiant ones! What terror had stalked the dark spaces of your sunken dungeon? What agony, my compatriots, had gorged upon your gouged nipples, plucked nails, lacerated thighs, mutilated organs and pulverized balls? Lay before us the many-sidedness of your truth. O, poor deluded youths! May God bless you with His divine betel nuts.²

Camus believed Sisyphus was happy for the attempt alone had satisfied him.

Perhaps the Russian soldiers, Putin, the Khasi rebels, old Powder Keg were all happy.

²Khasi belief that the dead go to have Kwai or betel nut in the House of God.

Perhaps the reputation of the Russian leadership
is lying at the bottom of the Barents Sea. Perhaps
that of our political leeches has been burnt to cinder
at funeral pyres or interred with punctured torsos.
But what of the grief, the outrage, the hatred?

Tombstones shall spread their tentacles
and succeeding generations shall chronicle
another insane history.

ONLY MY TENANT

What if he is a professor?
What is he to me,
though he is an M.Phil or a doctorate?
I'm the queen here, the big-bosom queen.
And he, a mere tenant
to my high station in society.
Only a weed to me,
to be trampled and crushed
under my colourful high-heels.
Like this!
I can bitch him around too.
When he reads
I can turn on my cackling music,
beat my children
(so they cry),
or cut off his electric supply.
I can refuse him water
by which he rinses
his so-called learned mouth.

I can keep him in the common latrine
and deny him access to my private one
where my husband pours water every day.

You see, he is nothing to me
but a little grasshopper.
Why should I treat him with respect?
because he is a doctorate?
He is a nice man?
No, he is just afraid of my big mouth.

Maybe my husband is jobless now,
but he will get a job one day,
maybe after my fourth child, who knows?
You may condemn him for a lounge,
pestering the girls in the street
and holding the marijuana pipe in corners.
But if he says this is so,
they will have to agree, my tenants.
Let him beat me sometimes, so what?
That bloody professor might beat his wife too,
when he gets married;
or he might drink like my husband
and then I will laugh and say
serves you right for behaving like a saint.

But why do you praise only him?
Let him get his doctorate,
but don't doctorate with me.
I too am a doctor.
Maybe only a doctor of the beasts,
as you so uncharitably say,
but my tenants are my dogs;
if healthy, I give them shelter,
if mangy, I kick them helter-skelter.

WINTER SONG

Winter that sneaked into these hills
on the tenth moon has consolidated
its stay beyond the cherries.

Christmas like winter comes again and again
seducing our hearts with promises of heaven.

Life takes on a cheerfully, sneeringly
devout look, pines lose their limbs.
But the cunning dealer from the plains
does a brisk trade selling stars like *bindis*.

This is the season for ecumenical blessings,
when neon lights and ornate pine limbs
make a home God-fearing.

When holly blooms from tablecloths
and everything is silent for the songs
of the new-born king.

Must I never again hear the wind moan
from nocturnal silk strings?¹

The nights cavort with willing virgins
and virgin drinkers, singing hymns
in wobbly tones.

¹Traditional *duitara* music.

HIRAETH

In the solemn hour of early morning the shrill chorus
of a *namaz* wrenched me from my affable dreams.
I twisted and turned and finally surrendered.

No more do I hear the morning sounds of home:
birds warbling, cicadas whining, crows cawing,
chickens yapping about the yard and my uncle
readying for the cement factory. Twisting and turning
I understood the *hiraeth* of Soso,¹ who wished
no more than to be a boy once more. I miss that too,
and our old rooster, how his triumphant cry would stir
my slumber making me draw closer to mother.

Out of that restlessness the past rises from dimly
remembered songs and I watch my ghostly ancestors
hasten from their dark pallets at the rooster's
first reveille; warming up for their fields,

boiling rice, packing their midday meal in leaves.
I saw them arm themselves with hook-like whetted
knives at the second. And slinging bamboo cones
on bamboo straps, I watch them emerge from their huts
at the third; bamboo torches twinkling in their hands,
ancient songs and playful limericks flowing
from their lips.

¹*Hiraeth*: Welsh word, loosely translated as various forms of
longing. Soso Tham was the chief bard of the Khasis.

Now, in the cycle of a year
my sleep is often startled
by raucous *azaans*, jangling bells,
wild ululations, weird conch-shells
midnight carousals, spirituous carols,
clamorous crackers, nocturnal heavy metals.

Strange sounds are crowding this town.
like the rooster, I too, seem
to have become obsolete.

REBECCA S. ERB

STILL LIFE FRAMES THE SEA

Early evening, on the porch overlooking
the ocean at the Battery, Belfast, Maine, U.S.A.

Sails aloft, each lone craft
Adrift upon this vast expanse.
The Sea, open slate until
A passing yatch sends
Washboard ripples
Across ripples
Across its ashen face.

Grey stillness paints this
Canvas with supple strokes.
Subdued voices float upon
A silver sliver of breeze.
A single grey gull's cry
Pierces the heavens' hush.

Even stone grey birches
Embrace the silent sea,
Bound by slate blue hills:
A distant island presence.

Light, fading from the sky
Leaves faint blue tones
Like dying notes from
An Indian flute embracing silence.
Soon, blue lights become ethereal white
Pink tones emerge beneath
Clouds' silent stationary form.
Faint ghosts of Cadillac
Skirt the horizon.

This ancient light between two worlds
Returns. Twilight comes.
Harbor bells foretell the night.

JUJU ABRAHAM

I, GAIA

I am the “She”
You are searching for,
Call me White Goddess,
Lillith, Demeter, Astarte or
Gaia:
I danced forth from nothing,
I gave you the earth.

Search for me in the caves,
Plunge for me into the ocean,
I shall gently rise in your consciousness.
I am the moon, the new spray of corn
I am myth, I am culture.

I create from the void,
I am woman
Who gave you man.

I am Gaia,
Within you
Without you.

HIATUS

Beside the hearth I sat,
She lay
with her head on my lap.
Running my fingers through her hair
I read late into the night.

Morning found us entwined
in each other's arms
sleeping like babes
beneath a heavy rug.
Mother had covered us at night
the thick carpet with butterflies and fairies,
the warm cozy bed.

Together we grew,
two beans borne in different pods,
and then
outgrew.

Now friendship lies mummified
in eternal sleep;
maybe to be excavated later,
brushed clean
and preserved forever.

CYRIL DABYDEEN

ON MEETING HER EXCELLENCY RAMA DEVI, GOVERNOR OF HIMACHEL PRADESH (*Shimla, November 1997*)

1

I am here in this majestic-looking building,
where the peace treaty or accord was signed
between Prime Minister Indira Gandhi
and President Bhutto of Pakistan--here where
all sorrows would now end: a new beginning, too
with more than Nehru's "tryst with destiny" in the year
of the Fiftieth anniversary of independence
as I look back at what shaped words
in a glass encasement, like time's own reckoning.
And India was once the richest country in the world
in the fifteenth century before the Europeans
came to the New World--I now hear you say.

In Shimla, I move around the building where the last
Viceroy lived, all with the Raj's own shape of things:
new railway tracks forming despite population upheaval,
or just Gandhi's *Swaraj* as I also kept going to Dandi
beach on the salt march. Now the monkeys stared
at me and whisked their tale about as I gesticulated
at them, and they didn't balk: only their watchful
eyes at my strides here in the Himalayan foothills.

Now my indeed being welcomed by Governor Rama Devi
as a poet laureate, or being from somewhere else--
as I recall making endearing smiles while considering
peace treaties, this haggling or bargaining over territory,
life's true negotiation far from the summer heat of Delhi.

2

A cobra had looked at me in a corner street,
in Mumbai close to the Taj Mahal Hotel, as an almost
blind man played his flute and enticed the reptile to raise
its head: such a rite, or a life lived for passers-by like me
as the poor came steadily closer to make amends
because of what must continue long after independence,
or facing up to new perils for generations to come.
Belly-up it seemed the snake moved, raised its head,
the eyes becoming more alert--as I remembered,
my own style before arriving in Shimla, believe me.
Negotiations continuing with the Viceroy as I longed
for harmony because of my burning sense of what occurred,
here in Governor's Rama Devi's mansion more than ever.

3

Without false pretence or inhibition I say it's like
going across the ocean to India once again
in a dhow and trying to make my own mark
without the sense of Mowgli, my being Kipling
once more. Now elephants have ways of becoming gods
as the trunk lifts up in me, or my being blind with
a snake's poison in my eyes; the trunk lowers next
as I am in more than a real mansion in the Himalayas,
which I will long remember, despite a monkey's rebuke,
or as I tried to be an upstart with Congress Party prowess
with my own identity while conjuring up other exotic
places, as freedom reigned supreme and kept me going
to where there's far less of the tropics, if being in
Canada's Arctic only. Instincts indeed alive in me,
as Her Excellency looked me fully in the eye; and
a cobra once more raised its head, as I fashioned
more treaties by looking at a glass-window
display I will contemplate for years to come,
crossing boundaries all the while.

MADURAI

He arrives in Madurai, a foreign youth,
Who immediately rents a house.
The caretaker is a man with grit,
He has two daughters, and he laughs often;
Religious too he is, believe me.
One daughter brings milk
For the visitor, with a sister close behind.
The sister smiles; her name is Shanti,
How her eyes sparkle, darkly.
Marty is suddenly alive with hopes;
He's been all over India, he says.
Once nearly died from malaria.
He finally marries Shanti,
And brings her to Canada.
Now he works for Multiculturalism Canada.
She teaches ESL, and contemplates
Having a big family.
The caretaker is happy, becoming
More religious now;
Maybe another visitor
Will come, he hopes,
For Binni, the older sister,
To a land soon empty of people.

A CERTAIN ATTITUDE

What I remember most--
give poetry to the prisoners

Make them say
the word "bird"

And the rest
will follow--

Like being
in mid-air,

Feet firmly
planted

On the ground
while in flight.

SANJOY SAKSENA

ANGLO-INDIANIZATION

In this Anglo-saracenic mansion Major Booth settled
Down, his pale white feet on the brass table.
Booty, captured with care, he couldn't take his eyes off.
Well watered creepers turned and twisted the flowers
And loin-clothed retainers busily palmed fans around.
In spare time, plans he imbricated for a new future--
Wylie Carriage Agents he drove horses for could be his;
Money in London and wealthy company could bring ideas.
Homely arches seemed to imprison them, white washed
Pillars like Presbyterian Church's Greco-Roman ones
Stood guard on their master's wandering desires.
Sky, clearly, was the limit clouds steadily restricted!
His quarrelsome wife passed off with the sepoy mutiny in rage
After the fire and wind. Memories came back
Each day like dust to needle him unseen,
Quietly. The three mistresses, all Hindu, pregnant
In a row, reward for valour in heathen lands,
Scorched him with their wide eyes, burning red
More than the sun, and he ran to set his brown lands
In order. They reminded him of his progeny to come.
The pull of blood, racial divide, deifying customs, grey beard,
Tracherous journeys and slippery English women in frills
On dimly lit cobbled roads haunted him throughout the day.
Our bones are the same, he thought, the colour of salt,
Friends sleep with in peace, protected from worms.
Between Christ and the Vedic faith lay a riddle
For him, too early in life to be resolved--a nightmare
To defy with the courage of an unarmed red-coat
Lest it should return at dusk when it is time
For the strong intoxicating pleasures of pagan life.
He hated black skins loose and flesh he liked,
The colour of curry. Mutiny had created his appetite for more.

Better to be arms in arms before defacing them
Lustily on the field was his favourite white advice;
He shared hubble-bubbling with mercenary white survivors
After wild hunts and chases in deciduous forests.
And when an uncalled for embryonic future beckoned
Trophies in the mansion, a tigress and antlers,
Possessed him; fear of addictives and the magic of innocence.
Neither force nor language seemed to work
His own successful mite had set him right.
The bravado and joke disappeared and his lips were tight,
His own booty had claimed him without a fight.

BESIDES GANGA

I walk on the sacred sand and silt.
The river, begotten by white haired mountains
Carries in its underbelly myths and legends.
Its reluctant flow revives sensations of racial memory.
Cold winds blow against arthritic limbs:
Obeisance to the Gods is painfully paid.
Tears in these boat-shaped eyes blur
The image of an honoured and honouring king
Surrounded by holymen: charity, conquest and lovely wives
Were part of his *dharma*. He never failed
In his duty to his kingdom and self,
Scholars and brave men were his friends.
To please his principal superstitious Rajput queen
Gods galore he created in stone, characterless,
And even now they have their praises sung:
Harsha stands marginalized on the roadside.
His two eyes are empty bowls.
They see in angles combined--
Like traffic rules and understood but rarely followed
Today. Thunder and lightning strikes
Land and water, cows and buffaloes shiver their skins,
Fishes see shafts loose themselves in foliage;
Men shut their ears, once they heard messages divine.

Language of the Gods has been finished
By the tongue of man. Nothing exists outside
Language. Death to the Gods is imminent,
Drawing room figuration is the rage.

Ashoka is dead, his message of peace and goodwill
Stares at the arsenal and army stationed,
Nervously. People celebrate detonation
Of five nuclear bombs, their destructive strength:
Gandhi ashes were rightfully immersed here.
The economy totters like the old beggar, ahead.
Begotten in poverty forward moves the next step
Propped by a bamboo stick, deformed legs all bone;
Crippled aid and World Bank loans.
To him we read aloud Samudra Gupta's inscription;
Pompous claims of exploits in war and conquest,
Negation of Ashoka's message of peace and spirituality
Chiseled deep on his high and silent pillar.
Between the clash of histories lies our fate,
Wedged between the sword and wheel is our existence,
Embossed in parenthesis is the supreme paradox.
Shameless viral brain fever, power created,
Persevering as the current in Gangetic waters that cut
The embankments in spate under cloudy shadows
When strong winds blow and trees agitate like epileptic patients.
The undying tree thrives on suicides; its rustling
Shadows quiver in the deep waves, green on green,
Jade on turquoise, watery underworld's heavenly reflection.

The rush of shimmering waters hurts my eyes
And I drift towards the shifting sands unawares.
"At *Sangam* life meets death," warns the police-man,
Twisting his walrus moustaches, a lost member
Of the demon's party that quarreled with the Gods
Over nectar. Here myths are legends and history,
Fancy is fact--life giving river and death's cushion
Since ages. This spot is sacred to many.

People believe a drop of immortality fell from the sky,
No rain, just a drop, enough reason to travel for miles,
Escape the cycle of birth and rebirth in the supreme
Godhead. River Goddess asks for a handful of water,
Its own, to deliver ancestors and wash sins
Committed in this life and others. It's a bargain!
The blessings are numerous microbes, the cure
For diseases, thousands carry in tins and bottles.
Miracles of mind and spirit! One man's poison,
Another man's cure; victory of spirit over matter.
In the progress of science are buried atoms of destruction
And in the curse of medicines are hidden distressing ailments.
Difficult it is to distinguish between creation and destruction;
Drowning waters and sky merge with land in the thickening light.
Gods have fallen and failed, demons have risen;
The enigmas of life have been cleared by preferences,
Dawn and dusk are mere twilight in this age of percentages
And our fate shall be decided by the evil in good.
As the shades of grey darken to a starless night,
The cutting edge of ends slices our destiny forward.

* * * * *

In summer the river is a woman frailed
By frequent births, the canals; she knows
The land will tremor one day, open its mouth,
Swallow her hungry siblings, alive.
Centuries back it swallowed a river and now
The sands stretch themselves in hunger, again.
Slow death and piety go hand in hand
In divine destruction lies the imminent will's satisfaction:
Its present creations have deified our defied imagination.
The new gods are demons with a religion of their own!
They read the signs of the times in the dark
And in the clash of men, gods and river a terrifying beauty is born.
In the dance of death Shiva may be destroyed,
Locks that contained this river; and the third eye burnt,
And the other two blinded shed tears in vain.

Time rolls on and the innocent continue their humble rituals.
The rustic offers a coin from the folds of his loin cloth
In gratitude, others fish and dive; the river feeds
Treasures buried deep in the earth and water.
Mother and child; relationship between man and river
Is filial, perennial myths are its pulse and rhythm.
The river creates its own throbbing poetry and prompts.
Today, its music and images are just mournful--
The sand and silt in its underbelly are grey ash
And I can hear the wheezing sounds of burning *ghats*.
Tomorrow there might be just the silence of annihilation.

OUTCAST

(After the legend of Karna)

Born in sin he outgrew it,
First pair of shoes soon wouldn't fit.
Sun took off his original colour,
Wiped off his parentage with a strong tan.
Tribals raised him on berries and wild fruits,
Fire in the flint grew unnoticed.
From a distance he intently observed
High born children learn under the priest's
Watchful eyes; imbibed martial arts
And the sacred texts under the bushes.
No mark escaped his humble bow.
When his arrow split the best
Trained, they asked for his thumb:
Knowledge acquired without teachers consent
Was usurpation. Sin of science struck
And the legend stuck out its sore tongue.

NINA BHATT

PLAY IT AGAIN

The past is a record
Black as a crow's wing
Breathing circles like the sea.
Face on the sea wall
Recalls a sharp pain--
A pin brought down on
The sea's soft disc,
Void. Then the outward
Throw of music, almost muscular
As it breaks into a room in rings
Like a rich lady with her perfume.
Loose words intrude, eyes divide
This living platelet
Into sound and celluloid.
A flash of future ghosts
Unvanishing like the ABC
That stays on boards
Slow victory over black
In pale writing; or a dust of
Sparrows, blown skyward--
Moment severed in a lifting
Field of brown fragments,
Each its own continent of
Eye and beak and flecks,
Each weathered like a pebble
On long playing sands.

MADHURITA CHOUDHURY

RED-Re-DEFINED

As I walked the streets of burning Gujarat,
Armed with degrees, culture and tradition,
None of these helped me save my life;
My community symbol on my forehead did,
My 'empty red dot' saved me.

Scanning the streets, I realized:
Once again we, women of all colours, suffer the most--
Stripped, bloodied, torn apart,
Red (our vaginal identity?)
Sacrificed again on the communal pyres,
Lit by the parochial patriarchs
Of both colours.

I see no other colour here,
Except the colour of my dot,
Red--neither saffron nor green,
Weak/ fair/ red /blood--so is my dot.
Many oppressors' colours target--
The dot and the blood of my body.

Red--the repressed colour,
Red--a communion of others like me and I,
Saffron/green, high/low, Rich/poor, dotted/undotted women
Red--we women--our community/communal colour,
Red--redefined.

K. RAJKUMAR

COCKROACH-MAN

On
One fine chilly winter evening
I saw,
On the white slippery floor
Of our lavatory,
A cockroach
Upside down, trying hard to turn-around
Unsuccessful attempts, painful groans
A pitiable urge
To survive.
Every renewed endeavour led him further
On the path of destruction
Indefatigable battle with Death.

In
This world of senses
A man,
Unaware of the materialistic musings,
Enters, eagerly and hopefully,
Only to find himself at the receiving end
Upside down, corrupted to the bone
Helpless endeavours to set himself right
Fighting a losing battle with Death.

When I used some water
To help the cockroach
In finding its way,
He went straight into the hole
Eternal hole...eternal hole.

INDIAN SLAVE-TRADE

Woman!
How strange are these clever animals
Nicely called 'men'
Uniquely selfish, perfectly circumspect
Truly seasonal, and chameleon-friendly.

They surround and adore in your teens
As roamers and loafers do,
Like flies to jaggery
Insects to flowers
Iron particles to the magnet
Unqualified praises, uncountable promises
To make life
Colourful, beautiful, joyful.

Once married
Colours begin to fade
Beauty turns to ugly
Adoration transforms to jealousy
Every possible endeavour
To make you a slave,
Unpaid labourer, children-producing machine
Desperate attempts
To get you
A visa to the Hell.

Oh Woman!
How strange are these 'clever' animals.

LAKSMISREE BANERJEE

LAKSHMAN-REKHA

Why did Sita cross the Lakshman-Rekha
(or did she trip over it?)
between life and death,
that shrouded secrecy
between light and darkness--

that ultra-thin divide
between faith and desire--
that muslin-veil between
appearance and reality?

Why did she pierce through
that cryptic, crystalline wall
stretching endlessly between good and evil
to meet her abductor half way?
to pursue a golden deer
through an endless mesh of verdure,
through tunnels of silenced shrieks?

Why did Sita throw herself away
to the winds and the deserts?
to the skies and the rivers?
rend apart her heart in glassy schisms--
trample upon her own jewels, her own creations,
her own crown of flowers?

leave behind her own garden,
her own home, her own *aangan*--
wrench in dressed pieces her own dreams, desires,
drappings, sarees, *ghunghat* in wreathed agonies,
show the fearful fissures engulfing her own self
in the grand finale of fire and tears--

Was it to punish Ravana
or Rama?

THE PHOENIX AND THE CACTI

(In memory of the 1989 Fire Tragedy, which killed and maimed
many including me, inside Tata Steel, Jamshedpur)

One more day of their heat-eyes
Afflicted me:

Their tongues, honeyed succulence
Wagged into snaky slime behind me--

Their glare was a spike in my flesh,
Though they often hoped
Against me, my good softness,

I managed to return the spike
With no deliberation and much destiny.

Their eulogies, emptiness, flowers
Explored to envious slips of flame
Ignited at my back

Giving them pain.

On that great day of the Visionary,
With pomp around and no vision,

Their pavilion full of meteor eyes
Fuming to have me burnt to ashes,

When the flames ate flesh and silk
Someone enthused:
“But isn’t she scarred beyond recognition?”

That day I garner’d realization from reality.

Kavya Bharati 2003

The fire tearing at my spirit
Writhed upwards and inwards,
Almost a hungry, lascivious female:

My arms and soul outstretched
To save my only fledging.

Times gone by
I have risen with multitudes

A phoenix unable to cremate
The charred corpses still inside

Crowding like cacti.

SRIDHAR RAJESWARAN

FROM THE STUDY WINDOW, 13 *'place du palais'*

The sudden disclosure
The great strip tease
Nudified
By a strung monkey swiveling on a chainsaw
The tree now stands barren
But for the top sporting
A crop of punkish green hair
A static wretch
A transmogrified craggy arm
Rooted to stumps clutching empty spaces
Desperate and despondent in its powerlessness
To change the consequences of human injustice

Just an other day in 'place du palais'

The entire day the mistral blew
Raged a frenzied number
In the morning
 To the simple mellifluousness of a solo flautist
In the evening
 To the repetitive bonhomie of a wild-west shuffle
All day long relentlessly
Stirring silly the befallen leaves
Whorling the wood-chipped dregs
In a flurry of trance
An agony of dance
Into a maelstrom of purposeless endeavour

*Beings all becoming
An abstracted time-cocoon of lost osseous yellow pollen*

Everything timed, un-timed, tuned, un-tuned
De-spatialised in the open--
 parts away from the whole they belong to
 splintered, spliced and severed from the essence of belonging
All swirling, whirling
Vacuously questing
Rising, rising, ever-rising
In togetherness all
Turning, twisting, twirling
Whirl-pooling from the hindering ground
At zenith meeting
Disseminating, raising, forming
Moving
In togetherness again
Unto the apex
As if to seek re-entry through osmosis
From the very top--now punkish--
Into the entrails of their mareotic centre

*Anachronisms in search of a past
Dead for them just after dawn*

Dawn and dusks
Dust and ashes
Old ends and new beginnings
Leaves shed are shred, and the shedding leaves
A clearer window with a view
A clear view with a window
Into the worlds
 of the palace of dead popes
Into the worlds
 of the milling multitudes
Insides disclosing
 the stench of history
Unravelling outsides
 New-life revelling

On the cobbled stones
Bodies revealing
Even as the mind unconceals
A differential strip tease

Salmon crawls the mackerel crowded seas

Darkness falls
Night descends
As it does to all and sundry
And
When the last tourist walked away
When the lost straggler chose to be lost elsewhere
Tree and me
In somber silence
Vegetated
Knew
That we
Bore witness
Stood testimony
Shared loneliness

Under a stark midnight blue sky

A TREE LIVES AGAIN

My tree lives again
Attempts to sway to the inimitable repetitive music
The movements though
A shade strained
Just a gently perceptible oscillation
Almost illusory
So very like

The innocent patter of tiny feet
That undecided try running
In all directions at once
Only to stay rooted
Eyes welled
With pouting lips and a very red face
Until balled fists
And withheld aspirations
Onrush, a palpitating momentum
To precipitate a forward movement
When the leaning, shaking, heaving
Trembling body pulsating,
Pumps,
Kick-starts a shudder
Shuffling to freedom,
Even while
All the time
Casting furtive glances
Of fear and shame,
The past memory of a reprimand intruding,
Innocent anxiety remembering,
Registering
The violent presence of inimical nature
And yet
Unable
To contain atavistic desire
Being unaware of an urge to stay away
From its essence.
The *esprit' de corps*
My poor tree!

LEEYA MEHTA

THE RANT

It starts with routine accusations--you didn't answer the door-bell
in time;

It ends with slurs, death talk--you will send me to my grave you
adulterous bitch.

There were women on the road who used to stop us. They too
would say things like this.

Those women were strangers to me, to my family. We were
salwar-kameezed and dark skinned.

They were fair haired and white, like chalk devils from *chudel*
myths. Their legs were not inverted.

But their sorrow was as great. They too had been abandoned.

But you are no returned-to-the-community woman. No post-
asylum-shutdown-case. You are family.

And I will not run away. Even though I am a poor learner and have
to stay unmoved by curses

That shudder past me. Like some animated computer goddess made
of rubber I must

Bounce the vitriol-of-a-swollen-belly into the dust I failed to clear.

Learn to believe that there will be healing at home.

KRISHNA BOSE

TAKING THIS ROAD

The road veers off
to sneaky, timeless curves
offering you a palette
deep, fastidious
in an undulating wilderness
you never choose to leave
but build nameless, silken tunes
out of the abyss of time
by the tragic mellowness of the sea.

You dispel scoops of nightfall
crouching low on stones
engraving with names
now lying on the ashes of the bones.
A tenacity quaintly waits
on the edge
when you turn inside out
those letters on a clean slate.

Now and then
in a manner of artlessness
you question Neha's dishelved self
left on the rough-hewn patches
at the rear end.
Gradually solemnity shrieks its way
to a far-away inlet
open, undivided.

PANJU

Panju, who teaches at Kanchi Mamunivar Postgraduate Centre, has published two collections of poems, four translations, and a novel. He won the Tirupur Tamil Sangam Award for the year 2000.

JUST ANOTHER THING

The Steel Storewell
Elbowed its way
To hold a pride of place.
Home cheered up.

The idiot box cat walked
Like a celluloid celebrity.
All faces at home
Became action packed.

The day the grinder arrived
Wife spun like a top.

One day a flower
Did bloom at home.
“Oops! A female....”
It was pronounced thus.

The home withdrew
Like an electric fan
Sans power
Only to go lifeless.

AT HOME

One for the Time.
One for the Date.
One for God
Supposed to be alive.

One for mother
Declared dead.

One for the looking glass.
One for the wig.
Two outside
To hold the nameplate.
Many inside
To hang the clothes from.

O Jesus! In my life too
It is nails, nails and nails.

CHANGE

To sneeze was joy.
We had fun
In forcing out sneezes
With a neem leaf
When the nose
Was not ready for one.

But today,
Sneezes come on their own,
Not in singles
But in battalions.
It is a disease,
They say.

Well! It's all like that.
It's all like that
Including the love of mother.

(Translated from Tamil by P. Raja)

EKANT SHRIVASTAVA

Ekant Shrivastava, born in Chhatisgarh, is working in the Hindi Teaching Scheme at Visakhapatnam. He has published several award winning Hindi poetry collections which have been translated into English and many Indian languages.

COLOURS

RED

This is the colour of the pomegranate flower
This is the colour of that woman's cheerful heart
which is breaking
like the ripe pomegranate.

This is the colour of my friend's smile
Whose lips are red due to betel.
This is the colour of the wept eyes of the sister.

This is the colour of the King grasshopper.
To its tail
the messages and thread are tied.
This colour is of the queen butterfly
whom the child is taking home.

This colour is of that fire
which is known as Tesu¹
and as it sparks the spring arrives.

It is the colour of that milky way
which mother applies on her forehead.
Fearing this, death stands miles apart
and father is with mother forever.

¹A kind of red flower

WHITE

It's the colour that
flowed from the breast of Eve
and became immortal.
You can find this colour
in Kans and Doodhmongra¹

When there's no choice
of any other
women live their entire life
with the help of this colour.

This colour is of those herons
that come rarely
from the town's sky for outing
and spoil the village trees.

I would ask this colour
about the swan that picks pearls
and knows about Mansarovar.²

When this colour is unhappy with the walls
the date for its collapse
is almost known.

When we return home in sorrow
for the broken star
this colour smiles before us in white paper
inviting us.

¹Kans and Doodhmongra are kinds of flowers seen in north India

²A famous lake on the Indo-China border which has religious importance.

GREEN

Be it the Siberian grass
or the jungle of Africa
or the mountains of Satpuda Vindhya
This colour
is the name of vegetation around the world.

The existence of this colour
is to believe that
as long as it is there the world is thriving
with full of vegetation.

This is the colour of the flock of wild parrots
which leaves their mark on the fruits

This is the colour which reflects the pond water
and it never snatches the colour of our shirt

One day in winter when the farmer
reaches the fields
It blooms at the last moment
and smiles at the farmer
the last smile of goodbye

And folds its two hands--Yes!
Perhaps in the next rainy season

When this colour dissolves with blood
that man bears all the torture to the last breath
without complaining

I want to keep this colour
away from my blood.

BLACK

The seeds of cotton and custard apple
are sleeping inside the earth
embedded in this colour.

After lighting the lamp in the evening
we surrender our weariness
to this colour
and borrow a little sleep.

This colour is of those gooseberries
which would be sold in the market
and would be a source of income
to purchase oil and firewood for many houses.

This colour is of the soft ocean of your hair
which is filled with music and fragrance
where I am completely drowned.

This is the colour of the clouds in rainy season
which mother hides in her eyelids
and the home is saved from sinking.

As the sun sets
this colour comes
with screams, murder and blood

And it is defeated
against the lamp
for the whole night.

YELLOW

To speak anything
about this colour now
is a daring act
when numbers of marigold flowers
live in this colour.

When thousands of
mustard and sunflowers
laugh on the earth,
The sun also shines
in this colour
and only this colour
falls on the entire universe.

This is the colour of turmeric
placed on the grinding stone
waiting to be grinded.

This is a soft colour
The girls' chunni¹ and sleep
are filled with this colour.

Listen! I am happy that
I am not involved in the conspiracy
to separate things from this colour.

¹A kind of small shawl worn by girls.

BLUE

For centuries this is the colour of our sky
and our rivers' heart
tremble in this colour.

Thousands of linseed flowers are sunk in this colour.

This colour is of that ink
which is spread on the children's
fingers and shirts.
My mother's saree's edge is of this colour
even after so many years.

This is the colour you like.
This colour is close to your heart and dreams.
One day too the colour of the sky would be the same.
Then one day I would meet you
crossing the difficult valleys of waiting.

This colour is related to
sad and fond memories.
Often in my dreams
I see the blue blood dripping
and I wake up frightened.
This, yes, this was the colour of the body
of my brother
before death
and after the snake bite.

I cannot forget this colour
because time carries this colour on its back.

(Translated from Hindi by Santosh Alex)

RAVJI PATEL

Ravji Patel, a Gujarati poet who died young, has to his credit *Angat*, his only volume of poems, published posthumously. He has also written several short stories and novels.

HAIKUS

(1)

The fisherman
Stood for long
Yet the fishes swim.

(2)

A feast got
Scattered; only the carpet
Was left behind.

(3)

A silent couple
Under an umbrella
Everybody hears.

(4)

The secret does
Not come out from the blanket
The whole winter.

(5)

An apple
On the street.
Countless eyes.

(6)

On the outskirts
Of a village Well sits
The thirsty Border.

(7)

In darkness
The sun moves around
Like a glow worm.

(8)

On hearing a song
An ear of corn swayed, on
It perched a sparrow.

(Translated from Gujarati by Vihang Naik)

NELICKAL MURALEEDHARAN

Nellickal Muraleedharan, a modern Malayalam poet with eight collections to his credit, has won several awards for poetry. At present he teaches at the Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady, Kerala

IN CYCLES

The sea
opens its heart unto the dusk.
A shadow together with its fellow
counts the waves.
Lo, the sea too
counts in return.
Paths, stars, sun, moon,
waves, flowers, we too are in cycles.

It gets late: into the evening
the last homing bird has flown.
As we walk, crabs burrow
out of the sand.
And there is the cold
filtered through the wind
abating the fever of the limbs.
Set the ghosts of love afloat
like the cranes of the sea.
Depart, before darkness
grows dense like displeasure in the heart.

On the way, keep silent
lest we speak the un auspicious word
And fall scattered
on the broken mirror.

(Translated from Malayalam by K.M. Tharakan)

GIFT OF EYES

When I cease,
To whom shall I give these eyes of mine?
To my parents devoid of eyesight?
To my sweetheart devoid of farsight?
Gift of eyes--a glorious gift.
To whom shall I give these eyes of mine?

My eyes--
Having watched and witnessed
Festivals year after year,
Truths and lies hour after hour,
Smiling masks in empty faces,
Crooked gambling and unjust exile--
Are tired.

Mine are eyes
Where sleep fears to tread,
Which never dare to wake.
Mine are eyes
Swollen and red and full of tears.
To whom shall I give these eyes of mine
When I cease?
Shallow are my eyes
But in them are tears drawn from the depth.
In them are idols of gods
But not the wounds of prayer.
My eyes look into the mirror and read the face.

They read with equal zest
The sexy blockish words of third-rate scribes.

To whom shall I give these eyes of mine?

(Translated from Malayalam by G. Radhamony)

THE RAIN CAME

No friends in the room;
The Thamburu oozes sobbing lonely.

Eyelids shut, he drinks down from the chalice
The seething, burning poison of chastisement.
A deep wound on his chest; on his right
A bird that wails the past.

Lying on a rag he swims
The ocean of grief, struggling, struggling....

No Friends in the room;
A devil comes in and kisses his left eye.
The candle goes off. The rain comes
And whispers, "Love, O Heart!"

"No more of love's ecstasies for me,
And your shadow is not to fall here anymore."
He cries his heart out.

On the flowering boughs
The rain dies, struggling.
The night's deaf window
Stands a witness.

(Translated from Malayalam jointly by V.C.Harris and A.J.Thomas)

MANJUL

Manjul, grew up in Bhojpur District in eastern Nepal, has produced *Gayak Yatri*, a collection of poems, and also has translated Ai Quing's poems, entitled *Ujyaloko Prasangama*. His extensive travels in several countries have resulted in the publishing of *Samjhana ka Paelaharu*, a travelogue.

POEMS FROM NEPAL

(I)

There's a doorway without a door,
It seems like it would swallow me.
The stuff all around seems
Like it would eat me up.

Who says I am a fairy from Helambu,
Caressing someone's embroidered shoes?
I'm only like a pair of shoes,
Thrown away.

There's no honey
Though we have a beehive in the house,
Like the song of my heart,
Without words.

There's no courtyard,
Only someone's wheat field touching the house,
Like the dance of my heart,
That couldn't dance.

I'm a pair of shoes
To be worn by someone
To be worn out
To be used till it's torn.

But of course I could have been
A fairy too, couldn't I.

I'm pounding and breaking stones,
And with these stones,
I'm pounding and breaking my years,
My days and nights,
I'm pounding and breaking
My desires and my resolutions all.

With these stones I break
I'm pounding and breaking myself.
Day after day,
Moment after moment, second after passing second.

I'm turning
From man into stone
I'm being broken into stone chips
With my pounding, my own pounding, blow after blow.

I'm being raped, violated
Like this desolation.
And I'm giving birth
To these stone chips.

There's no human being around,
Or only dirt like me,
Or maybe there are spots
Where animals have defecated, urinated.

(II)

There's no one
I'm waiting for,
I'm waiting for my own consciousness.
That's flown away no one knows where.

My body has flown away
From me,
The umbrella over me,
The place where I live.

If there's something
That has not flown away
It's my aloneness,
My staring, my melancholy.

There's no one
I'm waiting for,
I'm only waiting for my own consciousness
That's flown away no one knows where.

You say I'm not
Where I am.
You say I'm where
I am not.

But at this moment of time
That too is not known to me
I am sitting here, waiting
For the consciousness that can know it.

There's no one I'm waiting for.

(III)

I'd divide myself
In small change, in coins
For you to come and take turns
To pick it up.

For this is how
I've lived and known life,
I've seen myself in small change alone,
Never in any other form.

By now I find myself so attached
To these small coins, parts of myself,
I wouldn't like to see myself apart from them.
In each coin, I see myself mirrored, in miniature.

I'd divide myself
In small change, in coins
For you to come and take turns
To pick it up.

The dreams of the poor,
They're like these coins too, small change,
Specially the dreams of those
Who survive by compromise with reality.

I'm no heap of small change, either, only a small coin,
You could pick it up, pocket it too:
But as one never to be found by anyone,
You could also throw it away.

(IV)

Having lost all human shape and likeness,
My shadow has spread beyond the load I carry;
Leaning upon that alone I'm walking,
Becoming like that.

Between my shadow and myself,
There's just one difference:
I look just a little like man,
A couple of legs walking,
My body and the load are faceless too.
The very nakedness of these legs is my face:
Sans eyes, sans ears, sans nose, sans face,
Man estranged from man.

Naked legs,
Naked legs hanging from shorts,
Naked legs strapped with sandals,
These are the faces of men who work.

(V)

O yes, I make my living too
Making a show of snakes:
I make both ends meet
Presenting a dance of snakes.
But I don't have those venomous snakes
That the powerful ones have,
I do not have the thrills that come
From biting, killing simple ordinary folk.

I'm only part of the people who suffer misery,
An old man carrying soft and delicate dreams.
My snakes dance to music,
No, they aren't poisonous,
You too could carry them around,
You could make a show of 'em too
They are just my heart,
The heart of a guileless old man.

(VI)

I've no one of my own
For that very reason,
Everyone's my own.

Wherever I happen to stay,
That's my home.
Whoever I happen to meet,
He's my own.
Whatever happens to me
That's my life.

Just look at me, how I'm laughing.
How my white beard, my white moustaches are laughing,
How the mark that fills
My forehead is laughing.

That woman there, who has
All her own
And has no one too
Of her own,
Just look how sad her face is,
How agonized is her look.

(Translated from Nepali by M.M. Thakur)

KRISHNA RAYAN (1918-2003)

KRISHNA RAYAN an outstanding literary theorist and an excellent teacher of English language and literature is no more. He passed away in Mumbai on the 1st of August 2003. He had been hospitalized for surgery to relieve a haematoma. He was in the intensive care unit for thirty-five days fighting one reversal after another.

Krishna Rayan had taught English literature in the Presidency College, Madras and the National Defence Academy, Pune. Subsequently he was Professor of English in the University of Zambia and then in Bayero University, Kano, Nigeria. He returned to India in 1981.

Krishna Rayan's first book *Suggestion and Statement in Poetry* (1972) was published by the Athlone Press attached to the University of London. *Text and Subtext* (1987) *The Burning Bush* (1988) and *Sahitya, a Theory* (1991) followed. These four texts explore the inter relationships between Indian and Western literary theories. *The Lamp and the Jar* (2002) reviewed in KB-14 by Shyamala A. Narayan is a lively collection of twenty-four excitingly varied essays exploring new horizons in literary criticism. This book which turned out to be his swansong will remain the finest example of Krishna Rayan's formidable scholarship.

Kavya Bharati celebrates the memory of Krishna Rayan and his invaluable service to the world of literary scholarship. We will continue to miss his insightful presence in our pages.

ARUNDHATHI SUBRAMANIAM
**THE POET AS CARTOGRAPHER:
MAPPING THE INNER SPACE**

Daruwalla, Keki N. *The Map-maker*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 2002. pp.x,68. Rs.90.

The Map-maker is Keki Daruwalla's ninth book of poems. All that we have come to expect of his work is very much in evidence here: the energetic and tensile muscularity of style, the passionate fascination with diverse cultural contexts, the ability to make moments in remote history throb with arresting immediacy, and the formal ease and assurance that enables him to adopt the role of tribal raconteur and relate an entire mythic tale from Sudan with a bardic feel for mood, tenor and narrative cadence.

But there also seems to be something else in this book: a more reflective vein that comes to acquire a momentum and urgency of its own as the work progresses. Interestingly, the result is not the poetry of meditative stillness or epiphany, but a vigorous intellectual engagement with the questions of life and death. There is a febrile speculative sensibility at work here, rather than the voice of the mystic poet.

The Map-maker is the work of a poet at ease with his craft, but this is also poetry of self-implication. Poetry is explored time and again as a map-making enterprise: both heroic and marginal, imbued by a pioneering spirit of adventure and accompanied at the same time by an awareness of its own vulnerability to the imperialist trudge of time and cultural hegemony, as well as its ephemerality in cosmic terms. There is a distinct attempt to map inner spaces, but an accompanying knowledge that initiative has its limits, and that there are zones where word and symbol cannot trespass. The poet can only allude to these areas that lie beyond 'the coastal casuarina line' in elliptical terms: 'the fire of absence', 'the swamp within, the hedge between love and hate', 'that heaving salt of desire', 'the current/ running under the stillness of the river'.

The poet as cartographer is aware that he both reflects and creates. But while he alters reality, he is also altered by it; he creates a world that also curtails him. Mapping is, therefore, about courage and cowardice. To affirm, to define, to map entails choice, and choice also implies exclusion. And yet, to renounce the enterprise would mean death (after all, 'the dead are generally/ frugal with words'). It would mean relinquishing the ability to revel in texture, nuance and connotation, the capacity to discern the fine distinction between manzil (which 'means dusk and ice/ at the sweltering end of day') and destination (which 'is a garage/ where you park your car for the night'). And the poetry is clearly much too alive and vibrant, much too involved with the phenomenal world in all its richness and diversity, much too animatedly engaged with the resources of language, for the renunciation of form to be a real option. And so the making of map and metaphor continues, even while being intensely conscious of its own fragility.

'Monologues', the first section in the book, is testimony to Daruwalla's abiding curiosity about other histories and cultures. What makes this section so interesting is the fact that the dramatic monologues do not belong to canonical historical figures. Instead the voices are those of shadowy peripheral characters, whose intensely singular biographies embody universal predicaments. There is the Ghana scholar compelled to confront 'the night's distemper' for omitting any mention of slavery in his sanitised thesis on the history of cocoa for Oxford. There is the old cartographer from Majorca whose path-breaking discovery is sidelined because he's deemed small fry by his powerful mainstream counterparts from Genoa and Venice ('We may be tiny, but perspectives/ lean out of islands and voyage on'). And there is a disciple of the Buddha, reflecting on the dystopic and deeply compelling Fire Sermon, in which the Master omits to mention 'the fire in human voids'.

The most impressive quality in Daruwalla's poetry to my mind is his capacity to combine the big picture with the little one, expansiveness with exactitude, the broad stroke with imagistic

precision. In 'Al Azhar Lecture', a vast landscape is evoked in a single flourish by tracing the trajectory of the plague of 1350 'which travelled like a caravan/ from China across the Pamirs/ to the caravanserai called Egypt;/ rested here; refilled its water-skins/ and moved on to Europe'. But with this epic vision is a distinct evocation of the particular: 'I think their bodies smelt of loam' is a young Bethlehem shepherd's recollection of the three kings of the Orient in 'Nativity Poem'. There is also a skilful blending of narrative with casual off-the-cuff insight: 'If you look at a place long enough/ its contours wobble,/ serenity itself can turn fretful' ('The Hebrew Professor').

However, my favourite poems are in the second and third sections of the book--'Map-maker' and 'Century-end Poems'--which grapple with the physical and the metaphysical, the relationship between outer space and inner depth, temporality and inner presence. The title poem, 'Map-maker', one of the most memorable in the book, explores the symbiotic relationship between metaphor and truth, symbol and reality. From the evocative beginning ('Perhaps I'll wake up on some alien shore/ in the shimmer of an aluminium dawn,/ to find the sea talking to itself/ and rummaging among the lines I've drawn'), the poem raises questions about whether it is possible to discern the frontiers between fiction and fact, to locate the point where the map ends and landscape begins. It explores the need to map hinterland and coast, swamp and reef, present and past, the personal and the historical, the distant and the near ('Forget maps and voyaging, study instead/ the parched earth horoscope of a brown people'). The map-maker confronts all the implications--the blend of exhilarating exploration and escapism, liberation and bondage--implicit in his choice of vocation.

The concern with the inner-outer divide persists in 'Roof Observatory' where the writer Jorge Luis Borges is pictured standing in 'the quiet of his observatory/ where the solitudes were so large/ that all else diminished in scale'. But the poet's awe is at the writer's interior life: 'But even there, Borges, the universe of

your mind/ was as large as the universe you were looking into'. 'Mirror Poem' continues to probe the concept of space in the phenomenon of the mirror reflection, and just when you begin to wonder whether the poem is entirely weighed by abstraction, you come upon the lovely last line in which Daruwalla's hawk reappears: 'Looking down/ this vista/ from the precipice of light/ the hawk and the wheeling sky/ move into vertigo.'

The space theme also leads inevitably to a reflection on incarceration, the denial of space, that is so often self-inflicted. 'Bars' is a terse and effective poem that fittingly does not allow itself much space on the page: 'If you want a cage, my dear/ you do not have to travel far/ If you want to feel/ hemmed in, you'll be hemmed in./ Look for scars/ you'll be full of scars./ Even light can turn/ into a cage./ The cage of light/ has seven bars.'

In the third section, 'Century-end Poems', the poet journeys, not surprisingly, from the theme of space to time. The new millennium becomes the occasion for reflections on time as history, the relationship between memory and desire, past and future, the mysterious realm of the ever-pulsating present. Time is Draupadi's eternally unwinding sari ('A Millennium Poem'), and yet 'the past is frozen, it is stone,/ that which doesn't move/ and pulsate is not time' ('Migrations').

I find myself less comfortable with a poem like 'The Birth of Maya' with its consistently oracular tone, where the absence of the sensuous leaves you with the sense that this is entirely a cerebral musing. But when strenuous intellectual enquiry is fuelled by his supple imagistic sensibility, Daruwalla is superb. In 'Migrations', the metaphysical is integrally linked to the concrete and the material, as the poem explores the theme of migrations across space and time, from the biography of nations to a moment of searing personal biography: 'Now my dreams ask me/ if I remember my mother/ and I'm not sure how I'll handle that./ Migrating across years is also difficult.' Likewise 'Century-end Prayer' is not merely an invocation for a more innocent, less violent world, but a warm

generous prayer that trusts the singular, that prays for the denizens of the tropical forests with the same ardour as it does for the little visitor to the skylight: 'May the sparrow know glass/ from the crisp air outside.'

The Map-maker is a book by a poet willing to plunge into an exploration of inner space with the same ingenuity, agility and insatiable wanderlust that characterise his engagement with the outer. His intellectual rigour ensures that there is no room for flaccid self-indulgent philosophising or spurious transcendentalism. But at the same time Daruwalla's best poems are always those in which soaring philosophical speculation is anchored in the obstinate 'thinginess' of things, in which the 'aha' of the ratiocinative mind is linked to the 'oh' of sudden insightful discovery. The result is not merely a versified idea, but a more integrated animal: 'Dreams give you answers;/ meditations give you answers./ A dream-meditation only gives you/ a tremulous sky/ in the nervous stillness of the river' ('Sky, River').

SANJUKTA DASGUPTA
BUDDHADEVA BOSE IN OTHER WORDS

Bose, Buddhadeva. *Selected Poems of Buddhadeva Bose*. Trans. Ketaki Kushari Dyson. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003. pp.lxxxv, 206. Rs.550.

“Because you don’t soothe like a mother, but like a charmer, ask to be
won over,
because you invite magnanimously, reject cruelly, reciprocate lavishly,
therefore have I loved you--infinitely mysterious,
sexy Calcutta”

“Calcutta” (1955)

When Buddhadeva Bose the poet and Ketaki Kushari Dyson, poet-translator, two formidable luminaries of the post-Tagore Bengali literary arena, come together in one book, the reviewer, needless to state, is overwhelmed and considers herself extremely privileged to be entrusted to critique this recently published book of translated poetry.

It is now a well-known fact that during the first fifty years of the twentieth century it was indeed very difficult for Bengali poets to break free from the very pervasive presence of the Tagore cult. The anxiety of influence seemed to haunt their poetic psyche and the first two Bengali poets who successfully struggled out of this overpowering Tagorean mesh were Jibanananda Das and Buddhadeva Bose, though scholars and critics of Bangla literature quite rightly will cite many more names and evidences. It will be very difficult to find Bengali poets who at one time or another have not at least written a few lines dedicated to the memory of Tagore or referred to his influence in their writings. The spirit of Tagore loomed over the creative consciousness of the Bengali poet and it was great deliberate effort, often looked upon as an act of rebellion, that made it possible for the poets of the early 30’s onwards to break free from the mesmeric spell that Tagore had cast so firmly and widely.

Bose was in his early thirties and had already published three volumes of his poetry when Tagore passed away in 1941. Bose was born in Comilla (now in Bangladesh) in 1907. In 1923 his family moved to Dhaka. He studied English Literature in the Dhaka University and stood First in his BA Honours and MA examinations. He then moved to Calcutta in 1931, in search of a job, as he found himself in dire financial straits. Bose had a chequered professional career. He taught at Ripon College in Calcutta from 1934 to 1945, and some short and long term freelancing stints (including a year long Fulbright teaching award) took him to the USA. On his return Bose helped to set up the Department of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University and joined the Department as Head in 1956. In 1963, a decision of the Jadavpur University Academic Council refusing leave without pay to Bose, which would have enabled him to accept an invitation to teach in the USA, led to his resigning from the job. He accepted an invitation to teach at the Indiana University, USA, and stayed there for over two years, teaching and lecturing at various US universities. On his return, though he accepted invitations to teach or deliver lectures on a short-term basis, he did not pursue any full time job after his resignation. His health declined and he died on March 18, 1974 at the age of sixty-six. He was married to Protiva Bose, a talented writer, and they had three children.

In his memoirs of his early youth (*Amar Jauban*) Bose had recorded his passionate bonding with the city of Calcutta: “a huge and open university--such was Calcutta for me, for the first two or three years after my arrival here.” In her well-researched detailed bio-critical introduction Dyson informs the readers about how truly cosmopolitan and international was the poetic mind of Bose. Dyson identifies several poems which felicitously blend Bengali and Western icons and landscape, such as “A Juncture of Time” and “Icarus” among others. Moreover, Dyson refers several times to the well-known critic Shibnarayan Ray’s encomium, in which he categorically expresses his preference when he states that though Jibanananda Das, often regarded as the greatest poet after Tagore, is a pool of water reflecting the stars, Bose is like a cascading

waterfall. Dyson seems to be in agreement as she quotes Ray: “I do not see another such genius in the Bengali language after Tagore, as multifaceted and continuously dynamic as Buddhadeva.”

Dyson has meticulously selected and competently translated Bose’s poems from his very first volume of poetry *Bandir Bandana*, published in 1930, to the fourteenth and last volume *Swagatobidya o Anyanyo Kavita*, published in June 1971. Chronological links and the evolving of the poetic mind establish clearly the sameness and difference. Expectedly, in “A Prisoner’s Song of Praise” (*Bandir Bandana*), the youthful Bose learned the inevitable and clichéd lesson of life about being born free yet finding himself enchained. However, the poem concludes on a note of optimism rather than the dismal and cynical realization that freedom in its essence can at best be about the right to choose one’s chains. Bose proudly states,

Creator of the cosmos, if you’ve created me so powerless,
may you redeem yourself by forgiving me!

The poem concludes with these flamboyant lines,

So then this humiliated prisoner, in a rush of joy without
chains,
goes flinging the cruelest mockery athwart your way
in the guise of a hymn of praise.

As a reviewer who is able to read the original Bengali versions by Bose and compare them with the English translations, I find Dyson’s translations immensely commendable. The translated versions can be read and appreciated as poems in their own right, the primary test of any successful translation of poetry. At the same time the bilingual reader will very easily be able to recognize the meticulous fidelity to the source text that Dyson has scrupulously maintained throughout her translations. Along with the translated poems Dyson has very helpfully included ‘Notes to the Poems,’ an ‘Appendix’ (Bose’s views on the government’s Language Commission) and a ‘Bibliography.’

Translation, Dyson has reiterated elsewhere too, is a dance of approximation. This becomes more so when the source text and target text do not have any phonetic, syntactical or culture-specific links. So a sense of estrangement from the original automatically asserts itself if a Bengali poem is translated into English. Such a stark difference will not be the case if a Bengali poem is translated into Hindi or vice versa, as the two languages share many common words, have familiar cultural links and have identifiable phonetic resemblances. It must be remembered that translations of source texts are intended for those who are unable to read the original. Translations are not intended for comparative critiquing of the use of SL and TL except in translation studies workshops. A responsible translator would very rarely cannibalize the original; though sometimes subtle deviations become a compulsion so that the text remains reader-friendly and does not confuse the reader who, it may be assumed, will generally be familiar with the target language alone.

A sense of futility and world-weariness seems to run through many of Bose's poems translated by Dyson. If "A Prisoner's Song of Praise" scripts the vibrant voice of a very youthful poet in his bare twenties, in 1958, Bose expresses a sense of ennui as he writes in "For My Forty-eighth Winter: 2"--included in *Je-Andhar Alor Adhik* (1958):

Draw the curtain in that window. In the field there's
absolutely nothing to see.
They only want to seduce you--grass, earth, pond, sky.
Throw away those dolls, flowers, pet birds,
pots of precious cacti.
Sink into ennui that's without pique, ever in the same
beat, and doesn't cheat.

In a much later poem written in 1967, Bose's memory lingers and fuses images of Bengal, Brooklyn and Fifth Avenue in the poem titled "Welcome and Farewell":

the helicopter comes down like hope defeated,
an endless sadness comes down all over the evening's
veranda
this June, in Brooklyn, in my mind.

The poem continues:

Think, how often you have
re-written the old anew, woven into the same fabric
two layers of time, and still that cloth hasn't burst
under such pressure. Likewise
your being is inconstant, yet continuous,
present, absent, imminent, arrived.

The last poem in this anthology selected by Dyson is titled "A poem for Savitri" (1968). It concludes thus:

Did they teach you how to survive from day to day?
There's still time, take this opportunity to learn:
what stays with you--such as the dead,
and the crowd of your own dead selves,
and that ready-made trap, a piece of white paper,
within which from time to time the dead are entrapped
and whence they fly away again,
whilst you, thorn-tormented, wait for their return--
by the use of such resources you too, at some moment,
may perhaps gain God's ears,
leap across the ever-widening hiatus.
It's that very hard striving that's called self-cession,
which begins with death and ends in resurrection.

Bose's poems are undoubtedly brain-spun; their cerebral appeal and the skilled fusing of sense and sensibility reminds the reader of the poetry of T.S. Eliot, among other poets of the Western world. Dyson points out this particular quality in Bose's poetry--"its syntactic sinew," "the *strength* of prose" that holds a special appeal for her. Interestingly, those who have read Bose's translations into

Bengali of the poetry of Baudelaire, Rilke, e.e.cummings, Wallace Stevens and even a section from Kalidasa's *Meghdut* will know what an enthusiastic, skilled and intelligent weaver of words Bose had been. Expectedly, Bose had written quite unequivocally about the need for translation:

Whether the translation of poetry is possible or not is a big, meaningless debate which I want to skip, and I want to say at once that translating poetry is also a living, infectious, valuable literary activity....

In his by now legendary translation of U. R. Anantha Murthy's novel *Samskara*, A. K. Ramanujan had expressed the idea that the translator's purpose was not just to translate a printed literary text into another language but to be the mediator who could initiate and even induce the reader to internalize the representative text of an alien culture. So in the "Translator's Note" that precedes the translated text of *Samskara*, Ramanujan wrote in 1976:

I have tried to make the translation self-contained, faithful yet readable. But 'the best in this kind are but shadows; and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them'.

A translator hopes not only to translate a text, but hopes (against all odds) to translate a non-native reader into a native one.

This statement of Ramanujan's, "to translate a non-native reader into a native one," very simply but very powerfully introduces the crucial notion of Cultural Translation, when through a process of cross-fertilization and acculturation the reader is sensitized about the alien culture. Cultural contact zones are identified, *in other words*. So, through translations of creative writing, cultural bridges of understanding are securely constructed.

Everyone familiar with translation theory and practice is aware that translation no longer entails linguistic substitution or mere code-switching, but is regarded as a 'cultural transfer.' The socio-linguist Eugene Nida states that the role of the translator is to facilitate the transfer of message, meaning and cultural elements from one language into another and to create an equivalent response from the receivers. The message in the source language is embedded in a cultural context and has to be transferred to the target language. The co-ordinates that constitute the cognitive equivalence in this transference of culture are the following: lexical, semantic, semiotic, paradigmatic and pragmatic equivalence. The primary responsibility of the translator is to re-create in the target language the reader responses that the text in the source language had created. The ideal translation should therefore be accurate, natural, and communicative.

In an interview titled "Gesture of Language" Girish Karnard had stated, "All Indian languages share some structural patterns and cultural concepts. I feel that translating from one regional language to another is easier than translating into English. The basic problem for the translator lies in his search for appropriate cultural equivalents... a word is capable of reviving cultural memory, which might be difficult to carry into another linguistic set up. Dialects, too, are quite impossible to be rendered intact through translation."

Interestingly, the poet Shiv K. Kumar defines the role and responsibility of the translator in these inspired lines:

... a gifted translator is a creator. He can remain close to the text and render it creatively--bring the SL alive in the TL. The translation is a creative approximation of the original. The original and the translation must play in harmony, like *jugalbandi*.

Dyson's own arguments in support of the poet-translator (lxvii-lxviii) can be cited as the guiding principle of her own

translations of Bose's Bengali poems into English: "But to convey the *rasa* of literature, literary translation has to be a creative art, a genre of writing in its own right. To be a good literary translator one needs to be a good writer....to become a co-creator along with the original poet, to use words in the target language creatively and daringly, sometimes unconventionally and experimentally, exactly as a poet in it would, to use language with gusto, confidence, and panache."

For undertaking this painstaking but no doubt pleasurable responsibility of introducing Bose to the global readers, Dyson deserves our sincere gratitude and felicitations. Many of the poems that she has selected for translation would have won the approval of Bose himself. I have in my collection a slim volume of Bose's collected poems first published in 1953. The title pompously claims that the volume is a collection of his BEST poems: "Buddhadeva Bose ur Srestha Kavita." Though he wrote a very brief preface for this collection Bose began with a disclaimer, referring to Tagore and the claim of supremacy for the volume, *Srestha*. Bose narrated in his preface that when Tagore was asked which, in his opinion, was the very Best book in the world the poet had declared "Nature abhors superlatives." Bose stressed that though the word *Srestha* had been used in the title, presumably to satisfy publication needs, he very candidly observed in the same Preface that "The real point is, whether a book can really reveal the poet." He also stated that the poems in which he had felt that his poetic self, his own sense of "I" was manifest, those were precisely the poems that he had selected for the *Srestha* volume. Dyson has translated many of the poems that Bose seemed to have hand picked for this particular volume that he revised till 1969, that is till its third edition. *Srestha Kavita* has had eleven editions till 2002.

Dyson's selections are indeed representative as these map the "I" of the poet through the four decades of his poetic career, from 1930 to 1971. However, this reviewer was unable to figure out the rationale that inspired Dyson to elide the significance of the freedom movement in colonial India in her long bio-critical

“Introduction”--the lives lost, sacrifices undertaken, victories won, and the trauma of Partition--all crucial contributory factors that resulted in India’s Independence in 1947. Dyson however has stated that she was just using some of the data provided by Samar Sengupta in his biography of Bose, a “handy run-through,” as engagement with the political perspective ran the risk of becoming “*the story.*”

The context--the historical, political, social and cultural perspectives--are all interlinked and contribute to a more holistic reading of the text. Colonial Bengal, the resistance movement, the anti-colonial struggle for freedom from the British Raj and the independence of India are germane to the understanding of Bengali middle class culture, when the purpose is to introduce the global reader to a Bengali poet who had been a witness to the transition from colonial to postcolonial India. It is odd that Dyson has referred to the Swadeshi movement as “terrorist politics”; though she has amusedly recorded how Bose was inspired in his adolescence by the freedom movement, but then has trivialized the public upsurge against the Raj in her reference to young boys masquerading as heroes “who managed to get themselves arrested...and came out to be lauded and feted.” All such political movements include certain aberrations; selecting just those and leaving out the more positive results seems strange. As over 73 pages have been devoted to the “Introduction” and the “Translator’s Testament,” a few pages more on the perspectives would have enriched the contextual format of the book. This would have enabled future researchers, scholars and students to situate the poet in perspective and would also have facilitated understanding of the evolution and the compulsions that had characterized the first seven decades of Bengali culture in the twentieth century. These features must undoubtedly have had an indirect bearing at least, on even the somewhat alienated and aggrieved Bengali intellectual and poet, Buddhadeva Bose.

RANA NAYAR
POETRY FROM THE TROUBLED ZONE

Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast. ed.
Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and Robin S. Ngangom. Shillong:
NEHU, 2003. pp.264. Rs.230.

For a long time now, the Northeast has been the troubled zone, “a seething cauldron” torn by the ethnic crisis, economic failures, terrorist violence and mounting claims of regional autonomy and separatism. Lost in the haze and blur of contemporary history very often, it’s usually conceived not so much as a landscape inhabited by real people but only as a fictional metaphor of a world gone awry. No wonder it lurks rather uncertainly at the edge of an average Indian’s consciousness.

On reading this artistically packaged anthology, one is certainly disabused of a number of preconceived notions about the Northeast and its rich cultural heritage. A world of eerie contradictions leaps out of these pages as tradition rubs shoulders with modernity, folk rhythms jostle uneasily with the western pop, virgin forests stand a mute testimony to the debauchery of urban life, and recalcitrant nativism co-exists with the ‘otherness’ of the outsiders. This anthology certainly does rip the mask off the multi-layered and complex history/culture of the region, revealing the face of the people and the landscape that is anything but just salubrious and enthralling.

This anthology also has a definite purpose beyond its immediate poetic appeal. If on the one hand it brings the ‘gunshots’ and ‘the bloodstained faces’ of the Northeast within earshot distance, on the other it takes us right into the hearts of the people, their dreams and desires, myths and memories, and long struggles through history. By thus bringing us into direct contact with the cultural history of the people, it opens up the possibility of a dialogue we may have thought never existed. If in our troubled times poetry can synergize this dialogue, it could be said to have

achieved much more than it ordinarily does. For such a possibility alone can redress one of the understandable complaints of the editors that, for all the political rhetoric, this remains a “little known and largely misunderstood” region of India.

In all, this anthology showcases some forty-five contemporary poets of the region, reflecting not only myriad styles and trends but also diversity of concerns within “the Seven Sisters,” which, in itself, is no mean achievement. However, the representation of each state is somewhat erratic, Meghalaya, the home-state of the editors, leading the way with as many as fourteen poets; Manipur a close second with eight; Arunachal and Mizoram struggling hard to catch up with barely two poets each. Tripura and Assam have seven poets each whereas Nagaland has only five. If space is a marker of identity, then this kind of unequal distribution does raise questions of internal hegemony of languages/cultures. Especially so, because the editors have chosen not to address this issue.

Interestingly, all the poets selected from Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland have one thing in common: they all write originally in English. While celebrating the “fading voices/of deaf (tribal) women,” Mamang Dai, a journalist who belongs to the Adi community of Arunachal, doesn’t forget to mourn the endless wait of “the silent hillmen” for “the long promised letters/and the meaning of words”(pp. 4-5). Her retreat into personal memories is only a way of reclaiming historical consciousness, and it’s on the interstices of both that the political content of her poetry becomes manifest. Yumlam Tana, a teacher from the *Nyishi* tribe who is almost apologetic about writing in English, is acutely self-conscious about losing his tribal identity inscribed in *pomo* and *Jupung* to *kurta* and *pyjama*. It’s another matter that he manages to counterbalance his loss through his universal claim “to the Bible/The Quran, the Gita/And all human endeavours/In Science, Art and Commerce” (p.13). Occasionally, he also dips into the archives of *Nyishi* myths, bringing out poetic pearls of astounding beauty.

Though the personal note dominates the poems of H. Ramdhintari, a poet from Mizoram who now lives in Maryland, U.S.A., she is conscious that “We’re at the far end of the earth/where the touch of the sun ceases to have meanings” (p.197). However, her contemporary Mona Zote, who lives in Aizawal, is more explicitly political as she ominously waits for the “bomb” to fall “on those of us, unaware under/The catastrophe of houses against trees,” and is even eager to “leave words too and be/a gunrunner” (p.203). Though both T Ao and Nini Lungalang from Nagaland are among the better-known and older voices, each bears an unmistakable individualistic stamp. While T Ao’s poems such as *The Epitaph* and *Rumour* pulsate with a definite fable-like quality, Nini Lungalang returns “to where I began,” a world throbbing with social and political tensions, often caught through “neighbour’s quarrel/over a strip of land” or the personal pain of “I too have a brother slain.” Among the younger lot, Monalisa Changkija, a Dinapur based journalist, and Easterine Iralu, a lecturer at Nagaland University, impress by virtue of their uncanny ability to resurrect the social conscience. If Monalisa raises her voice in support of *Of a People Unanswered*, Easterine Iralu regrets that “One day, my son/when you come to ask me/what colour was the sky/before it turned grey/I will no longer have the answers” (p.222).

Assamese and Manipuri poets distinguish themselves by their unswerving commitment to their respective languages, though it hardly ever takes the form of linguistic chauvinism. Most of the Assamese poets are fairly young, the only exception being Nilmani Phookan, a much older and well-respected Sahitya Akademi Award winning veteran. In his all-too-familiar romantic world, “the plantain leaf (still) trembles,” “distant dreams of trees/move past,” and “the afternoon sun melts/into the shoreless waters.” Only very rarely does he surprise with an unexpected turn of a phrase or an image, and even when he does as in “In the frost-silent Japanese silk-night/if I could die” (p.57), the burden of existence is not much lightened. Among the younger generation of Assamese poets, Jiban Narah and Prem Narayan Nath are apparently the only inheritors of Nilmani’s romantic sensibility. Jiban discovers his own voice in

intensely personal poems such as *Mother* and *Night's Portal*, and despite its long-winded invocations and veiled references to the ethos of the *Mising* tribe, his poem *The Buddha* fails to make its mark. However, Prem Narayan has a deeper and richer resonance as he captures "the hum of *raga gandhara*/in darkness" with as much elan as he shows while recording the "rumblings from the earth's womb" that throw up "scores of dead bodies suddenly"(p.50). Nilim Kumar, Anubhav Tulasi and Sameer Tanti combine a certain earthy rawness of passion with more contemporary staccato speech rhythms. If Nilim Kumar questions "where are you bound, brother/with all those dead birds/on your shoulder," Anubhav Tulasi shares his anxiety over a dog "barking long since/Fretting in my blood." But it's left to Sameer Tanti, who has also crafted *The Ballad of Bones*, to state: "How do I hold hunger guilty/Hunger is my mother's first miscarriage/the third world of my agony" (p.67). Although she is the lone woman poet from Assam, Anupama Basumatary is easily the most powerful of all voices in her language. In comparison to other women poets from Nagaland and Mizoram who write in English, it's she whose concerns are overtly and explicitly feminist. Not only is she interested in historicizing the silence of women through the image of "the stone-body," but she also speaks of woman's essential exclusion and loneliness in her poetic ramblings *An Evening On the Banks of the Ganges*. Often she manages to transcend the politics of exclusion, thus revealing a strong universal strain in her poetry, which is self-evident when she says, "In the hope of achieving something/Every man is only losing himself" (p.22). A poetic sensibility that sees "a childhood dawn" "in the cluster of mushrooms" is certainly no ordinary talent.

Of the Manipuri poets, again only two are women, and the rest all men. Kunjarani Longjam Chanu and Atambam Ongbi Memchoubi are both teachers by profession and have published more than two collections each. Kunjarani's "hunters" that "stand in front of you/Carrying poison arrows" and "black maidens" that fall "inside the deep ravines" "along with the white slabs of snow" fester in our memory as much as Memchoubi's *The Goddess of Lightning* and *My Beloved Mother* do. A popular children's writer

and a much published poet, R K Bhubonsana, in his rather longish musings *Should Lights Be Put Out Or Minds Kept In The Dark*, exposes in a playfully sardonic manner the designs of the government in perpetuating the people's subjugation by not promoting literacy among them. Yumlebham Ibomcha's *For the Next Birth* and Raghu Leishangthem's *Politician and White Dove* are also poems in a similar vein, though Ibomcha's *Story of a Dream* and Raghu's *The Old Woman's Pitcher* leave a much stronger impression because of their depth of feeling and sensitive portrayal of character/situation. Thangjam Ibopishak, who along with Ibomcha is a Sahitya Award winning poet, creates unflinching images of the land and its people. While gushing over his land in a manner least bashful, "Manipur, I love your hills, marshes, rivers/Greenfields, meadows, blue sky" (p.88), he doesn't allow himself to be blinded by the fact that it is also "the land of the half-humans" where "for six months just head without body, six months just body without head" (p.93). The mythology of the land interests him as much as does its poetry or its history. If Saratchand Thiyam, an engineer by profession, stands out by virtue of being able to sing of both *Shillong* and *Africa* with equal ease, Ilabanta Yumnam, a teacher, marks himself out through the tardy, prosaic rhythms of his poetic outpourings.

Of the seven sisters, the only two that betray a baffling sense of linguistic diversity are Meghalaya and Tripura. In Meghalaya, one comes across poets in languages as varied as Hindi, English, Khasi and Bengalee, whereas in Tripura, Bengalee and Manipuri happily co-exist with Chakma and Kokborok. Tarun Bhartiya, who is from Meghalaya and writes in Hindi, appears to have internalized the ethics of postmodernism, and so celebrates the fragmentation of thought and being with a rare irreverence and panache. Just as he has no qualms about saying that "Cow Mother's thighs should be rubbed with pepper," he's equally blasé about sniffing "reality of gunpowder in the breath of reporters" (p.114). Piyush Dhar, who writes in Bengalee, brings a razor-edged sharpness of a typical Bengali sensibility to bear upon his reflections on the mindless nuclear arms race in *Five Pokhran Poems*. There couldn't have

been a more forthright indictment of Pokhran than this: “Infanticide ditches crisscross/your dreamy chest, too, Pokhran;/today your silent sands bury in their voice/an epitaph of vice” (p.121). Of several poets writing in English in Meghalaya none is so cosmopolitan as Ananya S Guha, who is very much at home, be it *In Calcutta*, *Mymensing* or his *Poem for Punjab*. If Anjum Hasan impresses with her deft use of the Japanese form in *November Haikus*, Robin S Ngangom sweeps us along by the sheer force of his haunting images in the searing evocation of the *Native Land*. But this, indeed, appears somewhat pale in comparison with the range, depth and intensity displayed by Khasi poets such as Paul Lyndogh, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and Bevan L Swer. As their effort is to explore the archeology of Khasi legends, folk-tales and customs, their poems often sizzle with a peculiar pungency of a purely local variety.

This variety of localism is also available in the poems of Niranjana Chakma, Sefali Debbarma and Chandra Kanta Murasingh, all from Tripura, though they practise their craft in Chakma and Kokborok languages respectively. While Sefali Debbarma celebrates the local sounds and smells in her intensely personal poems; Chandra Kanta’s crisp, compact lyrical meditations slowly bring her into contact with “our beloved soil.” In the poems of Niranjana Chakma one senses a definite rage born out of irrevocable ‘silence’ that most of the tribal communities have come to accept as their *fait accompli* over the centuries. In an intensely moving poem, Kalyanbrata Chakraborti captures the plight of Manirung Reang, “a girl from the hills” who falls prey to “the gun-toting belligerents,” with only “the birds and the wind” grieving for her. A similar portrait of a “woman suffering this society’s grievous hurt” bristles out of a poem by Gambhini Sorokkhaibam, who originally writes in Manipuri. However, the crowning glory of this collection are two poems by Kritibas Chakraborty, both of which could be regarded as the final tribute to the awesome linguistic plurality of the Northeast in particular and our country in general. Originally written in Bengalee, for inclusion in this collection, these poems have been translated not directly from the language in which they

were written but instead from Tripuri into English. More significantly, these two poems bring into sharp focus for us, once again, the complex issues of hybridized identity, belonging and homelessness. While wondering with the poet “How long you will burn, Northeast horizon!” (p.247), we feel as though we have come back full circle, once again. With apprehensions about the future of the Northeast buzzing in our ears, we return from this mythopoeic journey, sadder and somewhat wiser as well.

Despite the fact that poetry often doesn't lend itself to an easy linguistic transfer, most of the translations in this collection have been competently handled. Often while reading these poems, one gets the impression as though all of them including the ones not originally written in English have been so written. The use of words or expressions from a variety of host languages, however, doesn't set up any jarring rhythms. On the contrary, it ties up rather well with the politics of translation that, in any case, should have informed the very spirit of such a collection. By preferring the “foreignizing” mode of translation to the “domesticating” one, the editors have not only demonstrated their respect for the notion of linguistic plurality, but also made a significant statement of their ideology and intent. Of course, they deserve a full round of applause for their success in accommodating a vast “polyphony of voices,” reflecting an equally bewildering range of thematic concerns and formal preferences. These are the voices that ought to be heard with passionate concern, even compassion and urgency. More than the ordinary lovers of poetry across the country, this collection should strike a chord among those who wish to understand the cultural labyrinths of the Northeast, and respond to the multiple challenges such an understanding often poses.

RANA NAYAR
BARUA'S UNFAMILIAR CONCERT

Barua, Bireswar. *Achin Arao* (An Unfamiliar Concert). Trans. from the original Assamese into English by Gautam Barua. Guwahati: Navaneeta Agarwal, 2003. pp.vi,18. Rs.50.

Bireswar Barua is a significant presence in modern Assamese literature. A former civil servant, Mr. Barua has to his credit some thirty books of poetry, novels, short stories, literary criticism, social/cultural history and translations. *Achin Arao*, first published in original Assamese in 1970, is perhaps his most ambitious and his best poetic work as well. Conceived as a modern epic, a la Eliot's *The Waste Land*, *Achin Arao* is, at once, a poetic exploration of self, family, genealogy and the history of the land. Set in Sundaridia on the banks of the river Nakhanda, *Achin Arao* captures the story of seven generations, spread over six centuries, all within the space of a dozen-odd pages and ten cantos.

The poem starts in the fourteenth century, when most of India was under the Turko-Afghan Sultanate and the modern state of Assam hadn't yet come into existence. The narrator of the first canto is Bijoy Singh Sardar, the founder of the family, who had come from the deserts of Rajasthan, and who had through his prowess and swordsmanship managed to win the administrative and revenue control of the districts of Bausi Paragana. Located in the western parts of modern Assam, this area was then known for its pristine innocence, pure serene waters and virginal forests. Invoking the local mythology, when the narrator says, "O traveller from afar, in here swords do not spill rivulets of blood" or "in this forest lies serenity from life's whirlwinds," the release from "the moonbeams of intolerable memory" (p.2) also becomes an act of atonement, a way of exorcising collective, familial guilt.

In Canto II, Gandharava Singh Choudhury, the second ancestor of the poet continued to unleash the reign of terror, staining his hands "with the blood of the innocents" despite the fact that "the

ripe paddy sag (ged)” and “the worms started eating into the mind’s joviality”(p.3). By the first half of the fifteenth century, “the crack of a whip” had become as commonplace as neighing of the horses, in a place which had “no stables” in the fourteenth century and where “the hooves soaked in clear water” trembled as “eventides rippled by.” Looking through the folds of history, the poet tries to understand the dynamics of oppression and depredation that slowly resulted in altering the socio-economic as also the ecological profile of the area. While questioning the slow, imperceptible destruction of local ecology, the poet also bemoans the loss of humanity on the part of his ancestors. By the time Kripamoy Singh Uzir, the third ancestor, came on the scene in the second half of the fifteenth century, “speckles of selfishness and deception” had started flitting “in the bush-fires of desire and jealousy” and the cowries had started “slipping through the gaps” between his hands (p.4). “Sin and virtue” had lost all “mortality” and death had become “unstoppable in (sic) the edge of the sword”(p.4).

In the early half of the fifteenth century, Saint Madhavadeva came into this land to preach that “God does not live in the altar. God does not reside in the temples” (p.5). Despite the fact that one of the ancestors of the poet, Madhava Moral, was a very close associate of the saint, he simply refused to spread his word around. Rather he saw the “dreams... decay” and heard the “infants’ clamorous cries...die away,” seeking companionship all this while with “time” and “death”(p.6). After suffering defeat at the hands of Koch Kings in the seventeenth century, Veer Haricharan Choudhury, the poet’s sixth ancestor, is seen “scraping the rust from the sword,” nursing “a longing to cross from death to salvation” (p.7). Though “the temple beckons” him, he finds that “there is really no temple” and that he can only live with “the unsteadiness and uncertainty of faith” in his mind. The father’s acute sense of loss visited upon his son Uddhav Singh Choudhury too, but he ultimately decided to set up a temple of Ai Gosani at Sundaridia. The East India Company started to make inroads into Assam in the first half of the nineteenth century. Recording the surreptitious and undramatic entry of the White imperialists in impersonal terms, the

poet says, “They have arrived. Unintelligible their language. Outlandish their customs” (p.9). It’s interesting to see how the aggressor is first stripped of his identity and then of his essential humaneness. By thus referring to the colonizer as the ‘other,’ the poet does manage to offload his historical burden to an extent. However, the historical guilt of easy capitulation is still there in residual form, captured poetically through the image of an “adolescent daughter” departing “from the heap of pressed sugarcane in the courtyard” “leaning on the arms of a scruffy unfamiliar soldier” (p.9). The compelling force of irony here reminds one of Bertolt Brecht’s “Song of Fraternalization” in *Mother Courage and her Children*, which also dramatizes the transaction between an oppressor and the oppressed in virtually the same terms.

Much before Assam could recover from the designs of the British marauders, the Burmese army had overrun it. Now “the brocade shirt lies sullied on the front porch of my house” and “God’s wash-cloth sprawls inside out under the eaves” (p.9). It’s suspected that those “who carry on a blood-feud against us have given hospitality to our enemies” (p.10). After the Ahom kingdom collapsed, Atiram Barua, the poet’s twelfth ancestor, opposed the British but only at his own peril, as his descendents were later not accepted into the government service until the very end of the nineteenth century. Capturing the agony of that phase, the poet bemoans that “the angel never came. The nameless one. Who is hunting deer in the sky with such an uproar?” (p.10). It’s in his grandfather Haliram Barua’s bosom that “the evening’s retreating luminescence buries its head” and according to the poet, he was the true repository of most of these tales that capture the fluctuating rhythms of his immediate family as well as Assam’s history.

Barua confesses to have imbibed his exploration of the world and that of the regional history largely from the French poets such as Arthur Rimbaud and Saint-John Perse, or American poets like Robert Lowell. However, it must be pointed out that he has succeeded in indigenizing his influences to a large extent and has

done an exceptionally good job of finding a local habitation for their poetic techniques and/or strategies.

Apart from delving into the complexities of personal and collective narratives, the poem also manages to unearth some little known facts about the local names and places, which emerge almost unobtrusively. Guwahati is invoked as “this land of astrologers,” for Pragjyotisapur was the ancient name for this place. The main strength of the poem is its localism, inherent in its folklore, myths, legends and archaisms. However, most of it is just swept away in the translation, as it’s almost bound to happen in a poem of this nature, steeped as it is in local language and folk culture. Moreover, as the poem largely derives its main strength from the cadence of the spoken word, it could easily turn into a translator’s nightmare. Yet it must be conceded to the credit of the translator that but for a few minor slips here or there, on the whole, the translation is fairly competent, even graceful and fluid.

K. SRILATA
VOICES FROM POETRY

Kottoor, Gopi Krishnan. *Nirvana*. Kolkata: Writers Workshop, 2002. Rs.120.

Hamid, S.A. *No Man's Land*. Delhi: Mandavi, 2003. Rs.100.

Aquil, Reshma. *Shadows of Fire*. Kolkata: Writers Workshop, 2003. Rs.120.

Aquil, Reshma. *The Unblending*. Kolkata: Writers Workshop, 2003. Rs.120.

In his introductory note, Kottoor promises us two things: one, that this collection is not a random one and that there is a “sense of oneness” among the poems and, two, that his touchstone has been to remain true to himself. *Nirvana* brings us some quiet poems, quiet and under-stated, like this one:

Upon the mossed wall the casuarina still,
Lets fall its dried fruit on sure cat-feet.
A new rain has just left
Its foot prints by the front door.
 (“Home thoughts from Abroad”)

The images are often striking, interesting:

The morning bell.
Hundreds of small hands
Fold into moth wings.
 (“Among Kindergarten Children”)

Sometimes however, Kottoor’s adjectives fail, as does his sentence structure. I am thinking particularly of “The Mentally Retarded Child and His Father” (“Here is the father/...junk teeth...”). In “Milk Bottles: A Poem of Nostalgia,” Kottoor

attempts some visual poetry. The poem has a nice rhythm too. My own favourites are “Grass” (“That which happens next to us/ Is grass. Growing thick/Grass keeps the rule/Of spreading gently....”), “Old Time Friends” and “Nirvana”--the title poem. On the whole, this anthology invites the reader to dip in.

No Man's Land is Hamid's second book of verse. It contains thirty-four poems, seven of which are translations from Urdu poetry. Hamid's own poems hold promise but they seem a bit overdone at times as in this case:

I have injected these drops
into my blood
to colour conversation
and then return
to the wordless world
till I again need new words
to distil into fresh drops
for another injection
of rejuvenation
(“Rejuvenation”)

In “Choices” Hamid has some interesting things to say, but again the verse fails at some point thanks to over-explanation. The translations are much better, more ambitious. Hamid, it appears, has a fine Urdu sensibility. The best in that section is “Sometimes I Wonder”--a translation of Sahir Ludhianvi's “Kabhi Kabhi.”

Reshma Aquil's two volumes of verse *Shadows of Fire* and *The Unblending* offer an interesting selection of poems. The poems in *Shadows of Fire* are marked by a refreshing absence of clichés. They are very new and the images are precise:

In a window-pane
A blackbird tap-tapping
Beaking flowers in glass;
Suddenly stepping aside...
(“Breathless”)

Among her best poems are “The Encounter” (“Someone desperate for cover/Has planted palm, gooseberry together/It is warm under their shade”), “Shadows of Fire” (“They told me/The path is new, wide as you like/ Walk it/With a suspicion of shadows”) and “Ants” (“They are the first sign of rain/Swarming, spreading like mirth”).

Poems in “The Unblending” are somewhat different. Reshma has attempted some short poems and has been more ambitious on the whole. “The Unblending”, for instance, travels from the story of what happens to Rick’s cat, to cat instinct, to Rick’s wife and a shopping plaza.

Each of these poets, it appears, has a different take on the world, a different perspective and voice.

S. MURALI
FINDING YOUR VOICE

Swain, Rabindra K. *Severed Cord*. New Delhi: Indialog, 2002.
pp.70. Rs.120.

Raghupathi, K.V. *Wisdom of the Peepal Tree*. New Delhi: Minerva
Press, 2003. pp.30. Rs.25.

Raghupathi, K.V. *Voice of the Valley*. New Delhi: Minerva Press,
2003. pp.85. Rs.80.

In poetry, most often the voice itself is the discovery. It is not always there for the taking either. When something is gained after a struggle more valuable and taste-worthy, you go on reading and then you stumble over the hidden tenor. What is the value of poetry? It is like plunging around in the dark and then all of a sudden discovering a light source. But in these dark days even a slender ray of hope is so invaluable.

Three slender volumes of poetry--three separate experiences. Let me take them one by one. First, in *Severed Cord*, the poet is many tongued. We read:

into the dark you go barefoot,
leaving behind the light and footwear
you trusted so long

How ridiculous they look, without you!
Your determination lies ahead of you
like wild grass waiting to be trodden

in to a path...
only in the dark
do you seek your kind of light...

What is there to be gained is the emptiness of all experience that is there right from the womb and all we ultimately learn is how to live with what all we have lost. Well, as the philosopher would see it, authentic life begins when we learn to live without regrets, remorse and misgivings. The poet Rabindra K. Swain apparently does not believe in waiting till the experience ripens inside, but allows the half formed being to hang upside down as in poems like “Trishanku’s World,” wherein the narrator tumbles along in a crowded bus listening to talk of politics and perceiving “a lone kingfisher perched on a telephone wire,” while a drunk is pushed out:

Looking back through the glass
You found the man going still half way
More still than the kingfisher;
Yet more than Trishanku...
Some has taken your place...

Such quickness of catching the line as it slips by is certainly the art this poet seems to specialize in. We read in “In Praise of Dasia Bauri”:

And every time you return, you are sure
In every house there will be a temple,
In every temple there will be a poet,
And in every poet a Dasia Bauri...

Actually, it is in lines like these that lead us gently on into a deep poetic silence that Rabindra Swain achieves the desired experience--an experience of waving the magic wand of words. His poems are often enough a solidifying of an amorphous experience around certain metaphors (or non-metaphors?) like in “Although Sometimes a Hand”:

My night ends before my sleep.
It falls on the floor with a thud.
Baffled, the dream suddenly begins

To twitter like an early morning bird.
Then my face opens to another day's world.

Of course, these poems are genuine in their search for the other side of the blank space and echo and reecho their creator's profound concern with existence and values. However, many a time the poet allows sheer formalistic exercise to intrude into his voice. The opening poem, for instance, says so little, and ends up as a mere make-believe artifact:

The pool is preoccupied
With the thought of fish...

No fish has ever touched
Its floor of rotten leaves.

In the final analysis, Swain's *Severed Cord* leads us on to a certain ripeness of vision and word, and we learn to see with the poet "the summer of the tender, brown leaves and the wind..."

Every poet is a wanderer, by choice or chance. K.V. Raghupathi's long narratives *Wisdom of the Peepal Tree* and *Voice of the Valley*, bespeak of this eternal ceaseless quest:

Tired, you will return with no discrimination
But intense dissatisfaction.
You gain nothing except the deep feeling for the quest.

It is not quite an easy task to keep up the tempo of your questing soul in a long narrative, although our regional literatures are rife with such philosophical in-journeys. Religious and spiritual writing most often specialize in such endeavours. Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* and Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri*, although distinct and different in their narrative voice, are supreme achievements in this direction, keeping in line with the epical dimension of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and the dialogic engagements of *Upanishads*. Khalil Gibran and Nikos Kazantzakis are equally

exceptional in their spiritual explorations. K.V. Raghupathi follows their footsteps. Both these poems--*Wisdom of the Peepal Tree* and *Voice of the Valley*--reecho the long sought after queries. And this poet reworks his quest in simple formulations and dialogues, which are indeed delightful reading. What is strange about poetry is the intense source of pleasure one gains from running into kindred spirits. And often the most ordinary is the strangest. Raghupathi's poems are a repository of the wisdom garnered in the spiritual treatises of the world: they are intimate, personal and simple.

We read:

Bindura, where there is concealment,
There is every curiosity and desire to know.
Where there is no concealment,
There is no curiosity, no desire to know...

The genuineness of this poet is that he keeps the quest open and yet intriguing. One will certainly enjoy reading these volumes. However, one has to find the inner voice oneself.

PAUL LOVE
OF MURDER AND MISCELLANY

Kottoor, Gopi Krishnan. *Rev. Father Benedict Goes To Heaven or, The Mainatharuvi Murder and other poems*. Mumbai: Poetry Chain Press, 2003. pp.110. Rs.70.

This little volume is characterized by its diversity: diversity in kinds of poems, in their length, in the quality of the verse, and in the manner in which they are presented. Generally the more ambitious of the poems are the least successful. Perhaps the best place to start is at the volume's very beginning.

The first poem in the book, "Worshipping Judas," is an attempt to rehabilitate the reputation of the one of Christ's disciples, Judas Iscariot, who is said to have betrayed him. The poem is a kind of dramatic monologue. In its lines the persona, the speaking voice, is addressing an audience (Christ), who is expected to respond: "I need a little clarification from you on this...." (not the only prosaic line in this volume). But the justifications for Judas with which the persona tries to re-evaluate him seem specious at best: it was really Judas who made Christ famous, by putting him "right there upon the Cross/so generations would know (him)...."; Iscariot's sin was not as great as those who adulterate "ethyl alcohol" or those who genetically engineer the food that children eat; and especially, Judas was a "real man" because he could hang himself out of remorse for the betrayal he committed.

The poem contains a number of apparent errors that go beyond the scope of poetic license (unless the poet is deliberately trying to caricature his persona). There is no record to show that Christ performed magic "in the middle of the Red Sea" or travelled anywhere close to it (is this a confusion with Moses?). Neither is there anywhere a hint that Judas was "the one who loved (Christ) most," or that his kiss was any more affectionate than a means of disclosing a victim to his antagonists. Barabbas was accused not of

being a “common thief” but a murderer. And it is pure fabrication to state bluntly that “Judas had red hair” in a footnote to the poem (this time in the poet’s own voice!) which purports to give factual evidence about Judas and the “Judas tree.” There is a long historical tradition of attempts to re-evaluate the character and actions of Judas Iscariot. This poem does not seem to add significantly to that tradition.

Another lengthy dramatic lyric that begins unconvincingly is “The Old Boys’ Silver Jubilee Reunion.” Such an occasion is normally marked by well-lubricated conviviality and generous light-hearted reminiscences. But in this poem the persona seems to jeer at the folly of peers who have travelled long distances just to celebrate the graying absent-minded classmate, or the balding scientist colleague, or other impotencies with which the celebrants seem now to be afflicted. We sympathize more with the persona as he moves into a reflective “where are they now” vein, recalling some of his classmates who are departed, and recognizing the apparent meagerness of “those (who are) left of us, huddled together....” But one wonders whether such a “Jubilee Reunion” would ever be so exclusively dominated by such caustic greetings and sombre reminiscences.

The title poem of the volume is a long story which tells of a Christian priest accused and convicted by a “lower court” and sentenced to hanging for allegedly raping and murdering a “lovely young girl Maria” in a remote rubber estate. The titillation experienced by those who followed the newspaper accounts of the “murder,” the intervention of high ecclesiastical authority in the judicial process and the ultimate reversal of the conviction by a higher court initially give the reader a moderate narrative interest. But one’s patience and belief are stretched by the appended “confession” thirty years later of two women who come to the priest, one of whose husbands is claimed to have illegally performed an abortion on Maria with fatal consequences, and had himself caused Maria to be “dumped” in the “Mainatharuvi rubber plantation.” The poem tells us that by this time the impending

circumstances of Father Benedict's death "did not matter anymore" to him. After five long pages of wordy explanation, some readers may be tempted to an even greater indifference.

A footnote to the poem seeks to confirm the factuality of the accusation against Father Benedict, his initial death sentence and the Supreme Court's ultimate reversal. There are, to be sure, readers who today remember the actual newspaper accounts of these events "back in the 60's" as the poem dates them. The footnote does not explain to us whether the poem's ultimate exoneration of Father Sebastian is historical or only fantasy.

This volume includes other lengthy poems which seem more successful. One of these, "The Mad Man Writes His Sane Poem," speaks convincingly of the "mad man" who runs after his poem, chases it and catches it, only to see the poem spurned by its readers because of what they know about the author: "A thousand ears turn the keys that lock all sounds/as they pass on/telling one another/...a mad man must not write sane poems at all..." Even the poem itself turns accusingly on its author: "It is because you are a mad man/That I have lost my claim to immortality..." until the mad man can only make a paper boat of his poem and let it "slip away." This is one of several pieces in the volume that have to do with poetry and the process of writing it, and it is the most memorable of these.

But the strength of this book is to be found in some of its shorter poems. In one of these, "Night" (66), a subtle and original response to everyday images of sensuous surroundings gives us an attractive lyric:

Still earth.
On the museum walls of night
Are masterpieces of sleep,
And the wind painting lifeless trees.
The grasshoppers here are eminent authors.
Sometimes one strikes upon an original idea.
Together they make it a good poem.

Other lyrics impress because of their simplicity and straightforwardness. Consider “Drift Wood” (102):

You are my river.
Flow me over.
Carved in your oeuvre
I am your driftwood
Make me precious.

Here all that the poet requires are two unadorned metaphors, with a deft inversion of word order. “Sudden Rain” (99) uses a similar recipe:

The sudden rain
Has the shout
Upon the roof

Of the woman in labour

And soft flows
The new born
Mud stream

In either of these poems scarcely twenty words are needed to cement the metaphors and invoke a whole spectrum of sensuous response. If one wonders about the poet’s ability to sustain a metaphor over a wider expanse, there is “Hanging” (41) which asks “what if we could hang up our sorrows/like used clothes/upon these nails?/We could then wash them....perfume them....wear them....(and) when one day/they turn to rags/(even though they became/so much/a part of us)/we could simply/rip them.”

For a more obvious but nonetheless poignant use of metaphor “Broken Toys” (81) is among the best in this volume:

Half a hare
The drumming bear with the missing hand
Barbie with her blind hazel eyes

Asleep....
(But) a meaning
born in things beyond repair.
For instance,
Tiny hands growing.

Another skill is used in “A Body On The Rails” (74) in which multiple metaphors are fused effectively to make one coherent picture:

Why do I keep looking
To see if you'll come
At the door thro' which has gone
The winds of change....
You come.
You stand....
Then you pass me by, pass me by,
Sure as the night train
Over a body
On the rails

Gopi Kottoor has under his control an ample number of poetic “tricks,” such as repetition and inversion along with effectively employed metaphor to make simple, attractive verse. One more such example is given in “The Rain And The Slug” (20) which in the midst of impoverishment and emptiness gives gentle and more sober support to the old adage “if you can't fight them, join them”:

Once there was a night and there was a slug
And rain, rain, rain.
The rain came down upon the slug heavily.
You'll be washed away slug....

But the slug was firm. No way....

Suddenly the rain stopped....
And together they sat down and wept,

Down the face of lightning
And thundering hair
Of posterity.

The physical elements of the book are disappointing. In addition to typographical errors, there is a rather chaotic “Acknowledgements” section, in which it is impossible to decipher which of the book’s poems has previously appeared in which other publication (if that information is indeed what these acknowledgements are intended to convey). There is a “Table of Contents,” but in no case are we told the page number on which a given poem appears. This fact is all the more troublesome since the sequence of titles on the “Contents” page is not always the same as what is followed in the book itself. The format of the footnotes is inconsistent, and, as indicated above, they do not always distinguish between accepted fact, on the one hand, and legend or imagination on the other. Even in the volume’s title poem, the title is given in different format from what appears on the book’s title page and wrapper. Calling attention to these shortcomings might seem to be nit-picking “pedantry.” But the poet himself is Editor of a prestigious poetry journal, and one would hope editorial precision would have been employed in the pages of his own volume of verse.

There are poems in this volume that merit appreciation and enjoyment. They deserve to be in a book which is produced with sensitivity and care.

SUBMISSIONS

Kavya Bharati welcomes contributions of poetry in English, review articles and essays on poetry or particular poets, well recorded interviews with poets, and translations of poetry from Indian languages into English: from resident and non-resident Indians, and from citizens of other countries who have developed a past or current first-hand interest in India.

We prefer manuscripts on A4-size paper that are typewritten, or computer printouts. We will also process and consider material that is sent by e-mail. Submissions of essays and review articles sent in any format whatever must conform to the latest edition of the *MLA Handbook*.

All submissions must be accompanied by the full preferred postal address of the sender (including PIN code), with telephone and / or e-mail address where possible. With the submission **sufficient biodata must be sent**, similar to what is given in the “Contributors” pages of this issue. In the case of translations, please include the biodata of the source poet also. All submissions must be sent, preferably by Registered Post or Courier in the case of manuscripts and printouts, to Professor R.P.Nair, Editor, *Kavya Bharati*, SCILET, American College, Post Box No.63, Madurai 625 002 (India).

Utmost care will be taken of all manuscripts, but no liability is accepted for loss or damage. *Kavya Bharati* cannot promise to return unused manuscripts, so the sender should not include return postage or cover for this purpose.

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A SPECIAL ISSUE OF KAVYA BHARATI!

For the near future a special issue of *Kavya Bharati* is being planned which will showcase the poetry of the Indian Diaspora.

The focus for this issue will be on the work of significant poets of Indian origin now living in many different parts of the world.

For this issue contributions of new poetry are invited from Indian writers living overseas. We also will particularly welcome scholarly essays on aspects of expatriate Indian poetry. These essays should preferably not exceed 3000 words.

All contributions should follow the principles laid down in the adjacent **Submissions** page of this issue of *Kavya Bharati*. These should be dispatched before 31 August 2004 to the following address:

Professor R. P. Nair
Editor
Kavya Bharati
SCILET, American College
Post Box No.63
Madurai 625 002, INDIA

E-mail submissions will also be welcomed, directed to <scilet@sancharnet.in>, and marked "To the attention of *Kavya Bharati*."

Send us your contribution as early as possible, and help to make this Special Issue a memorable one!

CONTRIBUTORS

Juju Abraham, who resides in Allepey, Kerala, is currently guest lecturer at St. Josephs College for Women there. Her poems have been published in prominent literary journals and anthologies, and have been short-listed in several important poetry competitions.

Shanta Acharya's wide ranging publications include three volumes of her poetry and a book on Ralph Waldo Emerson, as well as two books on business and finance. Her newest collection, *Looking In Looking Out*, is soon to be published. She resides in Highgate, London.

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Meena Alexander was born in Allahabad, India. Her poetry volume *Illiterate Heart* won a 2002 PEN Open Book Award. A new edition of her memoir, *Fault Lines* (one of *Publishers Weekly's* Best Books of 1993) includes a coda, "Book of Childhood." Her latest volume of poetry is *Raw Silk*. She is Distinguished Professor of English at Hunter College and the Graduate Center at the City University of New York.

Laksmisree Banerjee, Head of the Department of English of Jamshedpur Women's College, has published two collections of her poetry including *Fire Offerings* which *KB* has reviewed. An active musician, she has presented integrated recitals of Indian classical vocal music and Indian-English poetry.

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Krishna Bose is Reader in the Department of English at F.M. Autonomous College, Balasore, Orissa.

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Cyril Dabydeen, who is a native of Guyana, now lives in Ottawa Canada. He has published ten volumes of poetry, two collections of short stories, two novels, and has edited two poetry anthologies. His latest book, *Hemisphere of Love*, will be published this year in Toronto.

Kamala Das, widely known for her autobiography *My Story*, for her poetry (*Summer in Calcutta*, *The Old Playhouse*), and for her short stories (*The Sandal Trees*), has also published essays (*The Path of the Columnist*) and important Malayalam short fiction. Her poetry is well represented in *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing*. Australia's CRNLE institute has produced the most authoritative anthology of her work.

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Rebecca S. Erb, who has travelled widely in India visiting family who worked here, now lives in Belfast, Maine, one of the northeastern-most points in the continental United States.

V.Y. Kantak is internationally valued for his extensive Shakespearean scholarship. For many years Professor and Dean at M.S. University, Baroda, he has also taught at CIEFL, Hyderabad, and in such overseas centres as the University of Utah in the United States, and the University of Canterbury at Kent. He currently resides in Baroda.

Shiv K. Kumar, for many years an honoured Professor at Osmania University, has published with distinction multiple volumes of poetry, criticism, drama, translation, short and longer fiction. *Two Rivers at the Ashram* is his latest novel. *Journal of South Asian Literature* (xxv.2) is comprised of rich and varied examples from his best work.

Paul Love is Director of SCILET, the Study Centre for Indian Literature in English and Translation, at American College in Madurai.

Darshan Singh Maini, formerly Professor and Head of the Department of English of Punjabi University, Patiala, has published political essays, critical studies of the work of Henry James, and four volumes of poetry, including the recent *The Aching Vision*. A festschrift in his honour, *The Magic Circle of Henry James*, was published in 1990. *Light Strokes*, a collection of short essays, is his latest publication.

Maya, whose poetry appears for the first time in this journal, sends her writing to us from Koyambedu in Chennai.

Leeya Mehta, who has studied at Oxford University on a Radhakrishnan scholarship, has been Chief Executive officer of Legalpundits International Services, and has published poetry and short stories in Indian, Canadian and British magazines. Her first collection of poems is scheduled for publication this year.

Hoshang Merchant is Reader in the Department of English, University of Hyderabad. He has published *In-Discretions* (a literary study of Anais Nin), ten volumes of poetry, excerpts from which have been chosen for an anthology of his work *Selected Poems*, and recently has edited *Yaarana: Gay Writing from India*.

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Vihang Naik, who teaches English at Shree Ambaji Arts College in Ambaji, Gujarat, translates poetry from Gujarati into English and writes original poems in both languages, many of which have been anthologised. His volume *City Times* received a Michael Madhusudhan award.

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M.M. Thakur, a good friend of the Nepali poet Manjul whom he has translated for this issue, is also author of the volume *Thus Spake Bhisma*. He resides in Darbhga, Bihar.

K.M. Tharakan (Kaviyoor P.O. Pathanamthitta District, Kerala), *G.Radhamony* (Perunna P.O., Changanacherry, Kerala), *V.C. Harris* (School of Letters, M.G. University, Kottayam) and *A.J. Thomas* (Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi), have translated the poems of Nellickal Muraleedharan, a modern Malayalam poet, in this issue of *KB*.

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An on-going autonomous, self-funded, non-profit project is underway to survey via an open-ended questionnaire the opinions and methods of all kinds of critics writing in all the Indian languages, including English, who have been actively publishing in India during the past dozen or so years (1990 to the present). The aims of the project are as follows.

- To develop a more productive sense of community among Indian critics in all languages and of all persuasions;
- To provide information about the diversity and commonality of their views, procedures, projects and crucial issues;
- To reduce dependence upon methodologies, attitudes, and approaches irrelevant in the Indian critical context; and, most generally and optimistically,
- To strengthen awareness, self-criticism and self-confidence in individual critics and their self-defined groups; and thus, ultimately, to strengthen the productivity and usefulness of Indian criticism as a whole and for its participants.

Individual replies to the survey questionnaire will be categorized, the types and issues commented upon and all the information published as soon as feasible. Initially the replies are being posted in unanalyzed form on our website under www.samvadindia.com/critic simply “to facilitate communication among us all.”

Anyone in India actively involved with criticism, whether literary or more broadly cultural and/or social, is invited:

Please join in this project by visiting the above-named website in order to get further information, to register reactions, and to download/print out the questionnaire. Alternatively at our joint email address, indiancritics@aol.com the organizers may be contacted:

Dr. (Prof. Ret) S. Sreenivasan, Editor, Journal of Literature & Aesthetics, Kollam, Kerala; JNU Prof. Makarand Parnajape, New Delhi; and Prof. John Oliver Perry, Seattle, WA USA

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AMERICAN COLLEGE, MADURAI

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