kavya bharati

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a review of Indian poetry

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Kavya Bharati is a review of Indian poetry.

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edited by Jayanta Mahapatra

NISSIM EZEKIEL

EPISODE

As the train started moving
she suddenly said, I feel I'm living,
don't you? I mean, going places
and all that, leaving one,
arriving at another, doesn't that
give you a sense of living?

Oh yes, I said, the train
is certainly moving, and I am
moving with it, I'm deeply moved.

You bastard, she said,
that's not what I meant,
you don't have the sense of living
I am talking about.
You've only got a sense of humour.

I admitted it was true,
so she kept silent
for the rest of our short journey,
which was quite an achievement for her.

MOODS

1

I cannot sing
and will not talk,
but the spirit of both
is in my walk.

2

I wake early
and sleep late,

a minor choice
related to fate.

3

Always fast
and full of spin . . .
at least it makes us
want to win.

4

The greener grass
is my very own;
I love its texture
but question its tone.

5

Whatever contradictions
I find in my life,
are reflected "frankly"
in the words of my wife.

6

I still can't pray
the way I should,
and only hear voices
asserting the good.

7

I'm still here
knocking at the door,
asking for alms
from the heart's core.

8

I know that when
the meek inherit the earth,
they'll be as unjust
as rulers by birth.

SURVIVAL

To wake and worry, smoke and dream
At 3 a.m. may only seem

A minor failure doomed to strain
Against its karma, fruitful pain.

Until a sickly thought appears
To cancel out its normal fears.

It talks of faith, it offers hope,
The mind accepts that ancient dope

And sleeps to earn another day,
Another bait, for mortal clay.

KULDIP SINGH

THE STILL CENTRE

The centre of the wheel where nothing moves
but all things are seen to be moving.

-*Ichor:* Gavin Bantock

I fear the vengeance of winds
after a lull:

for the soul sees
and the eyes see:
between the two
the neomyths flash a crazy mirror
between the two
restless fevered gusts suck and plunge.

* * *

The song within is the song
in the breeze:

but it must reach out
on its tender stalk
and cast its pollen
on galloping corpuscles
in the veins
quicken
the vocal chords
soar
with the soul
and yet be a mere lump in the throat
before it acquires words
and diffuses into the humming air.

So I sow the wind even as it turns
swirls
and sweeps away
and I in the vacuum of ellipse
the eye
of its reckless run
gasping
beating it with my fists
smeared with the dust of pain.

* * *

I face myself in the afterglow of
individual gesture:

with a jolt I break away from
the maw of the hissing funnel
and fall
down an abiding pull
to the still centre
outside of the welter of the senses:
through the conundrum of disinformation
the searing blasts
slapping across the stomach
a bitterness named justice:
out the dark of fire and ashes
to the heart of questions
the touchstone of facts
exactitude the nidus
wherein lies curled
the sleeping song
seed, if one but cared, of redemption.

THE LITTLE THINGS

A gesture unrequited
is a little thing; still
of no consequence if abused.

Presumptuousness and all its ilk
are what crow's cursing is
to cattle: these refuse to die.

An unguarded monosyllable,
grimace, or gleam: the ox's tail
it wouldn't do to get choked on.

But the night is frequented
by nagging ghosts:
denizens of dark recesses.

Many a little makes a mickle: skims
along choppy waters to sink
in the silt at the back of the mind. . .

there to grow stings. The body
in its innocence must awake
to the vile threat of the little things.

SUNDOWN

You are here. Now
there can be
no room for dreams.

Nor hope. The sun sinks
into abysmal
pit: a stillness seeps

into bones. This the end
a non-event
casts long shadows.

Darkness gathers as mind
gropes for meaning
in the day's loss.

MANOHAR SHETTY

BORED

When I'm bored, utterly bored,
I fill a blank page with my name,
Twist paperclips and scrawl
Variations on a grotesque face.
My bored mind invites things
I had shut out: the soft
Explosion of a runover pup, a baby
Sparrow I once stepped on,
Lost in thought.

When I'm bored, utterly bored,
I recall shy women returning
From toilets in movie halls,
And casual pillion hands
On the waists of scooterists—
Close, close to the crotch,
And that demure hostess
Wiping her nose and wiping
A sly fingernail on the
Underside of an armrest.

No, I can't think
Honourable, memorable thoughts
When I'm bored, utterly bored;
My mind opens a drain
For white mice to ferret
Around in sewage.

IN A STRANGE PLACE

There's a nursery outside
With flowers drooling,

And shaking their heads
Over the tall hedge.

I've tried to identify
Them by name; some,
I see, have turned
Very red; most are all too
Common; a few, I suspect,
Speak to themselves
At night, I met

The gardener
This morning. He spread his
Palms out towards me.
I noticed that all his
Fingers were green.

BEARINGS

Unfinished houses resemble
Abandoned ruins, and this one
With stunted columns and jagged
Supports like a child's drawing
Has been left out to soak in
The monsoon—a season of moss
And mushroom, not for the fitting
Out of resplendent rooms.
But it preys on me, this work
Kept at bay by violent,
Romantic rain, this incomplete home
A book awaiting the final page.

Standing by today I saw moss—
Green *litchi* heads—spreading in
The backyard of spilled cement,
Woodblocks and the idle adze
Red with flowing mud,
And, between cracks, hangerson
Digging in, an eczema eating

Into the raw fence; home already
For a stray aquiver with fleas;
Slumped under running plaster
From fractured joints, it
Waits for an unknown master.

I look forward to the harvest,
The rough roof ablaze with bulbs.
The assault of drill and saw,
Mixers' tilt, rivets flattened
Fast into concrete, and gleaming
Screws pressed into service.
I look forward to this stranger,
My neighbour's homecoming, to a home
Rising out of littered gravel, shrub,
Anthill, wild mushroom; a home
With lit windows shut against
The cold and the howling monsoon.

MISSING AUTHORS AND SUBMERGED TEXTS: A VIEW OF CONTEMPORARY INDIAN POETRY

E. V. RAMAKRISHNAN

I

At any given time, in the poetry of a language different modes and idioms co-exist. While this attests to the vitality of the imaginative content of life, it also has implications for the reading of poetry. In the wake of the shift in sensibility commonly described as 'modernism', poetry given to a self-conscious use of language has gained both currency and legitimacy in Indian languages. Along with this poetry, poems which are traditional in tone and design, rural in vision and inspiration and romantic in diction also flourish in Indian languages. One of the limitations of modern Indian criticism has been its inability to make sense of these apparently simple structures of meaning. It seems our critics can demonstrate their sophisticated methods of interpretation only with reference to labyrinthine structures. Perhaps this is a legacy from the tradition of Sanskrit poetics. In an interesting article, David Smith has argued that 'literary criticism as we understand it today did not exist in India'.[1] The poetry which is imprisoned in poetics can be set free only through an informed reading of its specific content in a social context. This is to transform what we read into writing.

Those who have attempted translations of Indian poetry into English are aware of the fact that 'the riot of imagery and ornament which form part of the natural texture of the oriental mind'[2] cannot be easily conveyed in the vocabulary of a foreign tongue. Since the kind of poetry which is called 'folk', 'traditional' or 'desi' (as

opposed to 'marga') has more of this picturesque quality, its subtle nuances cannot be recreated in a new language, that is, a new social context. Even in the political poetry which subscribes to a well-defined ideology the rural/urban, traditional/modern dichotomy makes its presence felt, as is obvious from the 'Introduction' to *Thema Book of Naxalite Poetry*, where Sumanta Banerjee observes: "We also had to bring together two worlds — the world of the starving peasant, community rituals, tribal festivities, guerrilla struggles, burnt down villages, blood-soaked paddy fields on the one hand, and the world of the urban students and youth, dreamers with a violent mission, bombs loaded with agony and sufferings, jail-breaks, deaths in the streets and alleys on the other."[3] Answering the question, 'How can Japan overcome the imperialistic traits in its culture', Kenzaburo Oe writes: "Our new culture must awaken the primordial chaos in which trees, grass, rocks and 'fierce *kami*' used to speak. We must at least infuse anew into our imagination the creative energy that exists in such a world."[4] It is in the folk voice that trees, grass and rocks speak. The process of modernization strengthens the tendency towards centre-orientation and unitary wholeness. This is as much true of literary activity as of social reality. Our inability to read a traditional text is the manifestation of a deeper cultural malady. Both Sanskrit poetics and Western schools of formalist criticism share a common vocabulary of mystification. The peripheral voices of our culture defy categorization along those terms. The nature of the problem involved can be seen from the discussions of 'magical realism' in Western criticism. What is originally a mode of peasant narrative which we encounter in different forms in our culture has been rechristened 'magical realism.' But the conceptual framework which informs this mode of feeling is not accessible to the vocabulary of Western rationalism.

A certain element of fantasy is native to Indian culture. A village craftsman who gives bird-shape to a vegetable cutter or transforms a fish into the proportions of a pitcher using the open mouth to pour water, asserts the imaginative life of his society by incorporating fantasy into the very form of his product. 'The outer adornment,' Tagore says, 'is the expression of an inner love.' When the outer adornment involves looking beyond the utilitarian, diurnal aspects of social reality, the artist is able to realize his freedom in the very content of his forms. This mode of incorporating fantasy into recognizable shapes makes them 'readable' in the sense that they do not drain away their separateness or suppress their historical content. However, to be aware of one's modernity is to become conscious of this discursive content of everyday life. Since modernity is an inevitable stage in the mental life of a changing society the artist will have to fact it. When the artist becomes aware of his modernity or 'belatedness in time' he is stranded in a field of criss-crossing dialects. As the self gets splintered he loses his fluency of idiom. While discussing the art of Nandlal Bose 'who had the uncanny facility to get to the core of any art form and a tireless curiosity for aesthetic facts both natural and man-made,' K. G. Subramanyan observes that 'this interest in the various streams of art language fragmented, to an extent, the corpus of his work.' Since the modern artist is not the member of an intimate work-circuit he cannot fall back on the organic unpredictability of an intimate tradition. With the loss of an identifiable location within a homogeneous society, the modern writer loses his sense of himself as an author. He is fascinated by imagistic structures because they create the illusion of autonomy and control. Peter Coates in his *Words After Speech* talks about the close relation between industrial production and imagism.[5] Imagistic structures in modern poetry have increasingly come to rely on self-referential devices to embody the subjective consciousness of the author which cannot be

easily realized in their fast-moving conveyor belt of rapidly overlapping objects. In the following sections, by contrasting traditional poems with imagistic poems, an attempt will be made to bring out the points of departures between these two ways of making contemporary world available to art.

II

B. S. Mardhekar (1909-1956) and P. S. Rege (1910-1978) were two major modern Marathi poets. Mardhekar revolutionised the idiom of Marathi poetry while Rege remained a traditionalist in substance and style. Vilas Sarang, a modern Marathi writer, after reading Mardhekar in English, felt deeply disappointed because he felt he had already met Mardhekar's skeletons and mice elsewhere. Sarang notes that Rege is 'modern' in a subtle way.[6] Rege's 'modernism' has been recognized, if at all it was recognized, only in retrospect. The kind of duality exemplified by Mardhekar and Rege are traceable to two modes of apprehending reality. Let us have a look at two short poems of these poets to see how they convey their meanings in their separate ways:

Song

The song that the bird sings in the tree
Has another tree again in the song
That the bird in the tree sings

In the tree the song that the bird sings
Has again another bird in the song
That in the tree the bird sings.

—P. S. Rege[7]

The Sky Was Adroop

The sky was adroop,
Sun's circle straggled,

Like to the dog of hope who hungered,
In the alley of desire.

A shout came from somewhere
'Woman, feed a beggar!'
Sun fled to darkness,
The sky was awake,
For someone at some doorway,
Food leavings were scarce.

—B. S. Mardhekar[8]

Commenting on P. S. Rege's 'Song', Vilas Sarang writes: "The poem exists in a closed world; it is a tight, closed system. The outside world is resolutely shunned."[9] In Mardhekar's poem the outer world of deprivation and hunger assaults the world of nature. It is possible to read these two poems in terms of *Akam/Puram* division suggested by classical Tamil poetry. *Akam* poems are love poems while *Puram* poems deal with public events and problems. In *Akam* poems one comes across the interior, archetypal world which emphasizes different moods of love through different shades of various landscapes. It is significant that Rege's poem records an interior landscape of desire. What A. K. Ramanujan says about classical Tamil poetry may be applied to Rege's poetic method: 'Poetry for the Tamils does not unify a *multiverse* but expresses a universe from within, speaking through any of its parts. The man belongs to the scene, the scene represents the man.'[10] Mardhekar's depiction of the hungry beggar against a disintegrating world of drooping sky and blackening sun brings before us a *multiverse*, two worlds which refuse to merge into each other. Ramanujan observes: 'Whereas *akam* poems tend to focus on a single image, *puram* images rush and tumble over one another.'[11] Rege's apparent simplicity derives from a complex immersion in the hidden sources of language and culture. His poems are submerged texts, utterances from the subjective centre of an essentially

local world which attains authentic universality through the intense treatment it is subjected to. The burden of Mardhekar's poem is its stifling self-consciousness. While 'Song' exists as speech through its rhymes and tone, Mardhekar's poem exists primarily as 'writing'.

III

In modern Marathi poetry, poets like Chitre and Kolatkar represent a further stage in the search for an appropriate Marathi idiom which distances itself from Mardhekar's ironic rationalism and Rege's introspective romanticism. In Malayalam poetry too such a refinement of modernist sensibility is in evidence. Here I would like to contrast K. G. Sankara Pillai's 'Kochiyile Vrikshangal'[12] (The Trees of Cochin) published in 1984 with a traditional poem, 'Narabali'[13] by P. Kunhiraman Nair (1905-1978), published in the late sixties. There is a mutation in the poetic language of Pillai brought about by the reflexive element in his consciousness. The missing author returns to the text as a peripheral voice in his poem. Kunhiraman Nair's poem is an *akam* poem, which translates ideas into interior landscapes. This mythic utterance is still a valid mode of experiencing and embodying reality because a substantial segment of Indian experience has to be traced to the rustic landscape of backward places. It is significant that K. G. Sankara Pillai's poem carries a reference to P. Kunhiraman Nair in the text of the poem. In K. G. Sankara Pillai's poem one notices a desire to recover the mythic inclusiveness of a self-sufficient world. In communicating the impossibility of recovering such a world he charts the distance between him and the earlier poetic mode.

'Narabali' (Human Sacrifice) deals with a moment of self-destructive rage in a ritualistic drama of wide-ranging passions. P. Kunhiraman Nair's romanticism was wholly native in the sense that he never read any foreign language. In his poetry the desire to ornament is inseparable from a sense of the sacred. His nature poems rarely describe people

as they depict an interior world of archetypal images. His anthropomorphism has a strong undercurrent of eroticism. It is the world of 'Akam' poetry where landscapes evoke human feelings and settings are emblematic of mental states. 'Narabali' is a long poem of 360 lines written in 'Anushtup', a Sanskrit metre.

The opening lines of the poem describe a temple in a forest. The unfolding description equates the temple with India. The elaborate depiction of the details of Indian landscape in terms of a temple and its surroundings reveals an architectural imagination stirred by profound forms. We are treated to an aerial view of India from the heights of the Himalayas. This imaginative inclusion of a vast expanse within the metaphorical content of the poem bears the stamp of Kalidasa's poetry. But, the influence is internalized to such an extent that it is hardly noticeable. The image of the temple evokes the sense of the sacred with remarkable ease. Dusk, dawn and seasons become maidens visiting the temple. Slowly the accent of the poem falls on the contrast between the former glory and the present state of disrepair of the temple. Locked-up dining halls, dirt-filled tanks with fading lotuses, unlighted, rusting lamps point to the moral rot that has infected the Indian mind. The skilful use of metre evokes the atmosphere of ritual and worship. As the poem moves forward a suppressed rage erupts into its tone. It is here that the full meaning of the primitive setting of the temple-forest becomes apparent. Since the rot that has set in can be rooted out only through an act of ritualistic cleansing, the poet has to immolate himself on the altar of the temple. In order to retrieve the authentic self lost in the acquired masks of a disoriented society the speaker of the poem has to destroy himself. The refrain 'I must die' runs through several stanzas. Regeneration through death, Eliot's theme in *The Waste Land*, is acted out in the central dramatic action of the poem. The poet sees the stone idol of the temple coming alive as a blood-thirsty Durga demanding human sacrifice. The poet

immolates himself in order to appease this mother Goddess and to restore the temple to its former glory.

I slashed and flung away
All coils of passion and desire
This burning pot of head
And life-breath boiling within,
Plucked and flung at your feet
My heart-flower, hands and legs:
I sanctify and offer my blood;
Pluck my eyes and gift them!
The tongue that spoke treacherous lies
I slice out before you:
The mind that constantly got drunk
I've placed before you in devotion[14]

The whole poem is an utterance at the point of directing the accumulated violence of a decadent society inwards. The theme of disintegration and rebuilding are placed in a narrative context. The poem derives part of its force from the use of a ritualistic structure which readers will have no difficulty in identifying themselves with. The Dionysian frenzy of the central experience creates a luminous space of participation within the poem. Its orgiastic violence is the meeting ground of the sense of the sacred and the erotic impulse which manifests itself in the desire to ornament. The poem moves towards a catharsis of self-knowledge. A society which can articulate its claustrophobic sense of being over-whelmed by materialistic forces of decay through a ritualistic structure of participation is one which can translate metaphors into meaning.

K. G. Sankara Pillai's 'The Trees of Cochin' is also concerned with themes of decay and disintegration. The poem does not opt for a unified mythical structure. Its principle of organization has to be located in the logical progression of images. In fact, there are three poems within this

poem, each framing a view of fragmentation in a different context. The opening section evokes a bygone era in the history of Kerala before the arrival of Tippu, Gama, printing, English and allopathy when the passage from Trikkakkara to Cochin had the linear simplicity of an age of devotion and trust. Trikkakkara is associated with the myth of the annual resurrection of King Mahabali heralding Onam festival. The trees that lined the passage from Trikkakkara to Cochin bridge the inner world of love, devotion and hope with the outer world of commerce, travel and flux. One could not lose one's way in such a world lit by 'the adage-like phosphorescence of moonless nights'. The organic symmetry of this world has the wild majesty of temple elephants. Since the origin of Malayalam is traceable to Tamil, the past that is evoked points towards a Dravidian world of devotion and frenzy. While the phrase 'the fruit of knowledge' may suggest the Fall, its association with Lord Murugan, the Dravidian god, is also relevant. In a poignant passage the poet shows how the trees that bound the inner world of worship with the outer world of time and change were consumed by history:

> Some of them became chants for Rama
> Some figures of god
> Fangs of demons
> Some lamp-posts
> Racks for the condemned
> Palanquins
> Rafters and doors with fretwork
> The fragrance of sandalwood in
> Egypt or Greece
> The frenzy of drumbeats
> The abode of the bird that sang
> of primeval sorrow
> The lyre that tuned to the
> 'Westwind's Ode'
> Some grew up tall and sturdy,

pioneers spreading out in the sky
Others branched off into clans
of emaciated seeds and
rotted cores
Paling the foliage
Some became poles for pennants
Some scaffolds.[15]

These images of metamorphoses point to the poet's intense desire to make sense of the transformations that have overtaken the society in the last few centuries. The rapid succession of images is indicative of an oppressive self-consciousness that intrudes into the primeval landscape of majestic trees. With these images one wakes into history, into the outer world of war and accelerated motion. It is significant that the central metaphor of 'Narabali' discussed above is a temple enclosed by a forest. P. Kunhiraman Nair's poem moves further into the archetypal aggression of the deeper forest which suggests the racial unconscious.

In Sankara Pillai's poem the organic symmetry of trees lies fractured into several splintered pieces of wood. Roland Barthes in a different context observed that 'A sign which fills one with consternation is the gradual disappearance of wood.' The vanishing of trees is emblematic of 'modernity.' The transformation of trees into various commodities parallels the rise of a market economy which annexes the villages destroying their rural self-sufficiency. The destructive forces unleashed by these changes had its impact on Malayalam poetry. In the second section, references to Kumaran Asan, Edappally (who committed suicide by hanging himself on a tree), Changampuzha, Vailoppilli, and P. Kunhiraman Nair emphasize the tragic fate of the poet in our culture. P. Kunhiraman Nair is described 'as a tree rising from Hades, the Mahabali of words'. Poetry as a means of reclaiming the lost space of rustic harmony and sense of continuity and community

succeeds only at the cost of the poet's disintegration. The poets who have deep roots in the soil are tossed in the raging storm of industrial development. Now the same passage which was once flanked by majestic trees is lined by chimneys belching smoke. The octopus-like smoke envelops the poet's world totally disorienting his senses. The poem ends with these lines:

> On a pyre lit by the raw firewood of excuses
> Our life-long cremation
> In our eyes, nose, tongue
> In our petty obstinacies
> In the bag, the watch and the dream of the future
> On the baby feet long before shoes
> The trunks of smoke coil up.
>
> Don't be in a hurry to get up.
> There is still time!

While the trees are transformed into 'the raw firewood of excuses', the majesty of elephants has got metamorphosed into the octopus-like malignancy of smoke. The rising smoke is a lurking monster which threatens the whole landscape with its amorphousness. The insubstantial nature of smoke makes it an image of dissolution. The ironic ending carries the self-referential signature of the poet within the text of the poem.

It is possible to see K. G. Sankara Pillai's poem as a comment on the poet's impossibility to exist as a natural, authentic, impulsive self. The speaking voice of the poem represents a willed self which is created out of the wreckage of the cultural debris that clutters up the psyche. This willed self can express itself only in terms of carefully manufactured linguistic constructs. Its procrastinating posture on the funeral pyre of excuses is an adequate metaphor for its ghostly identity and insubstantial presence.

NOTES

1. David Smith, 'Classical Sanskrit Poetry and the Modern Reader' in *Contributions to South Asian Studies*, ed, Gopal Krishna, (Delhi: OUP, 1982)
2. E. F. Oaten in *Cambridge History of English Literature*, ed. A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller, Vol. XIV (Cambridge: 1916)
3. Sumanta Banerjee, ed., *Thema Book of Naxalite Poetry* (Calcutta: Thema, 1987) p. 26.
4. Kenzaburo Oe, 'The Centre and the Periphery' in *Writers in East-West Encounter*, ed. by Guy Amirthanayagam (London: Macmillan, 1982) p. 50.
5. Paul Coates, *Words After Speech* (London: Macmillan, 1986) p. 123-25.
6. Vilas Sarang, 'Remarks on Modern Marathi Poetry', *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 17:1, Winter-Spring, 1982.
7. Dilip Chitre, ed., *An Anthology of Marathi Poetry 1945-1965* (Bombay: Nirmala Sadanand, 1967) p. 28.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
9. Sarang, op. cit.
10. A. K. Ramanujan, ed., *Poems of Love and War*, (Delhi: OUP, 1985), p. 247.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 253.
12. 'The Trees of Cochin' has been translated into English by K. A. Sherif and E. V. Ramakrishnan.
13. K. M. Tharakan, ed., *Malayalam Poetry Today* (Trichur: Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 1984). See pages 39 to 48 for T.R.K. Marar's translation of P. Kunhiraman Nair's 'Narabali'.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 47-48.
15. The unpublished tranlation by Sherif and Ramakrishnan.

SATCHIDANANDAN

FINGER PRINTS

Here, the old fortress-door.
See, the finger prints, small and big;
some printed in soot, some in tears;
some, of the kids that peeped through.
Some, of the old that collapsed in hunger
before they entered,
and some, of the young who tried
to break open the door, only to fall headlong
into the endless night.
I too leave on this door a finger print in blood:
a souvenir and a warning for those to come:
my poetry.

POSTMAN

The postman comes, a brown cloud.
My mind unfolds its wings:
What does he bring for me today:
Bouquets from my readers, brickbats?
Fears to share, fevers?
A snow-clad foot of the mountain's daughter?
A peacock feather from the forests,
dancing to multiply?
A conch from the seas
whose sound rouses the sun?
Letters with horns and hooves,
letters whose blood-thirsty nails reach for the brain,
letters with beating blue hearts
letters with green breasts dripping with milk
those that sing like violins upon a mere finger-touch

those that bleed when torn open
those that smell of flesh when burnt
those that pose riddles like the sphinx
letters that laugh inviting us to madness
letters that open with a creak like the door of hell
letters extraterrestrial with the odour of empty spaces:
which, which of these does he have for me today?

The brown cloud hands over a small envelope:
"Just this for you today, Sir."
I tear it open, the seal of Heaven,
the name of God, and under them, three words, just:
"SENTENCED TO DEATH".

THE BEAST THAT REMEMBERS THE WOODS

The beast that remembers the woods
will not easily tame.
His skin is moist like the marshes in the jungle
His hairs carry the intense scent of wild springs
His eyes glitter like the forest's sun oozing on to the rocks
Sylvan streams roar in his mouth.
Wild honey stings his tongue.
Wild elephants trumpet in his blood.
The clouds of the woods thunder in his heart.
His thoughts run mad along the forest-tracks.
The beast that remembers the woods
will not easily tame.
I remember the woods.

I CAN TALK TO THE DEAD

I can talk to the dead
dead men, trees, rivers.
Sometimes I see my ancestors:
my granny flies on proverbs
my grandpa crosses rivers on riddles.

Some swing on quartrains and couplets,
some ride chessmen.
Some play in circles ploughing fields,
some pluck the betel leaves of Heaven.
Sometimes I come across my dead friends:
they have not changed; only their bodies
have turned into glass.
We can see their hearts inside.
We were wrong to think their hearts have stopped;
they beat faster than our hearts.
They cry in the voice of drizzles
and laugh softly like falling leaves.
They are no different from us, the so-called 'living',
only sometimes they choose to fly.
Their desires, anxieties, despairs
—all are like our own.
Death is not the end of doubts;
questions baffle them.
They have long ago lost their language
their sun rises like a skull in the east.
Mushrooms grow on their foreheads.
When I am talking to myself,
I am really talking to the dead
when I am talking to you, too.
Sun has set in our language.

THE LAST RIVER

The last river had blood
in place of water.
It was boiling hot like lava.
The last lambs that drank from it
fell dead without a bleat.
The birds that flew across
fainted and fell into the river.
Skulls were shedding tears; and from the windows,
stilled clocks went on falling down.

A mother's skeleton floated
on the last river.
A boy was rowing it across.
His hands held a magic bell
his mother had given him at death
and his memory, a house ringing with laughter.
The shadow of that bell and that house
fell on the corpses floating on the river
'Aren't you afraid of me?' the last river
asked the boy. 'No', said he,
the spirits of the dead rivers
are with me. I have talked to them.
They had looked after me in my previous lives.
'Your father killed them. Their blood
is flowing in me; their curse is boiling me'.
The boy only rang the bell in reply.
It rained. Love cooled the river.
Her blood turned blue. The fish came back.
Trees put forth new leaves.
The clocks began to run again.
That was how human history began.
The bell is still chiming
in children's laughter.

THE BLOOD OF POETRY

When I wept in hunger,
you caught my tears on paper
and said: "Look here: a poem."
Then you sold it for a fortune.
When I spat blood toiling hard,
you caught it on canvas
and said: "Look here: a painting."
Then you sold it for a fortune.
When the machine cut off my hand,
you nailed it on to a pedestal
and said: "Look here: a sculpture."

Then you sold it for a fortune.
Then you chained me and led me to the square.
You mocked me: "Look here: a traitor,
sells his own tears, blood and hands."
You burnt me alive.

Then you sold my remains for a fortune.
Then you had my statue made
with the interest of my blood.

Then you sold it for a fortune.

THE PIPER

This is all we remember:
The piper came.
He destroyed the rats.
We followed the charm of his song.
The tunnel closed behind us.
We learnt to dress and walk,
laugh and talk like those
this side of the mountain.
We worshipped the goods of this land
and obeyed the king.
Good citizens we became,
following their laws, paying their taxes in time
and never taking the left side of the roads.
When this country declared war
against those on the other side of the mountain
we robbed our fathers, widowed our mothers
murdered our brothers and molested our sisters.

Now we know:
we had forgotten the colour of our blood.
This is the land of rats:
they exhaust the granaries
and adorn the thrones.
We are now waiting

for that piper to come back—
to take us across the mountains
to be ourselves.

[Translated from the Malayalam by the poet]

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(Signed) **R. P. Nair**
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GOPAL HONNALGERE

THIS EARTH IN ITS DAYLIGHT

patches of grass
like the fading hymns of the earth
or if the earth is a head
withering hair of an old man

grey clouds
like the ashes of my father and mother
immersed at the confluence of rivers
in the hope of sending their souls to heaven

in between these
i may be a freak
i may be a mickey mouse
leaping in the colourful landscape
of a documentary truth
but it is my body
with its eyes, ears, nose, mouth
brain, limbs, hands
heart, lungs, and genitals
a palpable reality
which exists in its daily breathing
eating, fighting and love making
affirming birth and death

every morning
the sun brings to my sight
specks of grey clouds
and crows perching
on the live-wire
of the megawatt power supply
sometimes even a large flock of them

squatting as if they are
holding a discourse
on life and death

if one of them
should accidentally touch
another live-wire
it would be charred
and the dead body of the crow
falls down like worn shoes

why do the crows take this risk?

thinking about them
as i try to walk fast the morning
i suddenly stop
bend down to tie my shoe-lace;
among the corrupt people
the corrupt government
polluted water
polluted air
here where even the light is polluted
by the dark deeds of men
twenty times changing jobs
to find a clean and honest
place to settle down
has put me down
i am a pair of shoes
with cracks in the heels
i stand up again

THE CURIOSITY

some are eaten
by the jungle cats
some are swallowed
by the hissing snakes
some are pecked to death
by the bigger birds

some others die, but rarely
of hunger, diseases
lack of proper nest
suicidal instinct
misguided migration
fatal weather
freak season
or the feeding mother
getting lost in some storm

some more of course are killed
by man's pollution
sadistic instinct
or for pots

but i have also seen
some chicks
leaping out of their nest
before they are fledged
and nothing, nothing
comes to save them

even the earth

even the light

even the curiosity

out of which they
come to see

the earth
in its daylight

BUDDHADEV DAS GUPTA

CATERPILLAR

Thanks for this birth. Thanks
to all my brother and sister
caterpillars everywhere. What
exactly happened and why and how
it happened is for the learned
among us caterpillars to determine.
Of course it had to happen. I had
to have the soft, boneless little
furry body and learn to ambulate on
my belly. It happened. There must be
something special in the soil, air and
water here and I'm grateful for it! We
caterpillars are progressing towards our
next birth effortlessly, crawling on our
bellies. We'll know all caterpillars are
ready for a real socio-political, economic
and cultural policy when, some night, we see
the last king and queen of the caterpillars.
The wind is blowing that way but the time has
not yet come when we'll be born recognisably
as caterpillars from the start.

UNMYSTERIOUS

to you a life is given once
to think and find which way
you will make a stand, from
where you'll confront death.
a hand is always on your collar,
it makes its presence felt
no matter how much you swallow.

For thirty years a boor has
used your bed, books and shoes,
wait in the street. the sky
darkens, your friends' faces
darken, hushed as the last
seconds before a storm breaks.
fury is silent and a yawn,
while waiting for the last bus
holds open the wide jaws
the uneventful earth enters,
soughing, cold, which you see
slowly rolling from your fingers
like a marble every morning
towards a small, unmysterious hole.

[Translated from the Bengali by Lila Ray]

SUMA JOSSON

THE SEASHELL

When all efforts to break open the seashell failed,
we put it back on the beach, a little away from the water.

Now everything depends on the moon, I said.
If she lets herself go,
then the salt-water will push in
and take it back into the sea.
If not, then it will remain where it is.
In that case it cannot exist in the other state.

Because there is life in it,
and therefore a longing not to die.

A NIGHT OUT

What is there besides roots under the ground.
A tuber.
Pale, marble-smooth,
the temperature hard to gauge.
A little pouch of vegetable.
By the pillow I cradle it to sleep:
a night out of its element
in the earth of light
matter of which I was made
to be returned to a mother
in the morning.
Days later shoots break, occupy space.

And I am sitting alone on a bench in the park,
waiting.

JOHN ALTER

MEDITATIONS AT MIDNIGHT WITH MY SON

That God does not tire, loving us, amazes me.

When finally you drift back into sleep, little one
your tiny hands clenched up against your head
(fresh as a loaf of new bread you are!), your tiny tantrum
over

tired I turn open the Book & read,
'the Word became flesh & tabernacled among us'.

You sleep, nose to nose
with your mother on the wide bed,
a symposium of love. I sit in the dark
& listen:

two voices
where for almost a year
only the one could speak
& you swam there in the dark waters
like a dolphin.
And then the waters broke
and kind-hearted strangers lifted you up
to us

fresh, fresh from God.
Tired I sat in the dark turning the pages
of our love. On the wide bed, nose to nose
with your mother you sleep now

your tiny tantrum over,
fresh as a loaf of new bread.
Tired I sit awake in the dark chewing the last
sweet crumbs.

That God does not tire, loving us, amazes me.

John Alter

PARTITA 2

Music flows from your violin
like mountains or the sea

or how water flows
down from the integrity of ice
through squalid adventures to become
at last

one note in the ocean of music,
purified
sporting like a dolphin

as if in his cave
beneath Mount Kailash an old Rishi hears
at last, speechlessly perfect
the voice of his heart singing.

His smile gives birth to violins.

—for Sam Mondol
July, 1988

NORMAN SIMMS

NEW YEAR 1986

At dawn down on roads that twist from cloud
and river lost in mountain fogs
the new year trudges weary even this first day,
and hermits, soldiers, devotees and cranks
surround her, strewing crafted petals in her way.
The sacred cabins fall apart, the shrines collapse
with age, and all the relics of the past corrode;
yet from such shards and fragments, dust and sand,
the sacra of the coming time are built, and drops
of water from the holy river, flushed from hidden peaks,
just the same, though dusted with the first light's ash.
Here she comes, proceeded to the city's wall
by maids and youths aroused to hopeful song,
winding awkwardly through twisted lanes, damp
and chilled, observed through careworn eyes by men
and women of outlandish age. And then the gongs,
the cymbals, the tinkling brass of urban rites,
while beggers jostle priest and prince, matrons whores,
and still more fluttering manufacture snows her path.
Infants and snot-nosed toddlers shoved into her face,
the leader draws to the temple, peace at last,
where for three hundred and sixty-five days she'll rest
in solemn splendour, warmed by endless candles,
feel the daily drench of chicken blood and wine,
the agony of futile hopes proclaimed,
the stench of hate, the over-honeyed dreams
putrified of silly kings and brazen serfs—
all heard and felt and tasted with indifference.

SANJIV BHATLA

WAITING

I have seen all the windows light up
one by one,
and the headlights
turn on, in pairs.
The cassette of awful music has struck
the dead end
in its gyrations. I fiddle
with the knobs
and feel claustrophobic.
The book on impressionist painting lying open
makes as little sense as
the sky perched above the skyscrapers;
under the same
grey sky I fathom
you must be
somewhere!

Your well-meaning servant fills me up
with all the news in town.
I steal a glance
into the neighbouring building
where they are combing their hair, sticking up
balloons, tuning in
TV sets, in defence
against the evening pouring in like the soot
from a tall chimney.
Your servant has a ticking mind.
He has views on politics, people,
municipality,
and looks at me all the time.

I lean against the parapet,
running fingers
through my hair.

Somewhere within this night, stretched
like the inside of a balloon, you must be
glazing past headlights, mobike exhausts,
crossing roads
like those people
twenty stories down below.

ANURADHA MAHAPATRA

GRASSLAND WITHOUT CHARIOT WHEELS

I said yes to death and no to God
and no to wedding vows.
Today my wish is to dress up the dawn
of my youth and my business-minded noons
in the cremation ground's colors.
Right next door the blind man, sweet shop
and new boats are all procurers,
and the distant farmland beyond
the cremation ground is under the wheels
of the hashish-smoking driver's cart. My love
lies somewhere in a grassland
unmarked by chariot wheels—who
will direct me in the paths of innocence?
I'll be a little girl again anb laugh and play
and sob as I kiss the cremation ground.

BLIND RIVER BANK

Illumine her beauty today with a simple hand.
A birdsong refracts patterns of latticed woodland.
On the horizon's distant sari-end
Her former life pillows her head in slumber.
The girl is hauling up that water
On the lost bathing steps of the blind river.

GOD

I have not seen God.
The minute I see temples
I think of God in His beastly incarnation.

When I see an image worshipped
I know the daughter of the house
will be sold for cash, offering
one faded life to another.
This is the final joke, to see blood
coughed out of the mouths of those
whose blood is gone.

Still, when I saw that young man
in the blue-black knit shirt on the tram—
dark, strong, straight as a cast-iron
cannon—I wonder: What would have happened
if he were God? At least I'd have gotten
some small patch of shelter. Or
I could have pushed him, and if
he'd been run over, if he'd been killed
it might have been love.

Nowadays, when I put my foot
on the running board of a bus,
I think of God.

PLATFORM ON STILTS

No child in that room, that room
that suddenly fills with trees.
Woman comes and builds the platform
of night's end.
There's no fruit, or pitcher filled with water.
A hairless head touches the sky's
emptiness today.

[Translated from the Bengali by Jyotirmoy Datta and Carolyne Wright]

THE RETURN OF INVOLVEMENT

Review Article on Recent Indian Poetry in English

MAKARAND R. PARANJAPE

Seth, Vikram. *The Humble Administrator's Garden.* 1985; rpt. New Delhi: OUP, 1987.

Alexander, Meena. *House of a Thousand Doors.* Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1988.

Padhi, Bibhu. *Going to the Temple.* New Delhi: Indus Publishing, 1988.

De, Bibhas. *On Grunion Shore.* Francestown, N.H.: The Golden Quill Press, 1987.

Ngangom, Robin S. *Words and the Silence.* Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1988.

Guha, Ananya Sankar. *What Else is Alive.* Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1988.

Yuyutsu, R. D. *Hunger of Our Huddled Huts and Other Poems.* Jaipur: Nirala Publications, 1987.

Kharmawphlang, Desmond. *Touchstone.* Shillong: J. Kharmawphlang, n.d.

The least that one can say after reading these eight odd recent collections of verse is that Indian poetry in English is doing well, thank you. A new generation of poets have been working diligently, away from the limelight and the fuss, keeping alive the flickering flame of this marginal, but significant poetic tradition.

But once the continuing health and viability of Indian English verse have been affirmed, some more interesting trends can be seen to emerge from these collections. First of all, the return of emotion, of involvement. The poetry of the 1960's and 1970's was dominated by the note

of ironic detachment, skepticism, and emotional restraint encapsulated so self-congratulatingly in R. Parthasarathy's *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets*, first published in 1976. The poets in this anthology, at least the majority of them, wrote about their alienation from themselves and their environment, looking askance at both. The tension between wanting to belong and the inability to do so gave birth to poetry. Recurring in their poetry were the all too familiar private traumas of the search for an identity. But the poets under consideration here seem to have shed this complex altogether to inhabit a more relaxed, even happier world, a world in which they are involved. In a sense, they know who they are and do not feel inhibited to tell us what they feel In a word, these poets do not suffer from the painful self-consciousness of their predecessors.

Of all of these poets, the most accomplished is Vikram Seth. It is unnecessary here to recount the stupendous success and acclaim that were accorded to his later book, *The Golden Gate* (1986), a very Californian novel in sonnets, modelled on Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. *The Golden Gate* not only made Seth a celebrity, but it has acquired the status of a cult classic in itself. All this attention detracts from a closer look at the poetic merits of his earlier collection of poems, *The Humble Administrator's Garden*. This collection establishes Seth as the most talented of the present generation of Indian English poets.

Seth's control over form, his feeling for metre and rhyme, and his sure exactitude in diction mark him as a polished craftsman. There is an air of ease and affability that pervades his poetry: it is relaxed, unhurried, and rich in texture—like a mellow, full-bodied wine. The poise and confidence of the poetry is almost neo-classic, but without the least sense of self-importance. Seth's persona is a most likeable, unaffected young man. It is not that the darker shades of life do not cross *The Humble Administrator's Garden*. There are recurring notes of loneliness and longing for love and security, but there is no self-dramati-

sation of these aspects of life. Only a quiet fortitude and wisdom as in the lost poem, "Unclaimed" (62):

> To make love with a stranger is the best.
> There is no riddle and there is no test—
>
> To lie and love, not aching to make sense
> Of this night in the mesh of reference.
>
> To touch, unclaimed by fear of imminent day,
> And understand, as only strangers may.
>
> To feel the beat of foreign heart to heart
> Preferring neither to prolong nor part.
>
> To rest within the unknown arms and know
> That this is all there is; that this is so.

It may well be asked what is Indian about this kind of poetry. I think there are ways of answering this question in the traditional sense, but I shall not attempt them here. I think Seth's is a liberated poetry, free from obsessive or self-conscious nationality. Here is an Indo-European sensibility privileged to exist beyond the more middle-class anxieties of identity.

Meena Alexander's collection, *House of a Thousand Doors* has an interesting cover design which, in my opinion, convincingly if reductively captures the preoccupations of her poetry. The cover shows an elderly woman looking sideways and underneath, within a latticed doorway is an orchid, unmistakably vaginal. The old mother is the grandmother and the orchid is the womb: this is going to be another gyno-centred book of poems. Not to forget the Indo-Saracenic lattice—that can be taken to represent the prose pieces on Hyderabad that intersperse the poems.

To start, a word about the prose pieces. I didn't like them; they seem precious and affected. Their value as prose fiction is minimal and though they are poetic it is difficult to see them as interesting. But thankfully, this

is a review of the poetry and therefore I may be permitted to skip over them lightly.

The poetry is very academic. That is, both deep and slightly boring. Alexander is a fairly well known and proven poet, with many collections to her credit. Thus, the formal competence of the poems is to be expected. Yet there is a feeling of verbosity, of wordiness in these long narratives about her family and childhood and places she lived in and experiences she has had. But what does it all amount to in the end? One gets the feeling that she doesn't have much to say. But certainly, this collection is substantial in size and content and shows a great deal of labour over several years.

Bibhu Padhi's *Going to the Temple* contains some very Oriya poetry in English. I mean that the landscape and the rituals of everyday life in Cuttack infuse the poems. Throughout, one hears echoes of Padhi's mentor, Jayanta Mahapatra. There are the silence, the questioning, the solitude, and pathos of Mahapatra here. But the major difference is that Padhi is far more straightforward, even superficial when compared to Mahapatra. The emotional depth, the sense of ageless profundity, gravity, and sorrow of Mahapatra's poetry are absent here. The poems are very readable though; and the author must be congratulated on producing a high quality, thoughtfully prepared, and very substantial first collection.

Bibhas De, the author of *On Grunion Shore*, is an Indian settled in Southern California. Though an applied physicist by training and a research scientist working in industry by profession, De is a keen poet who has published in several small journals. This is his first collection. I like the title of the collection: "Grunions," the author tells us, "are silversides that come ashore with striking regularity to spawn at full moon on California beaches." For the poet the earth itself is a grunion shore on which we humans are the grunions.

Despite some good poetry, the collection is rather conventional in its structure and theme. It has three sections "Dawn," "Shorings," "Dawn." The idea is of rising from dawn to greater dawn through an ascent of human consciousness. The poems depict an enlightened attitude to the earth, to the skies, to nature, and to God's creatures. The poet has a fine eye for natural phenomena. There are also some poems on India towards the end.

Yuyutsu, R. D. describes himself as "a noted Indian poet writing in English." He has published one collection, *A Prayer in Daylight* (1984) and is also an editor, translator, and publisher of poetry. *Hunger of Our Huddled Huts,* the alliteration seems very deliberate, is a collection of committed poetry. The back cover declares: "The book celebrates the ambition of the famished querns to possess the silos of plenty. Employing the agony of hungry huts as the chief motif, Yuyutsu conjures a sparkling drama of the belly and below." The poems, certainly, have a raw, starkness which jolts the reader. The language may be characterized as hard-hitting. Most of the poems are about "low life," or to put it more respectably, about our impoverished lower classes. Though the sincerity and passion of the poet cannot be doubted, the poems do become melodramatic and ludicrous at times, largely because the diction is inappropriate and dated. Also, one sees a definite tendency to go for the sensational and striking rather like the poetry of Pritish Nandy.

Ananya Sankar Guha's *What Else is Alive,* Robin S. Ngangom's *Words and the Silence,* and Desmond Kharmawphlang's *Touchstone* are all first collections that I like. The poets are young, in their mid or late twenties, and show a definite sense of vocation. Though Guha is a Bengali, he has lived all his life in Shillong. His poems are the most "metropolitan" of the three, though he too identifies with the culture of the hills.

Ngangom and Kharmawphlang are both best described as "ethnic" poets. They are among the first to

convey to us a feel of the rich culture of the North-Eastern hills. Ngangom's poetry is suffused with his feelings for the "Denuded and sweet-smelling hills" which are his homeland. There is an elegiac note in many of these poems: Ngangom laments the ecological and moral decline that has affected the hills. There is a definite note of loss and guilt at the migration of his people away from the hills and the recurring if painfully realized sense of loyalty and commitment to his motherland. He uses Khasi myth and folk-lore to reinforce this emotional attachment. But most of all, it is the powerful sentiment, obviously passionate and romantic, that characterizes his attitude to "Hynniew Trep" or Land of the Seven Huts, the name that Khasis call their hills:

> Seven Huts of my solitude, my first love
> Your rain, your wind, searched my face for signs
> of guilt when I first disembarked; a fugitive
> fleeing from ties of blood and desire.
> You who harboured me like a shame,
> and demanded my consistency.
> I saw the years clutched within
> your flailing arms of lessening pines,
> pleading with your errant people to return.
>
> (From "Hynniew Trep")

Desmond Kharmawphlang's *Touchstone* is, in fact, a bilingual edition which places the Khasi translations of the poems beside their original English versions. This scheme, if nothing else, shows the poet's commitment to communicate with his own people in their own language. This resolution is clearly stated in the poet's introduction: "This is my first book of poems, and an attempt to address myself to the people, not simply as an individual, but as their voice." No metropolitan poet could have made a claim like this in such a matter of fact manner, with such disarming simplicity. As the poet says in the very first line of his first poem, "The Conquest": "I never got tired

of talking about my hometown." Like Ngangom, Kharmawphlang is a romantic, but even more lyrical. Some of the poems are love songs addressed to specific people; a few are overtly political in their content such as "To Nelson Mandela" or "Peace." But a majority of the poems are of the sights, sounds, people, and things of the poet's homeland. A good example is "Of Stones":

Do you remember
the silent trees. . .that bride
of grace, the river,
flowing down to meet her lover?
And the red soil, we, once, scooped
from the earth's bosom?

My land (I tell everyone) wears
a great ochre stone in
her sweeping hair, spelling rain
in summer,

Thirstily, I once drank the wild
scent of her breasts of emerald;
And, at her feet,
sang trembling rivers.

The landscape of our north-eastern hills comes alive in these poems. Only a native of that region can write poetry of such intimacy and emotional identification.

There is a genuineness and simplicity in the poetry of Ngangom and Kharmawphlang which is both rare and touching, a quality of innocence that is sorely missed in our urban poets. Moreover, these poets, as several of their poems on writing poetry themselves suggest, have a quiet sense of commitment to their calling. They are modest, but determined. Not overly ambitious or successful in other pursuits, they have at last chosen poetry as their field of activity.

It is such quiet, steady ones who win in the end.

RABINDRA K. SWAIN

A SON'S DIARY

Neither father nor mother
wanted me to be what I have been.
I grew up purely as the son of the earth
scampering the mud floor, churning
the watered rice in a silver bowl
while my parents were away in the fields;
Father behind a plough
and Mother behind him, like his shadow.
I, then, held the house high
with my wild cry to be picked up
from the dust and from the curse.
I hung to my mother for my first six years.
I smelt in her steps
the cowdung, the scent of *mung*.
With her I learnt to suffer the affront
of the villagers being the onlookers to my brothers'
snatching of ragi-porridge from my father's mouth
and father's galloping in the dark of his empty stomach.
That was when I was sixteen.
Now at twentyeight, the looks of my parents
dare my failed eyes like the red lines
deep inside the scars on my palms
to hold the pen and to fill the pages
with my mother's lullaby
and father's admonitions not to stand
under any roof till there's an open sky
and a sun to ply
across the borders of the curses.

MAKE SURE

When you walked over them
a city hid behind its rubble

and the bulldozers were already quiet
like the horses back in their stable.

You walking the street
hear your steps echo

against the mute utensils
of the owners there
over their razed roadside stalls

who seem to ask:
how long have you been here?

Sleep is more enduring here
as tears, as mouths shut in prayer
and fear;

you don't even dare gulmohurs
in full bloom this summer.

This city harbours your friends so well:

When you drop them
make sure what you drop,

make sure
to come to terms with your self

when your words are men at work.

SHAKTI CHATTOPADHYAY

JOKE

That log-pile in blaze,
a funeral pyre.
When will you burn me in
such silvery flames?
Those who burn may turn outcasts.
And those crowding women—
celebrate around me across the night.

Look, the moonlight trembles, spear-sharp.
Such moongleams you will never see again.
All my friends are now away, all abroad,
They have left no shadows behind.

SCARED

Why a man stirs a noise—
Why does he clap?
He is scared of the rock
Or is he himself a rock?

Will a mutual embrace set aflame?

Scared
A man is scared of man

He would visit the woods, habitually,
He sees footprints of tigers—
As the fortune-goddess treads about the courtyard—

Man is scared of this incense-fragrance
Man is scared of man.

[Translated from the Bengali by Upal Deb]

HOSHANG MERCHANT

GOLCONDA ROCKS

The earth heaved
Lava congealed
Rocking them to birth

1
Four squares
Nicely rounded
Two of the breast
Two of buttock

2
Atop the kitchen floor
Is stacked its meaning—
Mounds of flat-bread

3
The landscape is too inhuman
So a stone
Impersonates human kind

4
From a moving bus
Stones throw up perspectives
One slowly opens
A door
—then shuts it

5
One stands
And withstands
It is all in the eye
This balancing

ANANYA SANKAR GUHA

PRAYER

Lord help me be complete
I'm aware of my incompleteness
When I meet that whining old beggar
always asking for more. . .

Or when I see selfless acts
Or when a friend or neighbour is in distress
because of someone's death

When I meet her with her beautiful eyes
and hum softly to myself old Hindi film tunes

Then only does my sleeping other half
shamefully, shyly lift its head. . .

PRABHANJAN K. MISHRA

NIGHT OF NIGHTS

Tonight we will not
make love or sleep,
we will live our years backward,
retrace lines on our palms,
those, like rivers fed by tributaries,
have made us to swell into shallow thalwegs.
Every night we scrape our innards,
mad magma seeking volcanic outlets,
intimacy recedes to far beaches
freak tides choking in debris of familiarity.
In orgiastic rituals our self-seeking vitals
meet, explode and part
night after night without involving us.
Tonight we will demolish the make-believe mascots,
props of pretences, facades of sophistry
and all barricades that make us aliens.
Tonight we will seek us out
from the crowd of time where we lost us.

THE SNAKE

A snake lives in my garden.
I did not kill it when young.
In youth it learnt to escape detection.
Age and experience
has taught it cunning.

All these years I have measured
my steps, lest I tread
on its lethal ruse.

My mother worships it and my wife
admires it from a distance.
Both claim that it visits their dreams.

It fascinates my daughter.
She wishes to touch its gloss and shine
but postpones her plans.

I hate its overtures
in my household.
It threatens to force
the lock of the room upstairs
where I hide among the shadows and whispers.

PANNA NAIK

SAND BENEATH THE SEA

I am
wet still sand
under the roaring sea.
I crave:
to go ashore
to burn beneath the sun
to be thrown around when the wind bellows
to be rumpled by a child's footsteps. . .
But
what about the infinite affinity
of these all-embracing waters?

EXCLAMATION MARK

Like an exclamation mark
in an unfinished poem,
you
have suddenly interjected
my life, half-way, where
an image of a ship lost
in the Indian Ocean drifts,
not certain of the journey's end.
I cannot keep forever exclaiming.
Why don't you complete the poem?

A POEM KICKING IN THE WOMB

I was nothing.

What can one store
in a bottomless box?

Yet
listening close
to my hoarded
scattered moments,
I found
in my womb
a kicking poem.

COW

A cow hungry for grass
peers around.
Her feeble cry is the only air around.
And then,
at some distance
there appears a field of grass
like a world of love—
but in between,
a lake of tears to be crossed.
Herds of cattle surround the dream pasture.
Her eyes now are heavy hills—
however hard she tries to lift them,
they remain shut.

WORKING CONDITIONS OF INDIAN ENGLISH POETS AS COMPARED WITH THEIR AMERICAN COUNTERPARTS

JOHN OLIVER PERRY

Recently in the United States feminists, popular culture enthusiasts, folklorists, and critics of Blackamerican and Commonwealth literatures have added Third World "New English literatures" to their efforts to broaden the cannon of literary study in America. Joining in that project to liberate Americans from narrow critical views of what poetry in English can and should be, I have been focussing on contemporary Indian English poetry, corresponding and meeting with critics, poets, and editors for the past several years. Though I now see the excitement for not only me but indigenous critics and poets created by "cultural challenges," the impression I had gained from several previous research tours of the sub-continent was that the circumstances for Indian English poetry are not only challenging, but downright difficult. It seemed to me surprising that under the prevailing conditions people could and would write poetry, a miracle that a few such poets are keenly appreciated by very select readerships both in India and abroad. Now I think the difficulties are less important for the poets than for their growing readers, yet it seems to me, as a concerned outsider, that confronting explicitly the practical obstacles to poetic achievement in Indian English can help to resolve some of the reluctances and uncertainties that both American and Indian readers continue to have about this literary work.

More particularly, it seemed to me useful to consider the creation and appreciation of poetry as a special kind of cultural work, a social, communicative activity going on

in its very particular historical and demographical context. As John Berger has brilliantly clarified in *A Sense of Sight* (Pantheon, 1985), we need to consider the work of art as a product of a system where the artist works under and prevails over specific material and historical cultural conditions, including the consumer-audience's demands of art-works and, equally important, the society's historical needs, i.e., the work that the art-work does for the working artist, the working tradition of art, the working consumers, and the creative, evolving society, present and future. Too long have so-called "universal" or, more limitedly, "contemporary international" esthetic standards distorted and diminished the powerful interpersonal communications of post-independence Indian English poetry. The marvelous diversity of this poetry has been pressed into restrictive molds by well-meaning but misguided critics who either want to prove it is as "good" as modernist Amero-British or Commonwealth poetry—coolly ironic, metaphorically complex, loosely associative, suggestively personal and so on—or they want to preserve its (undefinable and possibly irrelevant "Indianness" by applying fossilized versions of ancient Sanskritic or traditional Hindu esthetic theories that emphasise intense emotional suggestiveness approaching mystic nullity. Whatever an appropriate esthetic must be in order for diverse readers to engage appreciatively with this uniquely situated body of poetry is now in the process of development, and it is in the furtherance of that effort that the complex and varied cultural contexts within which this poetry is produced and consumed need describing.

By comparing the cultural contexts of Indian English poets with their American counterparts I do not mean to imply that the obvious differences indicate a deficit in either. Rather than establishing an "encounter" mentality, the comparison aims to highlight certain features which might otherwise be ignored and which call for

interpretation. Thus, interpretation of the poetic implications of distinctive Indian English cultural features, even though done from the perspective of comparisons with America, need not bear the burden of guilt and apologetics, defensiveness and aggressive self-assertion so often operating when Westerners attempt to deal with Indian cultural materials. It is precisely a major value of modern Indian English poetry that it can move past such "encounters" and establish authentic feelings and relationships on their own cultural grounds. Certainly for many Indian English poets, especially those over the age of thirty-five or forty, the experience of East-West encounter underlies crucial issues and qualities of their poetic sensibility: R. Parthasarathy, Shiv K. Kumar, Adil Jussawalla, A. K. Ramanujan and, in his counter-active stance, P. Lal. Critical analyses attempting to prove that such interactions must always be central are, however, readily disproven by more than a few counterexamples of relatively simple poets like Man Mohan Singh, P. Ramamoorthy, S. Balu Rao besides the established, indigenously complex modernists Jayanta Mahapatra, Keki Daruwalla, Kamala Das, Arun Kolatkar, whose work is thoroughly rooted in their distinctive regional language literatures and ways of living. Among younger poets this "encounter" and "indigenous" distinction remains, but the preponderance of initiative lies not with relatively traditional alienated, exile, or immigrant poetry like Vikram Seth's but with pre-eminently modern work loaded with traditional forms and feelings. Examples are Arvind Krishna Mehrotra's playing his surreal games/images off of medieval prakrit or folk poetry or Meena Alexander's poetry of an actual exile, which does not merely attempt a nostalgic "return" or a responsive reply to the call of her familial lands and people but brings them into her American life and multi-cultural family.

It has been argued that such poetic initiatives, indeed, modernism and post-modernism, are not appropriate

values for tradition-bound India. That argument rests on a political decision—that the nation and culture of India should remain relatively unchanged—and that decision in turn rests on a willed perception that the present rapid rate of change can be slowed and that modernizing forces have not irrevocably taken root in the consciousness of the generations, classes, castes, elites, leaders, and so on who will determine the nation's future. In certain areas of economic and social life it may be less stressful for the vast majority of Indian people, whether urban or rural, middle class or in poverty, male or female, that the rate of change be slowed; but certainly in some areas it is too slow for the well being of the whole body politic. Decision about which innovative technologies, markets, social relationships, etc., operate in the best interests of the whole evolving Indian nation may differ and certainly require on the ground experience as well as in the air perspective. A poetry authentically relating to the here and now is necessarily poetry both aware of changes from the past and projecting some personal or social vision ahead—and that is surely all that a modernistic poetic initiative need involve; it is certainly not "experiment" for the sake of "distinction." To this extent then, modern poetry in English can serve in India the special function that its cultural and historical position requires: to give substance and shape to all the tensions—the harrowing ones and the pleasing, the inevitable and the chosen—that mark everyday life and special moments and places. Given substance and shape in an interpretable, if poetic, language the resultant cultural understanding can guide responsible political behaviour, help to minimize self-inflicted wounds and open up opportunities for more people to achieve a broader selection of the diverse cultural values which so obviously characterize the Indian subcontinent today.

In describing the material conditions for Indian English poetry it should not be amiss, not too "American," to begin

with some American statistics. The figures that are most critical for producing poetry in America are not gross national product, per capita income, literacy rate, and so on, but stem from those distinctive marks of affluence. The figures I want to emphasize come from the back of most American dictionaries—the list of 2000 or so colleges and universities and over 1600 two year colleges, not counting nursing, barber, computer, stenographic, electronic and the like narrowly vocational technical institutions. Not only does this mean a highly literate reading public—whatever the low percentage of poetry buyers—but more significantly over *two thousand academic positions* for poets-in-residence and poet teachers, who have secure academic jobs working as poets. In India very few poets are academically employed, perhaps six in English departments, but they do not teach what they do; at best, English lit., though Arvind Krishna Mehrotra takes a few M. A. students for modern, that is Amero-British poetry at Allahabad University. Eunice DeSouza has a similar slot in St. Xavier's College, Bombay; and P. Lal, Shiv K. Kumar, and Nissim Ezekiel recently retired as English lit. teachers. Otherwise, poets here work in advertising, banking, the police forces, communications, editing, teaching physics, the army, medicine, bureaucracy, engineering—using English as the language of practical power rather than as a creative medium. The effect of this circumstance can be traced in increased conservatism in poetic technique as Indian poets continue to regard poetry in the traditional way as a very special linguistic enterprise, loading their lines with images, special words, rhyme and meter, obscure syntax as "poetic language" and high emotionality as "poetic feeling." The mainstream of contemporary American poetry is very cool, colloquial, laid-back, easy with detailed local images and references from everyday life that, with poetic vision, leap into suggestiveness for the American reader. When that post-modernist mode of poetry is, on rare occasions, imitated by Indian English

poets, often the Indian audience does not recognize the work as poetry or, in fact, the realistic details remain prosaic, flat, since the modernist traditions of "magical realism" or symbolic phenomenalism are not operative.

Along side their wide and deep academic support system, American poets enjoy the socio-economic and cultural haven of many hundreds of outlets open to their work. Dozens of very active and many more sporadic small presses, comparable to P. Lal's single-handed and crucially important Writers' Workshop operation; over a hundred university presses, several very prestigious, such as Yale and Wesleyan and Middlebury (with annual young poets competitions and many similar awards at other publishers.) It was Georgia University Press that published Jayanta Mahapatra's *Rain of Rites* in 1976, about when he, like Dilip Chitre and Arvind Krishna Mehrotra among several others, was being feted as International Writing Fellow at the University of Iowa (where the largest, best known US creative writing advanced degree program is run). Oxford University Press of India is virtually the only semi-commercial publisher and has presented only eight poets so far. To fill out the 1300 outlets listed for American poets in the current edition of *Poet's Market* one can find hundreds of addresses of literary magazines and journals, the two most important for poetry being the bi-monthly *American Poetry Review* and the famous monthly *Poetry*, from Chicago. Some journals take only major established poets, as does the *Illustrated Weekly* here, but highly respected so-called little magazines, like, for a wide sample, *Hudson Review, Raritan, Virginia Quarterly*, are somewhat more adventurous and are comparable perhaps to *New Quest*. Of the hundreds of tiny poetry journals with circulations of 300 to 500, there are dozens as regular and selectively edited as was the semi-annual *Chandrabhaga*. Of course, American poets *can* use vanity presses and journals as unselective as *Poetry Time* or *Poet International* from Madras—and they

will be equally disregarded! Thus 1300 or so outlets for American poets compare with the three or four respectable places just named in India.

The consequence of this scarcity here is that most published poetry in English—even, by the way, Kamala Das' national award winning *Collected Poems, Volume 1*—are self-published, usually crudely printed, certainly not well edited, and, of course, totally unselective, Alternatively, if the poet has foreign exchange for return postage, poems can be sent abroad, and they often are, at considerable cost, but with little likelihood of acceptance, even apart from American parochialism and cliquishness. For selectivity ratios range from 4 poems per 1500 entries weekly at the *New Yorker* to perhaps one in six at the least selective, one in a hundred at well respected journals.

The Indian English poet who sends his work abroad obviously expects that it has achieved "international esthetic standards," which usually has meant that the poetic perspective is of an alienated modernist struggling with an oppressive tradition-bound culture, a circumstance quite passe and alien to American readers today. Or the poetry may be excessively elaborate in poeticizing private, perhaps "Eastern" sentiments. Or again the work may be highly successful as an imitation of one of the dominant, probably conservative American or British modes of writing, but the consequence has been that strong talents in Indian English have not developed an indigenous poetic tradition until fairly recently. As for those who *live* abroad the many important Indian English poets like A. K. Ramanujan, R. Parthasarathy, Meena Alexander, Shiv K. Kumar, and G. S. Sharat Chandra almost inevitably write varieties of exile or immigrant poetry from their relatively affluent, supportive havens in America. Aside from these the most significant Indian English poetry since the early 1970s has turned increasingly toward indigenous themes. . ., materials and possibly even forms of poetry. Partly these

indigenizing strategies represent a positive reaction against both Aurobindian poetic excess and a complaining alienated stance so popular immediately after independence and so very derivative from classic alienated Western modernists like Pound and Eliot. Partly they show a conservative, inward-turning rejection of contemporary cultural change. Both modes have their cultural uses. Some such shift from alienation to indigenization can be found in the work of single poets. Arun Kolatkar's highly successful poem of a trip to the Maharashtrian temple town, *Jejuri* (1974), examines a somewhat deracinated but thoroughly Indian, bicultural sensibility; but Kolatkar's earlier poems in English, even if translations from his own Marathi originals and set in Bombay, sound very American, with slang and obscenities appropriate thereto, though not for most Indian readers. Arvind Mehrotra has continued translating Nirala, Kabir, and other Hindi poets while moving from surrealistic materials drawing on Western imagery—bisons, East European tractors, Minneapolis museum attractions, Shakespearean echoes—to drawing on medieval Prakrit regional poetry—see his "Bhojpuri Descants" based on the medieval poet Ghagha—and not yet published work drawing on Prakrit poetry. Nissim Ezekiel has clearly moved toward materials of a more personal, less abstractly philosophical sort. Recent poems often relate to urbanized India ("Very Indian Poems in Indian English," or lyrics for Nandu Bhende, the popular singer) or to his Jewish heritage in *Hymns in Darkness* (1976) and *Latter-Day Psalms* (1984), while still continuing at times to employ the highly formalized, ironic, Audenesque-Empsonian-Eliotian manner he adopted during his London sojourn in the fifties. When Jayanta Mahapatra began writing love poems in the late sixties, his mode was obscurantist, pseudo-modern, but soon he discovered his own style which has developed in relation to Orissan landscape, temples, customs, people—so much so that the Sahitya Akademi awarded his *Relationship* (1980) the first ever prize for Indian poetry in English.

Though *Dispossessed Nests,* his poems of 1984, work with increased social awareness, his latest long poem, *Temple,* while focussing on a present day victim of poverty and neglect, densely mediates its liberal social attitudes through ancient epic and religious machinery. Keki Daruwalla, the third national award winner, after Ezekiel, similarly in *Keeper of the Dead* (1984), has developed images and themes from North Indian Muslim scenes and practices, along with his continued focus on violence internal, communal, official and personal. Since 1965, Kamala Das, it need not be emphasised, has always drawn on her own immediate, often sexual and/or rebellious, experience, in Calcutta, Bombay, lately and more politically, in Sri Lanka, as well as memories of her Malabar, Kerala, family life. The younger generation of poets seem to be following this lead by the more established workers in the local vineyards. In avoiding excessive poeticizing and sentimental posturing, it is only to be hoped that "local color" and parochial concerns—obvious satires of local customs that are of only passing interest—do not come to be substituted for more hard pressing visions, whether from or into a special psyche that explores an indigenous world perspective.

Another danger that four years ago, Adil Jussawalla warned a P. E. N. audience about is just as threatening to an on-going Indian English poetry tradition as the crassly elitist modernist rage for a "mindless internationalism. Jussawalla called it "the regressive parochialism of our writers," whether in a regional language or English. From a world political perspective it seems that many Indian poets have abrogated their special historical and personal responsibility, one quite different from the subversive responsibility of American poets. To produce living poetry in India today poets are called upon to help this transitional society deal with its biculturality, the splits between traditional and modern, rural and urban, narrow conservatism and broad liberalism. Here a humane social outlook

is struggling with not only narrowly politicized regionalism but also communalism and color and caste consciousness that paradoxically support the growth of elite consumerism.

The issues raised by these considerations for poetry are more profound than can be treated here, but they certainly constitute one of the more compelling dimensions of difference in the working conditions of Indian and American poets. Though complacency and aesthetic or personalistic political isolationism may mark much of American poetry—especially the Wallace Stevens strain— a decadent society imposes historically less responsibility than a transitional (or call it dynamic even explosive rather than "developing") society. The consequence for Indian poetry is an unfortunate tendency parallel to that in, say, Whitman a century ago, to straining for democratic or social, nationalistic or local color regionalist themes and materials and attitudes, countered by extreme solipsism, personalism, isolationism. Today American poetry achieves its social responsibilities rather easily by sensitive presentations of our narcissistic consumer culture or some supposed counter-cultural alternative.

For this brief survey of differences I perceive in the working conditions of American and Indian poets I will end by sketching six well-known cultural factors affecting Indian English poets that are not felt by Americans. Because of time-space limitations I cannot always indicate how these affect the distinctive poetries produced by the two cultures, but some will be obvious, some already implied. The most obvious cultural difference is that English is the everyday, omnipresent living language of the street, boardroom and bedroom in America, while for Indian poets and their readers it is a language learned for special purposes—not at all for poetry, so that reliable effects in diction, lexicon, allusion, syntax, and rhythm are very hard to achieve. Two related historical and social facts about English in India are that it is the elitist

language of power for the highly educated ruling class of upper-level bureaucrats, technologists, academics, businessmen, and so on; and the second is that Indian English, even if in one of its highly Indianized variations, remains at some level an alien language with few Indian geographical terms and cultural idioms; indeed Dilip Chitre calls it "the enemy's tongue," with almost inevitably ironic messages in the medium beyond those culturally embedded in its modern poetic uses by Pound, Eliot, Joyce and their successors. Postmodernism in America, however, means *non*-ironically accepting that our language is deceptive, subjective, culturally biased. In general these linguistic factors for the Indian English poet intensify indigenous cultural forces toward traditionalism and conservatism, often using rather passe poetic modes, techniques and attitudes.

Three further cultural factors can be organized around the concept of absent authority. (Actually I have isolated three from a much more numerous complex that includes among others all the foregoing linguistic and other factors.) Instabilities in cultural references, inter-relationships, and allusions as well as about influences or traditions and esthetic standards and criteria all follow from the absence of culturally defined authorities for Indian English poetry and its criticism. Once more, excessive figures and feelings are paraded as poetic in the absence of clearer definitions—or the opposite occurs: pale prosaic cliches. This situation of instability in authority—which also makes for conservatism or more rarely a rebellious kind of experimentalism—is exacerbated by the relative paucity of cultural supports and publication possibilities for this poetry in India. Consequently poets turn to editors, audiences and critics abroad, another kind of absent authority. This sort is particularly harmful insofar as it not only obviates any clarifying face-to-face discussions of issues but also either trivializes cultural differences as

exotica in "East-West encounters" or flattens differences into vague humanist, modernist or post-modernist international "universals"

What needs to happen, and fortunately what seems to be underway, is a process not just of indigenizing criticism of Indian English poetry but more particularly, as I began by saying, the placing of each Indian English poet in his or her appropriate bi-cultural context. Such a context is not simply Pan-Indian, not even as a vague half of bi-culturality. The "two-culture" situation of Indian English poets is also not merely a composite of a regional base with some more specialized, somewhat alienated, individual superstructure, though that may describe the situation of some poets. With a profound recognition of not only the characteristics held historically in common by all these poets—including the six factors I have just sketched—a culturally sensitive criticism needs to trace out the multiple strands of personal and literary identity, whether communal, religious, ethnic, regional, sexual hierarchical, technological, historical, geographical, international, or whatever. The dimensions of identity in India, as someone who has studied them as carefully as Dr. Sudhir Kakar can testify, are as appropriately manifold and multi-rooted as the multi-cultural society that the highly educated Indian poets in English necessarily experience.

Though the American poet commonly draws on his or her specific ethnic background and local experience, the degrees and types of variation are relatively limited. The Indian English poet finds it hard to depend upon the dispersed, heavily academic and possibly international readership knowing even the basic Hindu epics, say, the episode of Sita and the golden deer. Though Biblical allusions may be equally unreliable in supposedly Judaeo-Christian America, over two hundred years of political and economic independence from Britain has brought about a

profound cultural hegemony, not to be confused with the American myth of a democratic melting pot. The high degree of uniformity and conformity and geographic mobility achieved through mass-media manipulation of values in the affluent consumer society makes possible a range of common cultural reference not available to Indian English poets. A mainstream poet like Jane Miller, for instance, can write about Cape Cod on the East Coast and the quirks of California culture, and she can include suggestively ironic cultural references to the not terribly successful film "Cotton Club," where, she suggestively says, "Negroes are played by blacks." Though an Indian reader may divine the implied social comment, an American reader, probably also higher educated academically but sharing that status with perhaps half his or her age-group, will understand the joke on American liberalism and the myth of social progress.

It is precisely because the comparable but conservative Indian national myth of "unity in diversity" is so patently a political fabrication solidifying Hindu dominance, as many readers and poets in India well understand, that I find Indian English poetry of such intense and wide cultural interest. The enormous differences in cultural contexts and working conditions, not only between Americans and Indians but among Indians constitutes a major attraction in this body of poetry. Thus, I can reasonably hope that learning about it will genuinely broaden the perspective of American readers toward the language and accompanying hegemonic culture we think of as principally ours, while the more diverse literary and cultural achievements possible in that multi-cultural medium—even of Blackamerican poets—are virtually ignored. It is because of that ignorance that I have focussed on differences in cultural working conditions rather than on the tenuous links that have been sketched and stretched by previous critics of American-Indian relations.

MAKARAND PARANJAPE

RAIN

PROLOGUE

The song of surrender is rain.

When its first notes are heard
You realize how unsullied words can be,
How exact their meaning.
You realize the tongue can be simple
And essential again.

Rain is effortless.
Under its cleansing strains
The traps that confine you within yourself
Involuntarily disintegrate.
You melt and merge into larger spaces.

The song of surrender is rain.
When you heed to its beat,
You feel each drop making sense.

I

It was an afternoon of uneasy restlessness.
Outside, the birds had stopped calling.
The breeze died.
No leaf stirred.
Inside, it became unbearably hot.
The fan whirled full-speed,
Only to churn swirls of warm air around the room.
I paced about the house
Opening cupboards,
Prying into books,
But putting them away dissatisfied.
Oppressed, I waited.

Then, with a crack of thunder,
Like a smile of relief across an anxious face,
The sky broke into rain.

II

Though I thirst for rain,
It only comes when you send it.

After it rains
I am left with the question
Did it rain because I wished it
Or because you sent it?

Will it rain if I don't wish?

Rain brings relief.
But after each shower,
The anxiety returns:
Will it rain again?
Will I be left beneath this parched sky
Wishing in vain?

The rain is your instrument.
Without it my earth will shrivel,
My crops will fail.

With these limitations
I don't know if I can reach you
In my distress.
Nevertheless, I continue to pray:
If not to move you,
To comfort myself.

III

We live from drought to flood:
Ours is the strange rhythm of sun and rain.

As the new year begins,
We prepare for the scorching summer.

We toil in the sun
Until the skin peels off our backs.
Our women labour at construction sites
Breaking stones, carrying bricks—
For paltry wages.
Slowly the sun rises.

The land trembles, heaves, cracks.
The sun rains fire on us.
He is Siva's third eye,
Opened to destroy the world.
The rivers dry in their beds,
The wells dry in their throats,
Our tears dry in our eyes,
Our prayers dry in our mouths.
In the heat of summer
A deadly dry breeze blows whose touch is death.
Many of our folks it claims;
Many die of sunstrokes.

When the sun goes down.
The sky suddenly breaks,
For days and days we get torrents of rain,
Then the rivers begin to rise;
Our villages are flooded;
We are forced to evacuate.
As we leave,
We see our houses swept away.

After the rains we return:
Again to face the sun,
To renew our prayers again.

IV

This month it rained again and again.
In the fierce winds,
The long rain-drops curved like scythes,
Slashed the soft brow earth.

Torrents of muddy water swirled in the furrows.
We did not like this darkened sky;
We boded ill this incessant drumming.

He who had gone to the river bank
To water the buffalos,
Returned early in the damp afternoon.
Standing in the door of the hut,
Shivering, drenched to the bone.
He panted: "She is rising, the river is.
We'll be flooded by evening."
Behind him, muddied to the haunches,
The buffalos uneasily stamped in the slush.

Two hours later, we heard
The mud embankment had disappeared.

Where were you then, O Giridhari?
Why did you not come?
Why did you not hold up the mountain
With your little finger
To shelter us underneath?

V

Our rain, unlike yours,
Is not a local matter—
The outcome of depression,
Of low or high pressure in the air.
Our rain is not a chancy occurrence,
Here today, gone tomorrow.
With us, rain is a season.
It is the sky's answer to months of penance and prayer.
After a long spell in the scorching sun,
Our peninsula like a tongue of flame,
Licks in mammoth air currents from the seas.
For thousands of miles
These moist, balmy breezes travel,

Until affronted by mighty mountain ranges.
Forced to ascend, the winds cool,
Lose steam, relinquish their dear cargo.
Relieved,
We gird up our loin-cloths
To wade in muddy earth-blood
Of the parched soil, soaked to the bone.

VI

For want of rain,
The Managing Director sat, arms folded,
At a small desk overlooking the plant.
The factory was merely an empty shed.

All the machines had been wheeled away;
The furnaces were drained and sealed;
The worker laid-off,
Not a sound was heard,
No one came in, no one went out.
And the 80% power cut continued unabated in the state.

VII

ACID RAIN

Each day
The Mathura refinery exhales billows of black smoke
Into the helpless sky.
"Can't one choke this chimney?"
The residents cry in vain?
In remonstrance,
The sky itself rains bitterly,
Underneath, with every downpour,
An ounce of marble dissolves
Off the snow-white Taj.
In his grave,
Shah Jehan wonders
What rain is this that bites deeper than his tears?

VIII

In the big ugly city
I could not recognize the rain
Staying at my aunt's three-room flat
In one of the tenements of a faceless suburb.
For three days it rained eonstantly,
Without sun or sunshine,
The whitewashed walls turned yellow.
Ugly swellings on every face.
Like pus, water oozed from each crack.
Outside, the suburban train tracks
Were three feet under water.
A nearby housing block
Built on reclaimed land, already visibly tilted,
Sank another six inches this season—
Three more than usual.
My uncle waded to work in gum boots.
The slums by the roadsides were flooded.
The rains brought disease and death.
Each drop was black when it hit the ground,
Falling through an atmosphere of dirt and pollution.
In the big ugly city,
Rain came as the yearly scourge.

X

THE DANCE

The rain-dance required prior permission from Mother.
In the tiled courtyard in the middle of the house,
Gleefully shedding our clothes—those encumbrances —
We two brothers would assemble.
Then frisking and romping in the showers
We would yell for our neighbours upstairs
(Sisters of five and seven with rhyming names)
To join us, splashing about a great deal
To make our invitation attractive.

Then, with bated breaths we awaited the outcome
Of the artful badgering of our peers,
Considering that their father was out, and
Conniving to use the occasion
To bathe her daughters thoroughly,
Aunty upstairs would reluctantly grant permission.

I danced till my limbs failed
Or it stopped raining,
Scarcely realizing that the image of two immature girls,
Soaped from head to toe, dancing wildly,
Slowly washed by the rain to pink nakedness
Would follow me across the gulf of puberty
Into the wet dreams of an uneasy adolescence.

XI

THE LAKE

The house overlooked the long artificial lake
In the heart of town.
Inside the temple across
Worship would continue into the wee hours
With cymbals sounding to the chant
Sri Rama jai Ram jai jai Ram.
Street lamps threw reflections on the waters
Lighting the edges in shimmering streamers.
When the wind blew
And the rain thrashed into the lake
Like a million hooves kicking up dust
The reflections stretched
In ribbons of blue, green, and orange light
Almost reaching over to the other side.
And with them
Something in me strained and strained
To understand
To connect.

XII

THE VISION

When the first rain fell
I was a cripple outside your temple
Unable to enter your presence.
In this plight I was caught unawares:

Lord, I am a broken sapling
Which cannot absorb this nourishment;
I am a peacock deprived of plumage.
How can I dance in the rain?
So said I and shivered in despair.

Then for the first time
I felt your touch on my skin,
Your breath in the air.
I am still a cripple outside your temple
Struggling to enter your presence:
But when it rains,
I am granted the rare blessing
Of glimpsing you
Of being whole again.

XIII

One evening it rained forever
Between tea and dinner.
I was closeted in my room—
A lone child in a big house,
Sitting by the window,
My only companion, the rain.
Suspended between two events,
The evening lengthened
Until it lost all shape and proportion.
Hours passed,
But the pale alarming silverlight
Did not dim,
The rain did not stop;
I grew glassy-eyed staring.

At dinner-time
They found me asleep in the chair
In the silent darkened room.

For days afterwards
Everything felt strangely novel
As if I had a new pair of eyes.

When they asked
How could I explain to them
How Rip Van Winkle felt?

XIV

With peals of thunder, the sky broke.
For a brief moment,
Through my little window,
I saw the tamarind tree in the yard
Lit up in a brilliant flash.

For hours, the rain kept time
On our asbestos garage roof.
The car looked like a huge bug
That had crawled in to keep warm
And escape the torrent.
Now and then, the leafy branch of the young coconut tree
Would slam the wire grating around the garage.

Inside,
Wrapped in a warm blanket,
I would lie wide awake,
Listening to the rain.

XV

1

Like magic it had rained when I was asleep.
I woke strangely refreshed,
Wondering at the unusual feeling of exaltion.
On my dusty panes were stained
The footprints of rain.

2

Again
Rain had silently touched me
In my sleep.

When I awoke,
I smelled the quenched, fragrant earth
Through my open window.
In the dark dawn
I hurried outside.
The grass was wet and glistening;
The air cool, fresh.
The plants stretched lazily in utter contentment.
In the far end of the garden,
And old chipped flower-pot
Abandoned and empty for years,
Had filled up with pearly liquor.

I had dreamed well.
When I awoke,
It had rained.

XVI

There is no shelter or escape from rain,
Like a secret, incurable disease
You carry it within yourself.
So that even when the sky is clear,
When you are sitting cosily in your living room,
You can be swept off your feet by the impending drizzle.

There is no shelter or escape from rain:
You may try to deny, hide, rationalize,
But can you ever escape yourself?

XVII

This obsession with rain
Is a lonely compulsion
Like recovering from a long illness.

Alone, bed-ridden,
You struggle silently day after day
With little or no visible improvement.
A patient in an isolation ward,
You cannot expect others to share your pain.

XVIII

This obsession with rain
Is a lonely compulsion
Most friends view it as eccentricity
Preferring not to talk about it.
After it has rained,
And you are temporarily fulfilled,
What is the use of discussing your feelings with others?
Rarely will they understand your achievement.
And before the downpour,
Impossible to communicate the toil of many silent hours
Without palpable outcome.
In ancient societies,
The rainmaker had a revered place;
You know no such recompense.

But the beauty of rain is beyond change:
It is complete and choiceless.
Once impelled,
There is no stopping it.
And between downpours,
You just have to wait.

XIX

The way of rain
Is simple to comprehend;
Only, you may find that being simple is not easy.

Then rain, I admit,
Does not answer your questions;
But then
It helps you understand them.

We often ask questions
When no answer is needed
And the question dissolves itself—

Thus, the rain has its own logic
Which is impossible to refute:
Whether you ask the question
Or formulate the answer
Its response is the same.

XX

Come listen to the rain.
The rain speaks in its own language.
To understand it you have to be absolutely quiet
If you love the sound of your own voice,
You will be disappointed:
After listening for a while,
With thoughts racing in your mind,
You'll arrive at the convenient conclusion
That all this patter is nonsense.
But if you are completely still
waiting patiently, expecting nothing,
Perhaps you'll learn something about yourself.
Don't succumb to the temptation
Of translating the rain into your own dialect.
Don't argue or talk back with the rain.
Words do not count with rain.
Imagine each drop to be a word;
In a minute a million drops descend—
Don't waste your breath.
When the rain speaks,
It seeks no reply, no opinion, no comment.
It hardly matters if you agree or disagree with its refrain.
The rain's utterance is entire,
And sufficient in itself.
So, if you have forgotten how to listen,

Try again.
Come, listen to the rain.

EPILOGUE

Through the long winter of my silence
When I burned with restlessness,
The man in the next apartment
Played his musical instrument.
Every evening he practiced for an hour after dinner,
But his strains could also be heard
At odd hours of the day;
It was obvious that he practiced
Whenever he could find the time;
Perhaps he played when he was depressed,
Or to refresh himself.
I listened with a helpless jealousy.

In the summer
When I found my torrent,
I felt a kinship with him;
We practised together night and day.
I only wished that as I heard his instrument,
He might hear my scribbling pen—
Like raindrops
On his window pane.

DARIUS COOPER

MY COUNTRY'S BEGGING BOWL

When darkness falls, I look at my son's
sleeping face, his tiny palms
closed over the world's weight
and think of my parents, in a small town far away,
as they dream of holding him in their arms.
My wife sleeps, Mersault's convincing frown
firmy embedded on her forehead,
and I wonder if I can ever go home
after these long long years abroad.

Yesterday, in some other darkness,
a friend blows a speck of my country's dust.
It enters my sleeping eyes tonight,
and myths that I threw in the waters
like painted gods, at the end of a festival,
get revived. I prop myself up like
paper gods on pointed sticks,
and with banners flying in the noisy forehead
of my sky, I suddenly spy my son
as he smiles in his sleep and opens his palms.
Even the frown disappears from my wife's
calm bodhitree face.
I have been offered my country's begging bowl.

ANUBHAV TULASI

TO *TU FU*

As if the heart were burnt into ashes
Each drop of blood sheds pieces of charcoal
Not even a single word is spared
Melting tar in the sky
What about your stroll
By the river Tu Fu
You too have a fracture
in your foot

[Translated from the Assamese by the poet]

RAJNEESH DHAM

WHAT CAN A POET GIVE YOU

Well. a broken pen for one
Or may be a crumpled page
Saved from the clutches of the waste paper basket.

A few highly motivated cells that make up a man
Or a few kgs of decaying flesh:
The pockets full of penury
Every poet's nemesis.

Well, in fact could give you a few books
Bought secondhand on pavements
Or seeds to sow a new generation
That may bring in a few hopes.

THE CLOWN

Spectators demand, acrobats oblige;
Unnoticed the clown cries.
This is the synopsis of my life.

Nothing hurts anymore.
The geometry of life learns with time:
Every noble gesture demands its price.

Today after 24 years of it,
Every theorem of life creates its own proof
Every proof its own principles.

And believe me when I say
Lucky is a common face
Adjusted to the whims of society;
9 to 5 and a happy family life,

Why cry clown?

UNWANTED MEMORIES

I

These stones
I carry
Are your giving.

The stones
That need
A grave.

All I need
Is an unfathomable
Sea.

II

Whispers steal past me
Open the invisible door
And the image changes.

The water uplifted
Hastily dotted landscape
Grass and trees.

And a tired shadow
That has tested numerous seas.

III

At last
Twilight of my years
Has brought me home.

Damn these stones.
Never knew some things
Might cost so dearly.

SALEEM PEERADINA

TRANSITION

Half-past five. For some it's time
For prayer or kitchen or setting out.

Sparrows chatter, while the barking
Of night dogs shows signs of settling down

Into a snooze. I squint at the stars,
Still on duty, as I lean on the balcony

Wondering where to fit your absence
In this routinely dull, compulsively busy habitat.

This space, my backporch, where I greet each morning
And drag each evening back full circle

Is a cut-and-paste northern suburb:
Fields held back, stables hemmed in, the hill

Pushed aside to nail human settlements
To the ground. Trains circulate—

At this distance appearing to rub sides
As they slide past on converse rails—

In the bloodstream of this insomniac city.
A plane lifts off, receding in the direction

Of night. Whether you're two hours away
Or a thousand miles out

Or across the ocean in another continent
Make little difference. You're gone.

My pitching place is the spot I stay in.
But more is found than lost in this state

Of transition: the small poetry of letters
Unearths a spring neither of us could divine

From up close. Two together can break love as easily
As allow time and distance to dissolve it.

Or nourish it. With your answering tide of letters
You've roused me to a fever. I wait

For the light advancing up the shutters
Of your sleep, to awaken your face

Not in any inhospitable landmark
But under the aegis of my watchful eyes.

LONG SHOT

Five a m. Sitll time to stay under
cover of darkness, curl the limbs inward
into a whorl, pick up the threads of a dream.
It doesn't work. The script's

Switched on, spiralling out scenes
of days past—the first seven days
of our intimacy. Sleep's painted
over in a wash of light since

You packed up and left and I'm in love
with the rushes: rerunning sequences,
lip-synching the words, marking
jumps, checking the flaws.

Here is material for a memorable
work of art. What's at the end
of the story is unwritten, out of sight.
The way is open. Let love improvise.

MENKA SHIVDASANI

SOMEWHERE ON THE STREETS

God stepped down from His pedestal today,
strode out of the temple, spat
at a a beggar crouched nearby,
impatiently shook off a devotee's
pleading hand; He was fed up of the idleness of prayer.

Once upon a time they told me stories,
they said everything was solved if you just prayed.
My bedtime tales were told by God Himself.

As I grew up, I went in search of Him,
knowing of the deserted corner in the prayer hall.
I bumped into God in a crowded department store.

I decided to have some fun with God,
but He proved too strong for me.
So I played ping-pong with myself
and lost the game. Meanwhile,
he disappeared to lands I did not know.

I hunted on the streets of Bombay,
Pondicherry—Paris too.
He had to be somewhere, I was sure.

And my god,I found him in a brothel near my street.

Today. I pray to the place where He once stood
in the darkest corner of the gigantic room.
I could be just another simple girl,
a sari covering all that burns my brain.

Someday, I tell myself, I'll realise,
it could not be God who betrayed me in that way;
just an idol stone I was taught to love.

The real God is still somewhere on the streets.

THE ATHEIST'S CONFESSIONS

At 13 I believed in rose petals
strewn at the earth-god's feet.
Agarbatti aromas made me heady
and I ate *prasad* only after a bath.

At 14 my purse got slashed
in the temple crowds.

At fourteen-and-a-half I began to wonder.
The gods no longer smiled
when I prayed. They couldn't.
They were idols of stone.

Fifteen, and the Beatles
became my gods. I grew heady
on Chanel 25, and ate
fish-fingers between sips of gin.

On world Religion Day,
I made a speech.
God didn't exist, I said.
I was 18, and worshipped myself.

At 20, the rose petals were on my cheeks
and in my hair and in the bouquets
he brought when he took me out to dinner.

Then he took a blade and cut
the flowers from their stems.
I wilted—he grew heady
on the scent.

Twenty-two. I no longer worship
myself, or him.

I look at the sculptures
in the *puja* room
and wonder: are the gods faintly
beginning to smile again?

REPAIR JOB

Yesterday I slit a jugular
That had strayed into a corner of my brain.
Nobody screamed, not the commuter,
the street vendor, the businessman, the slut.

The small talk rolled off like blood
turning the insides scarlet as lust.
And they said. "See the roses in her cheeks!"

I picked the thorns off like worms,
split a finger or two as I did it.
The petals closed in, trappcd an insect.

Listen to the buzzing in the stamen
Like a beehive being smoked out by someone,
the honey all viscous like glue.

I put the jugular together,
stuck the slits together with gum.
Nobody noticed what happened;
the businessman—he smiled and proposed.

SAFE—I THINK

Twenty-four ridges up the palm tree,
I flap my fronds gently in the breeze.
Every season, faithfully, the coconuts
come like tear drops. stiff in a cluster
beneath my leaves, remaining till some
lithe-limbed, dark-skinned stranger

mounts me, wrenches them for profit.
(Three rupees a tear, sometimes four,
and a little haggling allowed.)

I see the shells, scooped dry, forgotten.
These days, I see some things, I've risen
like a sun-flecked tidal wave
shocked mid-air. Is that Noah's ark
approaching or just a fisherman
returning to his village in Versova
triumphant with his catch?
I wave hello to passing airplanes,
this corner of the beach my only home.

A bird sits quietly cooing on my twig,
sheltered. My edges turn to straw,
dehydrated by the summer heat. Later,
they will use me to thatch their roofs.
And I will go on till the rings
dimple and merge, the bark getting
harder with each passing day. Twenty-four
ridges on a coconut tree are not
enough, and I'm safe—I think—for the next
150 years, unless some bureaucrat
worried about his job, orders
me cut because I'm standing
in the middle of where a building ought to be.

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