KAVYA BHARATI

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Kavya Bharati is a review of Indian Poetry

Kavya Bharati welcomes contributions of poetry, essays on poetry, translations of poetry and review articles. All submissions must be original typescripts, or else they may not be considered. All submissions should also be accompanied by brief bio-data about the writer, sufficient to identify the writer as he desires in case his submission is published. Utmost care will be taken of manuscripts but no liability is accepted for loss or damage. Contributors are strongly advised to send their submissions by Registered Post, Acknowledgement Due to the address given below.

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Edited by R.P. Nair

FOREWORD

This issue of *Kavya Bharati* contains a section of "Book Notes". Included in that section are brief non-critical summaries of the contents of books related to Indian poetry that have been sent to the *Kavya Bharati* office during the past six months. We hope that something among these summaries may be of interest to at least some readers.

What interests us, rather strikingly, in these books is that fully half of them extensively involve the translation of poetry or poetic material from Indian languages into English. The translations are from Assamese, Bengali, Sanskrit, Tamil, Urdu. Putting aside, for the moment, any attempt to judge the quality of the translation, the striking fact is the amount of activity that is being expended now on this kind of poetry translation.

Kavya Bharati has long supported the desirability of such efforts. Each of our last several issues has included a Translation Section, as the current issue does (though we wish it contained additional translation work of quality). All of which is to say that while *KB* always warmly welcomes original poetry of clear merit, we are especially on the look out for translations which render poems from one of the Indian languages into coherent, reasonably grammatical, tasteful English verse. We are eager to receive and consider carefully for our next issue serious attempts to bring poetry from an Indian language into English.

The Editorial Board gratefully acknowledges the major contribution to the production of this issue that has been made by John Paul Anbu K. of our Indian Literature Study Centre. Without his skill, industry and patience in a variety of supporting work, this issue of *Kavya Bharati* would still be languishing.

KAVYA BHARATI

a review of Indian Poetry

Number 6, 1994

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MEENA ALEXANDER

MUSE

She walks towards me, whispering
Dried petals in her hair
A form of fire

But her skin,
like finest Dacca cotton
drawn through a gold ring, spills

Over bristling water.
Something has hurt her.
Can a circlet of syllables

Summon her from the Vaigai river?
She kneels by a bald stone
cuts glyphs on its side, waves to me.

Our language is in ruins --
vowels impossibly sharp
broken consonants of bone.

She has no home.

Why gossip about her
shamelessly -- you household gods,
raucous, impertinent?

DARIUS COOPER

FOR THE LIGHT THAT FINALLY TOOK YOU AWAY, BHADRAKANT.

(For Bhadrakant Jhaveri)

"Let there be light"--the Lord said
and there was an explosion of LIGHT
that afternoon at Matunga station.
But before being consigned
to the ritual of fire and sandlewood and ghee,
You, Bhadrakant, entered light confidently.

Since ideas
constantly exploded from you,
when your final moment came
you did not go
as most of us probably will:
complaining and raging and finally melting
into that inevitable arthritic darkness.
No.
In ONE blinding moment
You BECAME
OM and IM
mortal.

They said it was a crude bomb
made out of Calvary nails
and broken pieces of Golgotha wood.
Once,
Krishna has held an entire hill on his index finger
to protect a village from a demon's wrath.
Now,
a castebisected Judas tossed that same hill

onto a busy railway platform,
and the artist's unflinching mercury
shattered into a million fragments
in our nation's fragile thermometer.
Aware
of all the theatrics that lies
behind all fundamentalisms,
what was your final gesture?

Were you pondering a fundamental point
you wanted to place before a friend
later that evening at your favorite bar?
Or were you deep into a post-modern text
quarreling with its author's intent
about hasya and karuna rasas?
Or were you about to carve out a phrase
from an alphabetless sentence
or maybe mime a mudra
out of a nailess moment
in that fatal train compartment?

We, of course, shall never know.
But what we do know is

that you escaped being nailed
to incestuous death
whom you had always humbled
by laughing at its slowlocal crawl,
every midnight,
all the way to the last station on the line.

Kavya Bharati

By entering LIGHT justified
you flung
your art and your attitude
so spectacularly
into the cosmos
that you have finally become for all of us
a solar system
of the heart and mind.

"Where there is light,"
this too the Lord said,
"There will always be those like Bhadrakant
that the LIGHT finally takes away."

SMITA AGARWAL

STAIN

A monsoon month. A grey unbroken sky,
heavy with clouds. Under a croton I'm
grafting. I whittle away half an inch
of hide, expose the xylem dull-white
as bone. Apply hormone powder, dress
the wound with moss, wrap a piece of
plastic, secure it with twine. I'll
wait a fortnight for the sap to
weave roots for the clone.

I come in for a bath. Undress, gape at
my blouse. A russet stain on the left
shoulder. Plant juice surreptitiously
seeped into the fabric, spread, took on
its texture. Scrubbing with soap and
water, using a mild stain remover,
brighten the colour; firming up a faith
in the ineffable bonding power of chemistry.

ALPHABETS OF NATURE

He looks at a serrated oak leaf;
Smells it, rubs its smooth, white
Underside against my cheek,
Then flings it away. He moves on,
Discovers flowers on the hill,
Their genera for him as yet unnamed.
He pulls out their pistils, dips
The stigmas into the pollen,
Takes the anthers apart.

I can see him years later examining
A body. Son, will you by chance
Recollect the insular glory of your Father
Inviolate in his separate bedroom
The day you tire of your wife?

THE DRAKE

On one of my many sojourns I shall
Chance upon the silk of water, rippling.
The tall, unstaid grasses will sway. My wings
Shall nudge and part the air. I shall circle
And dive, confident of a smooth landing.
North America and Siberia are prey
To an insidious cold that works its
Way into the limbs and dampens my wings.
Tropical heat blanches and sears; my golds
Greens and browns weaken. Besides, I detest,
Crowded lakes, the enervating pressures
Of communitarian living, the
Constant cackle of dissatisfactions.
I recall the taste of many waters
Yet a thirst disinters. My trajectory
Is wide but circular. The sooner I
Accept this the better. Why is it I
Tire, feel old and abject? Should I
Give up migrations, settle down to rest?

Smita Agarwal

FOR(E)MOTHERS

stay with me.

see sons shoot up,
board a train,
raise an arm in
farewell

for days, the boy-scent
no detergent washes off,
inhabits your dreamless
nightland

the secret wait at the
gate for the mailman;
a first letter read, re-read,
memorized; a failed affair
with God to whom you turned
for succour

at last the truth, plain
as water. a trembling
imaginative pool we dip into
naked, tonsured, shorn,
again, and again, and again....

MANIFESTO

Two Annas teach me.
Speak seldom.
Shoot to kill.
Never let go
Of classic control
Behind the veil.

Two Annas: Anna Akhmatova (1889-1966).
Anna Swirszczynska (1909-1984).

HOSHANG MERCHANT

MY GREAT-GRANDFATHER

A Parsi hat maker
glued paper together
into a thick board
Then he cut it shaped it curved it
in cowhoof shape (out of Hindu respect)
to fit the refugee Parsi head
Next he painted everything black
and then polished that blackness to a shine
Last he touched it up with gold points, 18kt.
Like golden stars in a dark night.

A sufi saw a star in his head
"You're a diamond!" he said
Great-grandfather became a jeweller
Operating out of a hole-in-the-wall in the bazaar
He gained entry to the best homes in the city
The choicest pieces he kept for his daughter (adopted).

I share a star with my great-grandfather
Cancerians both (by the moon): Our names begin with an 'H'
How have I bridged to him
by way of repaying generational debts?
I have adopted no child
I am a refugee once again
I have gone over to the enemy in friendship
Forgive me, ancestor! I'm too modernised.

Hoshang Merchant

'NIRVANA'. '94

(For Kurt Cobain)

1

It is the fall of New York
New York fell because it did not listen
to all its poets
Whitman Lorca Ginsberg 'Adonis'
New York fell headlong into the sea:
A siren weeping for her dead lover
The sphinx shaken to suicide because its secret
was discovered--
The golden lady was a sham / she had no heart

2

Kurt Cobain's father was a logger
They could not make ends meet
He turned his family out into the street
(This, in the great white dazzlingly rich USA)
Kurt took a little something to ease the pain
No foster home wanted him
He slept under bridges
His mother probably had no way to keep him.

3

"I died because of
this nauseous, burning stomach"

4

"Do not join that stupid club"
His mother warned
She meant Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix and co.

5

"It's easier with the lights out," he'd said.
"I took drugs to get back
The luminescence I felt as a child."
--The redwood forest is a cathedral of light.

6

His baby daughter
tramps their lake-side estate
looking for daddy

7

London, Beirut, Moscow, Tokyo, Nineveh
Nineveh's tall towers fell into the Hudson
When you leave a city
the roads part silently as sighs

8

Hate, hate your enemies
Love, love your friends
Fight, fight for your life
speak, speak the truth....

Sharjah, UAE

'ROSS'

Edwin Morgan has come to Ross
who lies in a Swiss sanatorium
What a way to go: see Europe and die!
The irony couldn't be far from 'the great writer'
But friendship becomes real
only in the moment of a friend's death

Or is this a betrayal?
Syed Masood would rather have been buried
under the snows of Kashmir
But in Switzerland at least he can speak French
to the orderly -- and answer to 'Ross':
Nothing becomes a man's life
as the moment of his death

Edwin Morgan hovers over the consumptive
like a love-lorn moth consumed by a dying flame:
Let the dying man even now make a reconciliation
A confession of love--
But he has come too late.
The life is sapped out of a great tree
And the friend left to repeat the moment of his death.

SANKRACHARYA'S DREAM: JANUARY 1994

(For S.Vishwanathan)

Did I dream the man's death?
Did the man dream his life?

Was I awake or asleep when I
re-membered suddenly recognising him

As a parent is recognised by a long-lost child:
Surprising my Hindu host

(a pious Shakespeare man)
Did I then proceed to claim

That I then dreamt the Sankracharya's death?

All I know is I knew
Knowing this man ever unknown to me

The press cutting irrefutably says:
Sankracharya, 101, Passes Away

It proceeds to call him god in man's form
To tell how he protected a mosque

The devout were dying
to convert into his bedroom.

Sleep and waking
Walking and dreaming

Speaking and silence:
A hundred and one years of silence

Nothing to add to the 1000 year reign
Of the Sankracharyas

Was the crocodile that sank its teeth
into the Adi Sankara

As the seer sank his teeth into the world
to find it fictive, real?

NEW YEAR'S EVE IN THE GULF, 1994

Why have I come to a country not my own
and yet not another?
It is not Serendip:
There are no steles to read its history by
The sun bleaches all things

Where are the Arabs, I asked
Pearl-fishing or dhow-building
All I heard were hired hands
Even the birds of home were those of passage here:
Parrot and mynah and gull

They need no passports
Those that come and go generations
in Sindbad's dreams
they have become Suleimani from Ceyloni
that is to say, from something into nothing

Once they greedily fingered the rupiah here
What they could get of it
And lived in barsaatis on the beaches
looking for dhows bringing in coir
to caulk broken beached ones
How many sails I saw drift by my boyhood window

Off to the Arabian Sea
though our world bound by a garden-wall then
had no place for Arabia:
(Only Mother, vast as Asia
and Father, remote as God)

Then life was one long Arabian Nights
I was Ali Baba and Morgiana
I was her knife and the breast that received it
I was Arab and Jew and the Magus
While boringly remaining myself

When did the X'mas card figues become real?
In that taxi to Bethlehem where the fellah
sat fingering money foisted on him by a foreign power
right in his very home
And I did not weep but said:
THESE PEOPLE'S MONEY IS NOT THEIR OWN?

Even their dreams are not their own anymore
Theseiger found alot of boys naked under their cloaks
to undulate with in the dunes
But where he did that, today is Karama Circle
And the Gulf is only another name for greed, he says

At Eton they boxed his ears for lying
about cheetah-hunts (Lord Chemford's son)
But the orient was oriental then
And no amount of political correctness will will it away

And all the world's gold was lost for a pepper-corn
Pepper I'd seen glistening in rain on the Malabar ghats
What was that mad boy not doing to die driving that night?
Did he not know of the snail roaming worlds at home
in its shell?
Of Sindbad blown by the Trades; returning to earth
thrown down by rocks?

Of steles that hermetically keep secrets from
minds while proclaiming them to sight?
Who owns what? The petrol will dry up.
Karama Circle return to desert
But the walls of Gondwana or Gaddara or Sheba
glisten on till the end of time.

JOY THEKKINIETH

DYING IS BREATH-TAKING

How many ways of dying!

You may simply die
decease
expire
perish
or just collapse
and ultimately pass away and fade out.

Beware of your stature:
You're free to breathe your last
give up the ghost
succumb to burns or injuries
get a bolt from the blue
lie in state and be consigned to holy flames
or rest in peace in a common cemetery.

In a lawful country
you can be hanged or hacked by mistake;
can be gassed, electrocuted, poisoned or pacified
depending on the facilities available;
can be shot or blasted just like that in a bazar or backyard
can be done away with in a lockup encounter;
can be fatally knocked and left along the lanes of any god.

If you're lucky
your kidneys would fail
heart stop
or cancer eat you up
before AIDS or any other scandal gets you.

Otherwise,
you might become "an unnamed person died on an
unknown day"
The whole range of suicidal possibilities is amazing:
You can cut your veins at home or hotel;
you can drown yourself even in a bath-tub;
you can sleep with pills and always die tomorrow;
you can crash in mid-air or on to a mountain and vanish
into the clouds;
you can join the squad and flash into martyrdom
or betrayal;
(of course, fasting unto death isn't anymore fashionable).
Death is also a matter of right as well as duty:
You might be bitten or partly eaten,
abandoned or beaten to death.
Still you're buried or creamated without any option.

Hell, heaven or any other,
dying can really be breath-taking.
But look at Birth:
You're either born or begotten
maybe by accident or by design.
A silver spoon: that's once in a long while.

What else?

Dying is all.

(This poem was occasioned by another in Malayalam, by the poet Kunhunni, on the theme of death.)

AT THE STATION

On these cut-out smiles
slog-rimmed frowns are hung.
Bent over countless shoulders
they span across
miles of head-rows.

Stunted by hi-tech bytes and bits
or dream-dry nuts of shares,
these hangovers of the day
(office-worn or factory-bred)
wait to be borne
homeward and backward.

Feeding on xeroxed fate-lines
monitored by job-labs
I too file in
tucking away my curse
in a briefcase.

THE SALVATION HISTORY

It took just a word to make
heaven, earth and all the rest.

Indulgent as He was
He shaped His image into tangible grace.

Then Cain was born
and it's never been the same.

Regret couldn't right the wrong even in a flood of anger.
A double heart in flattering lips
the Lord could never cut off.

Lamentations in anger and anguish nagged Him in Egypt;
psalms of curse and praise went with Him into exile.
He knew He wasn't man and couldn't give up
as gentlemen do.

He covenanted with the worst
and walked between the halves
carpetted by the best blood of His choice.
Again Gomer went her way.
He pawned one by one the dearest of His lambs
every time He brought her back.

At the last stake
the takeover was done and the keys were pledged.
He was packed off to the Caves
to safeguard the transcendence.
(By the way, there too He lost to the masters
unable to dissect the generic from the specific
in the square-cut rounds of being!)
Jerusalem was rebuilt in Rome--
the power of the cross and the sword!

Passovers were handed over to pagans by anointed palms.
Exiles were forgotten in Advent hangovers.
Cribs came in handy in a mega-share blitz
and got duly baptised.

Wars and riots rip through genes and generations
bartering people for band-aid and relief-corn.
Even so the Holy Undertaker
buries the dead
and absolves our killings
in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.

MOIN QAZI

LOST CIVILISATION

Justice was the salt of every civilisation.
Its luminescent eyes were folded blind;
Its strong hands were trusted with a sword
That fell on all with equal vigour
Be they of any race, rank or religion.
But what have we done to the virgin lady?
The bandage on the eyes has tattered away.
The hand that held the sword has palsied
And the innocence has melted into rancour.
Yes, Justice has become ill and senile
No one knows what turns its whims may take
Even as one fears the looming dooms day.

Truth was the nectar of all values
But even the flowers have wilted.
Even God's temple has grown impoverished.
For those whose hearts still retain a few dregs
It is no longer an invigorating tonic.
Yes, for us Truth has dug our own grave.

Freedom is that loving, precious gift
for which tears are no recompense.
Yet, what has Freedom brought to bear?
For those whose bodies suffer in toil
And those at whom hunger daily stares
What message can Freedom bring?
It is only the gateway for oppression.
Liberty has multiplied coercive means
By which the rich have forked out wealth
From the wailing bellies of the poor.

Moin Qazi

FANTASY

Do you remember the sun-white days?
During our school-breaks we used to sit
under the huge sage-like banyan tree,
munching sandwiches and teasing crows.
And then we would dream in pretty colours
that all men are gentle flowers
and all women silken roses.
You remember? I once said to our group
that soon there won't be any darkness and
we could play and be merry all the day.
Yes, I do remember all those phantasies.
And, after seeing the wickedness of Man
I can't believe I was so foolish as I was.
Do all children believe men to be flowers
And then grow up to find them forked thorns?

FOR MY LATE UNCLE

How dearly I remember my Uncle!
Silence was his costume, smile his language.
Love and compassion were his religion;
He poured them out in overflowing streams.
Happiness was as much part of him as his skin.
His personal magic instilled joy around him.

The shadow of separation lengthens
And I tremble if the bond may snap.

His words would light our minds to life.
His love would stir up thrombosed hearts.

The burden which he tried to raise
Was too heavy a load, too big a task.
He did raise the heavy crust
But under its weight slept his final sleep.

DARSHAN SINGH MAINI

MANUSCRIPTS

Dead men, they say, tell no tales,
Dust to dust, ashes to ashes,
The singing bones are home again.
Gone's the great hand,
Gone the cunning and the code,
And the fictions begin to crumble
Inside their falling tombs!

Ah, but those eagle eyes
Did once scour heaven and earth
To rock the dreaming boys and belles
Into an eternity of youth,
Or, perchance, move a local Lear
To tears of salt
On a heath of his own home!

And now these monarchs of passion
And pain lie supine
In prisons of parchment,
A sack of trash dreams
For the rag-and-bone shop of our town.
Yes sir, a royalty's out in the cold,
Gathering straws for the long winter days!

Darshan Singh Maini

THE LIPS OF GOD

You die each night in bed
And're born again at day-break,
A world of ghouls and Freudian
Ghosts drops into the pit,
As the dawn streaks in unawares.

You're helpless before your past
And helpless before your future,
The present's but a moment
In sand and sun,
A child of contingency and chance.

The pincers of the past,
And the forks of the future
Hold you in a vice of ambiguities
No thought or prayer may prise
Open to read the lips of God!

Oh, yes, His hand we always see,
But not His heart;
Pain too, they say, is His gift,
He drives you into a cage
In His own kindliest way!

MUSINGS OF AN OLD MAN

Here I sit in a white
Wicker chair with the day's paper
On my lap and the grinding
Mills of time and calendar
Reduce soft silken dreams
Of yester years to fine dust.
But some grains of thought'll not
Submit to the indignity of stones,
And they leap out suddenly,
Fugitives from the press of days.

It's a warm November noon,
Full of breeze and drowse,
As I pick up those moments
That dared the sun-light,
And wouldn't stay
Holed up in the dungeons of the past.
Wantons, begone, I say,
But no, they mock me back
Into a summer of girls and swans,
And a whole volume of inconsolable truths.

I know though, it's time
To hang the sabre on the wall,
Time, indeed, to call
A truce with impertinent ghosts,
And turn to the nirvana
Of Nanak;
But oh, rebellious heart,
The memories now heap upon me,
And all I can do is
To turn it all into a rage of words!

Darshan Singh Maini

IN THE CAGE

Why did I push the imagination
To the brink tonight
To see you in the prism of my thought,
See you in your prime pride:
A town Venus drap'd in the pink-pale silk,
Announcing another spring
In the winter of my days?
This wretched illness'll not go,
It needs perhaps a diet of old dreams.

O, yes, even the cleverest dons
Are all duped by the whoring mind,
When youth and beauty and style
Shake them out of their theories and thought;
Arguments come easy to all such,
But not the gift of love
Which's as strange and obscure
As a late Jamesian "tease",
They're trapped in a fake romance.

I do remember, though, James
Wrote that unique tale, "In the Cage",
An allegory of fictive love,
Spun out by a famish'd telegraphist
Over her machine and morse code,
And a poor dreaming heart.
Well, her fate's mine too after a fashion,
I've constructed a cage for my lean life
Out of my ruins and insolvencies.

MOLSHREE A. SHARMA

RAGAAS

It is evening and I bask in a sunless sky
The windows swing open, shadow lights descend
And the ragaas fill the emptiness
She sings on precariously as I muse
At how fragile the scales are up and down
The quiver of these voices
Rise higher and higher
My mind lets go and then balances
Somewhere on the edge
She has controlled the notes once again
She has held me captive once again

I listen to the sounds and fuse within
And forget to tell you that I have relived
The symphony of our words colliding with one another
The segments of syllables drunk and unstable
The stammer of frustration finding its way
I struggle with these ragaas
Wild in a jungle
She races deer-like ahead of my tracks
She rains in torrents at my arid insides

I move with the music
I swing round and round
Rotate with the hurricanes
The spirit swells and pangs at my chest
It forces me to venture within
The no mans land between our borders
I wonder how long I will be kept there
And she swallows the last of the ringing vibrations
Realization engulfs my being
She makes me hunger for her voice again
Even if it were for a little while
She leaves me abruptly and forces me to cling on
Surrounded by the ripples of her silence.

IFTIKHAR HUSAIN RIZVI

DRIFTWOOD

Driftwood of known and unknown souls,
Torn off or fallen from the wings
And bodies of the age-old trees
So firmly grounded in the rocks,
Sails on the crest of streams.
These pieces of all shape and size
Surrender to their unknown fate.
They roll and dive and sink and rise
And go on bathing endlessly.
They're soaked in water to the spine
As they are tossed and dipped by waves
And thrown aside on sandy banks,
Where lie huge stones in timeless rest
Whose children pine for their cold breast.
These driftwood pieces are dwarfed by
Great trees which stand in close embrace.
And man, in search of something strange,
Is pleased to reach the haunt of crabs,
Of hyenas, weasles, scorpions, snakes.
He's dazed at tender figures, shapes,
Designs and patterns of driftwood
Carved by some unseen artist's hand
In forms of man, bird, beast and bloom,
And picks them up as treasure great
To decorate his drawing room.

GEORGE OOMMEN

BEFORE THE GREAT POET

I stood before the great poet,
as he sat in his arm chair,
my poems before him.

After going through them
he raised his head, expressionless,
no smile, no revulsion.

I hadn't foresuffered this
What I foresaw was another scene --

He welcoming me,
at the threshold of a great career,
like Emerson greeted Whitman.

I came out of his office,
sad and forlorn.

Outside, the road lay straight
as I walked with weary steps
I remembered those great words:
"If you keep quiet, these stones will cry".

Suddenly the road turned red,
nature spread a red carpet,
to welcome her poet.

George Oommen

DUMMY PACKETS

The boss gave the order
Make one lakh dummy packets
For the ad campaign
The marketing people need it --
And I got launched into the project

These dummy packets, you see
Being empty inside,
Behave awkwardly,
Under slightest pressure and force
They lose shape and disfigure themselves
Like hollow men
Losing colour and reacting foolishly
Under slight provocation

Anyhow I managed to make it
And felt satisfied
But I wondered
Does God feel satisfied
In creating one lakh hollow men.

CHARANJIT KAUR

PALASDARI

"And the rising of the sun was also an event"

(i)

With the clatter of the misty-winged wheels
intermingling with the racing catii,
in the dilating distance
effecting a merger
with fat Gujarati ladies'
chatter...
and the swinging of a strap overhead
beating a tune
to the swimming vision
of a lone, upright tree
rearing its abundance
to the winds of a lonely mountain-top....

(ii)

A walk across a spiral
injecting the music of the ages
from a swinging tape-recorder
into an unrecorded glance;
naked, blank faces,
shrivelled, paused, reclining,
staring out a blank contempt...
Pickaxes in their hand.

It was the smile of a stone
at the meanderings of the fire flies.

(iii)

The waters of the lake
shimmering...
lisping out that first cry
frozen in a moment long ago
buried under the dark rattle of a train
Shrilling through the tunnel.
An uncoagulation in the eyes,
A flowering of the iron-grip.
And the drip, drip kissing
of an ancient pair of shoes
discarded -- shy and waiting
to sail on the back of still waters,
Shimmering, shimmering...

(iv)

There is a Silence that can be heard
Only in the rustling of an entire forest;
There is a one-ness to be felt
Only with a gull skimming in a world
All its own....

(v)

And amidst the clutter of trees
And broken jam bottles,
we eat away the hunger
of webbed villagers, with outstretched begging hands,
of doleful glances from a limping dog
stationed at a less respectable distance

than the tattered child on the hip
of a two-pleated sister
with running nose....
The meal over
and a scrambled rush
at what is no longer there;
and in the rush
the loss of an ancient, inherited innocence,
All in the backdrop of a droning saw
splintering wood for a government hospital.

(vi)

And between two hills
Life stretched out to breaking point,
Shimmering...
Suspension, animation
in every ringlet of reflected
evening glory;
A turbulent quiver
When the hand splashes
to pick up remains of an oyster-shell,
A murderous peace,
Settling on all...
Enticing...
to rip open
the hush of centuries,
imprisoned...
between two hills....

(vii)

Then,
the long trek homewards;
Picking up stones to hit in
a memory that's already a remembrance,
the silhouette of a past creeping ahead,
to foil the blare of a tomorrow
rushing in from behind....

(viii)

Shimmering, shimmering,
broken jam bottles -- suspension,
drip, drip kissing
a lone, upright tree--
outstretched begging hands,
a gull, the remains of an oyster shell
clatter -- fat Gujerati ladies' -- stretched out
chatter, contempt--
A scrambled snatch
An ancient inherited innocence--
What is no longer there.

R.SUNDARESON

SOUND AND SILENCE

Words ashamed of their vain loudness
commit suicide
by jumping into the ocean of silence;
sounds that hit the rocky silence of mountains
instantly split as echoes,
weaken and die!
Sound ephemeral,
silence eternal!
The noise of the surging crowd
thinning
through gaining height,
tapers
into silence,
shedding its arrogance
till it has found its way
to salvation.

MY STRENGTH

If I have not outgrown myself
I am a pitiless prey to my convictions,
however silly or illogical they may be;
I know
outgrowing myself,
transcending myself,
I travel towards the truth.
But, I do not want to outgrow myself,
for I have been trained to believe in my convictions,
which make me obstinate, perverse,
and I know,
my obstinacy and perversity are my strength
which makes me stand erect.

PREMA NAIR

THE JOURNEY

When God was put
to sleep
and faces lit
in sheer faith

conversations
dissect in a train
journeying to destinations
lives built on hopes
expected

the buffalo specks
dotting
black clusters
silence in their majesty
united
in movement

When God was put
to sleep
and faces lit
in sheer faith

the ripples on
the water
fast moving
change course
darting in waves
of motion
like thoughts

When God was put
to sleep
and faces lit
in sheer faith
tufts of green
cottoning onto
the brown
landscape

tall slender palm
trees
bottlebrushes cobwebs
of sleep.
Many faces, little lives
and laughter
smiles.

When God was put
to sleep
and faces lit
in sheer faith

light streams through
thick curtains
brown-specked on beige
the destination begins....

WAVES

fishes will come she said
to nibble
the sand.
in her childhood the waves chased
snakes n'ladders they played
up ashore
perched on a stool tiny
she sat
fishes will come she said
to nibble
her toes.

they are dry she said
wriggling her toes.
two boys tiny
stool atop perched over
a goldfish bowl
goldfishes are boys they said
fished out
they glistened anew
but the goldfish bowl turned over
in a shelf
in her girlhood the waves crashed
on her doors
shut in within
a school-go-round
she was a poised
carefully balanced glass
on a tray
the doors knocked

the waves crashed
the waves chased
fishes will come she said
to nibble
alone she sat
night in her room
light burning her thoughts
insomnia he diagnosed
but
fishes will come she said
to nibble
the sand.

RHYTHM

Conversations
at uncertain
crossroads
a meaning like the clear
filtered
light streaming in.
coffee
and mugs
in a sink of routine
washes
like a halting
moment
you pause.

Dust
settles.

D.VINAYACHANDRAN

THE LEAVES

She gave me a flower
I kissed it and became a man.
They gave me a fire

I took it and became a poet.
A wind advised me
to wander for ever
from eyes to roots
and hell to heaven.

At last,
A leaf of grass invited me
to share the crisis of
the tearing earth and
the blooming sky.

PAINTINGS

The cry of crows,
smell of dewy hairs
- it is dawn.
Bundles of ways
and a blind sun
- it is noon.
Withering shades
and frightened flies
- it is dusk.
Above an endless question,
below an endless grave yard,
in between a mad wind
- it is night.

IN MEMORIAM

I rejected their invitation.
In the centenary hall
they were digging up Gandhi
Dead words and cold teas
- they laughed and made him a god.
Mr.Gandhi
I may tell you
It is your fault that India is free,
Oceans and mountains
ridiculing your no-weapon called
non-violence.
I see your shattered bones
in the marshy dreams of this bleeding Bengal;
I see your mourning
in the ghostly winds of the Punjab.

Some strangers are arguing
about seagulls and Kashmir
But I praise you, for
you could hardly resist
the bullets of Mr.Godsey.

S.P.SWAIN

WHAT IF

What if I did steer
my palms in the bog
and caught nothing?
What if I move my fingers
on the sand and scrawl nothing?
If I bit my lips
at the sight of a cadaverous tart;
If I perfumed my black beauty
at the dead of night
when a serpent popped out
of the fragmented mirror?
What if the ogles
melted with my own shadow
after I had deciphered my sins
on the rose hurled at me?
What if I howled and growled
with the lava that fell lifeless
on a faceless maiden
in the desert of silence?

SIDDHARTHA MOHAPATRA

FOR A FRIEND IN SUMMER

His long hand came, singed and empty
like a summer stretch,
like a wind that has galloped a long way
after dipping the muzzle in a mirage.

He said, "Give me five bucks, please!",
and his voice nearly needed rain,
but, in that aureate corner
clouds wouldn't dye the sun's irate mane.

His smoke-whitened eyes can trust
nothing, now, and would easily panic
when light'd blind him on a sidewalk
and his shadow'd laugh and mimic.

The Shadow's laughter would stay like a stain
on a white linen over the table,
somewhere's lost immortal universe of a child
and a blameless harvest of fables.

Elsewhere it must be raining now
over knee-deep rice fields,
some returning to the village, others couldn't
and their minds darkening in guilt.

But, what rain can wash the filth of marijuana
off our river banks,
footsteps that went and were lost in the river
remain printed on the sand.

K.G.SANKARA PILLAI

THE GECKO'S TAIL

(K.G.Sankara Pillai, b.1947, was first noticed by Malayali readers in 1973 when he published "Bengal", a long poem of violent remonstrance and anguish, and of grim warning directed against the ruling classes. His recent collection of twenty-seven poems is entitled *The Trees of Cochin* [Mulberry, 1994]. He teaches Malayalam at the Maharaja's College, Ernakulam, Kerala.)

The broken gecko's tail
looked back calmly:

there sits my gecko,
unconcerned, as though nothing has happened.
Like the tendril that shed a flower,
like the tear that left the poet,
there sits my gecko.
"Hardly grievous of the thing lost...
assuming a pundit's grandeur."

There sits my gecko--
no vengeful feelings towards anyone.
Neither the promise of a renewed start,
nor even the well-known sense of lost values.
There sits my gecko,
awaiting a new prey, mate, or help--
there waits my gecko.

(Translated from Malayalam by K.Narayana Chandran)

Translator's Note:

No one suspected "The Gecko's Tail" to be making any political statement when the poem first appeared some seventeen years ago. Nor would anyone have read in it a direct sociobiological message. It seemed to assert nevertheless the human right to meditate, a privilege of the sad loser. The politics of split or factional feud apart, the poem seems now filled with an intent to allegorize the terms of relationship that ought to bear revision periodically. To divide, surely, is not to take away.

Why wouldn't, one may ask, the poem say as much about the poet as the tail about its lizard? Or the translation about its original? In any case, the lizard and its tail seem to have been vouchsafed a gift for seeing each in the other as never before, an epistemological crosslight Robert Graves once summed up as follows:

> He in a new confusion of his understanding,
> I in a new understanding of my confusion.

Apparently that explains the intertextual sorrows the poem bespeaks--Ezhuttacchan, Kumaran Asan, and Nalappadan--and what it means to wriggle, unattended, at the fag-end of a long, live tradition of Malayalam verse. The miniscule regret of the fragment, in a way, expounds its own aesthetic. A token difference, it remains and reminds. In short, Sankara Pillai puts an extraordinary interpretive vista before us, if we are able to see in "The Gecko's Tail" our postcolonial struggle to control meaning, to revise the "heads-I-win-tails-you-lose" notions of reading our world.

Tuncattu Ramānujan Ezhuttacchan was a 16th century saint-poet. He is best known for his *Adhyātma Rāmānyanam* and an abridged translation into Malayalam of the *Mahābhāratam*. Kumaran Asan (1873-1924), often counted among the most significant poets of the Indian Renaissance, and a social reformer and thinker, was the author of a long poem called *Vīna Poovu* (*The Fallen Flower*), 1909, an elegiac meditation on the illusions of friendship and love. Nalappattu Narayana Menon (1887-1955) wrote *Kannunīrtulli* (*Teardrop*), 1924, the poem by which he is best known. The poem was occasioned by the death of his wife. Menon has also translated Tagore's *Gitānjali* into Malayalam.

TĀYUMĀṈAVAR

WHEN DEATH COMES

Not form not formless
Not outside not inside
Sequence unchanging
Without attributes
Neither full nor incomplete
That which Vedas call "the One"

Spotless

Rising like a great mountain
So those with inner knowledge
Can see it
And remember the goal

It is the soul in the space of knowledge

That which burns with fire
But is not in the smoke
Which is dissolved in the waters
But doesn't fall with the waves
Or rise when the wind chill blows

That which is still
Which doesn't die in war
Not "he" not "she" not "it"

Moving gracefully
No one knows its place

Not darkness not light
The First One
In which everything else is contained

That which took pity and saved all the gods and goddesses
Brahmā and the rest who are worshipped in this world
When they fell into worrisome religions
And got spun around

It stands shining amidst all forms of knowledge
As the one knowledge
Which scorns to say "I" and "mine"
The knowledge which brings to an end the illusion
of the world

That which cannot be known as two
Which cannot be divided

Which is the same
In both moveable and immoveable things

What is it
That is always full
That is beyond thought
Whose form is bliss
Bringing health and happiness?

You should seek to know
That All Supreme!

Instead,
You fall into a fascination
For girls glowing with youth.

Like a deer trapped in the hunter's net,
You are caught.
You can't think straight.

Speechless and unsteady,
You drink what flows from their lips.
Day and night you stand ready
To drink in their sweet words.

You wind garlands in their hair
To beautify it.
And right away
You want their breasts
Which look to you like lotuses.

Like a bee buzzing from flower to flower
You roam around listening for,
And excited by, the ringing sound
Of small jingling anklets.

Your nose catches
The wondrous fragrance
of fresh tumeric
As it wafts forward.

Prostrating,
One by one
You decorate their feet
With your head.
And so, increase your bondage.

Bewildered,
Alternating between clarity and delusion,
You forget all about liberation.

As the ocean of passion boils over,
You take your finger
And circle round

The wound of desire
Which is an open sore,
And you caress it.

Ecstatically, you think, "sex is bliss."

This embracing becomes daily more frequent,
Growing to excess.

Like the waning moon,
Your intellect becomes exhausted.
And your body shrivels up
Like a monkey's wrinkled skin.
You grow old soon.

Sickness gets to be a regular occurrence.
You become helpless.
Constantly coughing.
You can't keep food down.
Eyes without brightness.
Face without luster.

Your relatives
In and around the house
Who thought, "everything is ok,"
And looked forward to more of the same,
Now loose their composure
And start wailing.

When the dark Lord of Death comes,
Who will protect you,
O sinful mind? [1]

(*Translated from Tamil*, Vannam, *by Swami Sevananda)*

[1] This poem appears as the final item in most editions of Tāyumāṉavar's work. In it, the poet echoes some themes which often appear in the works of the Tamiḻ Cittars. These poets typically begin by reviling the physical body and its pleasures, and end with an exhortation to seek union with the Imperishable Absolute. Here, the order is reversed. In the *first* half of the poem, Tāyumāṉavar extols the Ultimate Reality, using the Upanishadic, "not this, not that" description. And in the second half, he lambastes his mind for having succumbed to the temptations of a worldly life, totally devoid of any spiritual attainment. It is only at the very end that we find out Tāyumāṉavar has been addressing his own mind throughout the entire poem. This is also a common feature of the Tamiḻ Cittar poems.

N. VISWANATHAN (PADASARI)

THE BEAUTIFUL WHIP

(N. Viswanathan [b1955] has published a volume of poems and short stories, under the pseudonym "Padasari" -- The Ocean Within The Fish. He contributes to little magazines in Tamil. His poems in translation have been published in *Indian Literature* and included in *Modern Tamil Poetry* and his stories in *Modern Tamil Stories,* both published by Writers Workshop, Calcutta. He has participated in the Poetry Festival, Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal in 1990.)

How is it, sparrow,
You stand in front of me
Before I breathe my last?
You expected nothing from me
All these years
You were with me.
But I have failed to learn from you.
Now I can see the difference between
A bird's death and mine as a man.
Death is not painful
Surrounded as I am by these books.

I could have gained a lot
From your songs
This moment of life's final spark --
Wherever I turn
No living being falls
On the last movement
Of this poor man's eyes.

My pet dog that punctually gets down to the street
To ask for its share from the corn vendor.
The cat that often climbs the tree
To steal crow's eggs.
White ants that eat away the collars of my
Father's shirt in the photograph.
Cockroaches that transgress into books
To dirty them. Lizards that openly mate
Before my eyes and female mosquitoes that
Torture my body all night --
I can't see a single living soul
To bid good-bye.

My only elder sister, many times,
Without letting her husband know,
Donates butter and dry cow-dung cakes
Somewhere in a distant village.

After my exit some will come
In human dress, to see a dead poet.
Dear sparrow, you know only too well
I am one of those who died before
His heart stopped beating.

And now, a small favour --
When you sing your songs
Let the lines of this heart
Be in your voice:

You, living souls, dressed in flesh,
Pardon this man.
Till the very end, his only
Effort, his only achievement
Was to shape a beautiful whip.

A beautiful whip, yes, a beautiful ...

N. Viswanathan (Padasari)

AMBULANCE

Outside my room
The delight of a boy
Riding an imaginary vehicle

Out there
The rattle of vehicles

Here everyone
Keeps a vehicle
Some ride it in imagination
Like children

I too had a vehicle
I went places the way my desire
Led and came to the edge
Of this abysmal void
Today I lie fear-gripped
That any path will turn tedious
Even before I go half way

Vehicles ply along
The regulated path of habit
Within the bounds of clock-like
Routine. They are never tired.

In my room
My vehicle stands
Bereft of embellishments
Bereft of headlights
Bereft of warning bell, safety-lock,
And most important of all, brakes

Kavya Bharati

The voice of my worn-out vehicle:
We have lost the way
Trust the vehicle to find the path

Outside
A vehicle speeds away
Its siren screaming

(*Translated from Tamil by M.S.Ramaswami*)

N. JAYABHASKARAN

TWO POEMS

(Jayabhaskaran. Poet and critic. Two collections of poetry. Native of Madurai. A Postgraduate in Tamil and English.)

I

No one
To take me
To Him

"Seeing my changed complexion
my melting heart
my shamelessness
my pale lips
my distaste for food
my pining" [1]

Save
My dark desire
My fear
And Andal's hymns.

[1] Nachiar Thirumozhi, 23. Of the 12 Vaishnavite Tamil hymnists Andal is the only woman (8th Century A.D.). Her other garland of poems is Thiruppavavi, sung in all the Vaishnavite temples of Tamil Nadu and Tirupathi in Andra Pradesh, early morning, in the month of Margali (December - January)

II

At the end of
The drought

My bowl
Brims over

For whom

For
Everything.

(Translated from Tamil by M.S. Ramaswami)

JOHN OLIVER PERRY

THE TWO BEST FROM RUPA'S GOOD NEW SERIES

E.V. Ramakrishnan, *A Python in a Snake Park*. New Delhi: Rupa, 1994. 52 pp., Rs.95/-.

Prabhanjan K. Mishra, *Vigil*. New Delhi: Rupa, 1993. 87 pp., Rs.95/-.

Reading through the ever expanding stream, almost a flood, of new poetry from Rupa, two volumes go beyond mere promise of achieving a new voice among the established Indian poets. Since 1979, E.V.Ramakrishnan has impressed me with his potential for a deeply felt, honestly expressed and carefully thought poetry to match his excellent criticism. The poems of his first book, *Being Elsewhere in Myself* (1980), signaled his properly high ambitions for personal directness in observation and incident. As Jayanta Mahapatra indicates, in *A Python in a Snake Park*, Ramakrishnan again "displays a quiet integrity, and, in his best moments, a strong intention"-- a more considered critical judgment than praising EVR for "that ring of authenticity" (Saleem Peeradina). For, though Ramakrishnan is never false or flashy-- more than sounding "authentic", he poetically enacts his integrity-- his excellent intentions are only occasionally achieved in full.

The initial, title poem provides us with what we have come to expect, an indication of the philosophical and poetic keynote to be found throughout the volume. The python symbolizes India's (or Kerala's or Ramakrishnan's) mythic

heritage, but "He no more invests the space around him with belief./... Under the summer sun's focusing/ lens, his skin peels off/ like plaster,as he waits for/ the final transgression/ that will repatriate him/ to the submerged land/ of his nomadic ways". That is, in EVR's not very controversial view, for intelligent persons like himself, myth-- belief in a still green and growing past and beyond-- now must return to, live in, the fluidity of the unconscious, rather than in established historical structures, myths and legends or social institutions; for however sinuous, noble, powerful and revitalizable the latter may be, such set forms are still vulnerable to distortion and attack, especially from enlightened scrutiny.

If this is EVR's preamble and promise, we should look for both incisive critical intelligence and, at least occasionally, a profoundly stirring and reconstituting image, dream or surreal narrative. The rational first without the poetic second may give the impression of intellectual aridity, just as the poetically suggestive without a close, if indirect, analytical look is merely disorienting, chaotically open, disturbingly without point or direction. Predictably, because the dream-like second is the most difficult to prepare for and retrieve, that sphere is where EVR, like most poets anywhere, often falls short. Even the very compelling symbol of the python that EVR deliberately works through, fails to strike into fresh areas of awareness: though by no means merely an elaborate intellectual conceit, the mythic snake here remains within its conventional base of meaning and range of resonance. Since we are applying criteria for the very best poetry, that judgment should bring no shame or disappointment to poet or reader. To overcome the resulting limitations of conception, Ramakrishnan would have to sparkle with wit, overflow with circumstantial detail or show off with

verbal pyrotechnics, poetic procedures he has too much integrity to seek for his own work. Nevertheless, "The Archness of Rhetoric" shows his awareness of those values in celebrating "plenitude", "medieval opulence", and "a grand gesture of lyrical grace" in a lovely old temple's "Waves of marble".

The second poem, "To a Writer in Exile", offers an extended exercise in imagistic thinking that confirms this general judgment. The poetic material is reasonably presented, in a fairly straightforward epistolary mode that does not allow for profundities or exciting insightful suggestion. Freely chosen immigration is, as usual in india, exaggerated into "exile", reflecting a well-founded social attitude: those who leave Mother India, whether willingly or not, are so dependent upon her unique cultural ambiance (no matter whether or not admired or believed in) that overseas travel is, as traditionally understood, tantamount to cultural death-- or at least, temporary destruction of self at the hands of foreigners. (Thus, most Indian immigrants, even while they assimilate, make determined, if doomed, efforts to import and hermetically preserve selected Indian cultural products.)

EVR's treatment of this common theme is distinguished by being presented from the perspective of a stay-at-home who sees how "unfinished" is his native city's "narrative": "A crippled postman/ goes round, carrying letters/ addressed to dead people". The next two lines, however, retail a cliche image that is too flat, even for a letter to a friend who has deserted these dead and dying to go abroad: "Perhaps you have only crossed over/ the bridge, not burnt it behind you". And the final notion that the exile (why not the stay-at-home too?) must feel "an absence stronger than a presence" sounds like very tired critical jargonizing.

EVR's footnote explains that "the Gujarati poet, Adil Mansuri, disgusted with the communal violence in Ahmedabad [in 1985], decided to migrate to the U.S.". This literalism raises further doubts about the depth of this letter: amid the imagery of amputated limbs, mass suicide, traffic jams, half-eaten newspapers in a cow's mouth, cracked walls, children reciting nursery rhymes like prayers, does the letter-writer show any imagistic recognition (and consequent understanding) of the communal violence stated in the footnote to motivate this poem? Again, only the epigraph, quoting Brecht, asks, "why were the poets silent?". In short, Ramakrishnan has not provided in the poem the political complexities he peripherally notes.

In fairness it must be immediately pointed out that the whole collection offers plenty of well-aimed political poems, without clumsy, if highly principled, propagandizing. Ramakrishnan readily attacks complacent attitudes toward poverty and starvation, deplores the decay of Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy, and, most particularly, sympathizes with the confusions of the Afghani tribal wars (which stand for other such useless wars too). A philosophical "cobbler" (surely a thin Indian English equivalent for **mochi**!) reacting to Yeltsin's stepping into Gorbachev's shoes is rendered as broadly resonant (about politicians' typically changing faces) as the more current and continuing environmental- ecological concerns treated elsewhere. When a son queries his father, "Where were you when" opposition was needed to internal political oppression, more than the 1975-77 Emergency is invoked. And there are several poems focusing on the difficulties, emotional and otherwise, of an urbanized educated man suffering "internal exile" as he tries to relate positively to his mother and his native village. In "To Grandfather-God" he acutely remarks: "To those who live on/ disputed lands, history is reprisal".

In the midst of such well-honed insights drawn from careful, occasionally dream-like observations, we hear, "Through language I recover/ land from the arced mirror/ of the meandering river"-- characteristically a direct description of EVR's poetic: to make solid verbal sense of life's reflective fluidity. Applied more personally this becomes: "Go back to the mud-/ walled hut of your mind and be reborn/ in language. Look. The land bristles// with signs...." And elsewhere, "Like a river/ flowing back to its tribal source,/ I keep returning to the decline of// my past. I hear my name pronounced./ I see my father fall. I crash into/ the garrison town by night and wade// through blood. It takes so little/ to wreck a human life. Krishna, I am/ grateful, for when you took away my/ convictions, you also destroyed my weapons". We can be thoroughly satisfied with the aims and achievements of this set of responsive and responsible poems. Yet they only occasionally offer some particular brilliance of perception-- political, social, moral, psychological, philosophical, historical-- or of poetic expression that marks the very best poetry being written today, whether by younger or older poets in India or abroad.

Ramakrishnan, one feels sure, can welcome such a measured criticism, for the voice of these poems is indeed convincingly modest, having given up self-deception along with the inherited and unquestioned convictions of his South Indian heritage. "An agnostic in a world/ of detergents wanting to get out...you wave the white flag/ of your apologetic smile for safe passage.// Once inside, you trust the name-plate/as a talisman to ward off/ the war-torn world from your doorstep". Explaining "The Unwritten Sequence", he suggests, "Perhaps what I knew of the weaver,/ the farmer, the healer, the barber,/ the mason and the carpenter was not/ adequate or what I knew of the police-/ man exceeded the needs of the poem./ I could never decide whether I was with/ the precocious and the gifted/ or with the

dimwitted and the lost". Ramakrishnan is wise enough, however, to continue on with his genuine poetic gifts, no matter how creatively "lost" he also may be among his land's bristling signs.

Prabhanjan K. Mishra, widely published in Indian journals and anthologies, has collected 61 poems in *Vigil* that demonstrate a solid poetic talent developing over a wide range of materials, from mood pieces to fairy tales, striking dramatic vignettes to neat epigrammatic observations, personal semi-private imagism to public socio-political commentary-- on Bombay slums, corrupt politicians, "Peasants of Orissa", foreign tourists-- from decrying sexual oppressions to hymning ecstatic sexual interactions, from narrating poignant scenes of loss to sketching jaded suburban moments. Occasionally, of course, his energy flags, his technique or vision is not up to the situation; the often forced, sequentially vapid images of a Bombay "Suburb" is a clear case in point. And certainly "The Vigil"-- which depicts, with adequate ire and irony, a girl being seduced by a "cool", unfeeling, older rich man who throws away all too symbolically the skin and seed of his sucked-dry mango-- is a mere trick of a poem not deserving to be the title piece. Often the titles, especially in the longest section (IV, "The White Hush") and in Section III ("From Invocation to Immersion"), offer obscurely additive images that convince the reader of the seriousness of effort controlling every word in this book.

The initial poem, "Bread is not Made of Dreams", introduces a frequently revisited intimate lovers' mood: "We anchor in eternity and breathe/ in an aroma of sweat and spit,/ swallow our unmoored longings./ With our last savings/ we buy a dream/ and go hungry./ The thoughts of food/ nakedly mushroom/ in our blood./ Crumbs of rice - cake/ rule our

destiny". The following poem, "Writings on the Wall"-- obscenities, blasphemies, slogans-- announces an anti-ideological stance evident throughout: "blood has no creed, no faith...".

Neither of these poems promises much, and "Vertigo", the next one, makes the maturing of fearful perspectives from, first, a third floor balcony, then a sixth floor window and finally an airplane reveal, with welcome closing ambiguities, "what the height did to the void;/ .... why/ the rich despise the poor,/ and their porcelain pride". Although later, from a strong feminist perspective, Catholic, Muslim and Hindu examples are graphically presented of bad marriages and marital rapes, they are but "Three old fairy tales/ on a worn long-play record./ The more you repeat,/ Their intensity tends to dull". The last lines are perhaps saved by their archaism-- "long-play record"-- and the awkwardness and fumbling tentativeness of "Their intensity tends". A suspicion that the feminist politics is merely conventional may unfortunately be confirmed by a half dozen other poems in which women are seen as sheer sexual objects or sexual predators-- e.g., "Hips wiggle" on "Chowpatty Beach". Nevertheless, most of the later poems that deal with man-woman relations-- one is entitled "Male Repentant Pig (MRP)"-- are actually sensitive to the complex political issues involved, both the broadly social and the intimately personal.

A more telling and particularized set of intergenerational interactions constitutes "The Divide", wherein a student watches "deadpan" and listens uncomprehendingly to his widower father's sentimentality over his lost wife: "Away in the hostel/ ..../ the old man's voice/ lingers on the long-distance/ after the essentials/ and the banalities/ unwilling to disconnect".

Throughout the succeeding character sketches and political commentaries only an odd phrase hints at further poetic possibilities beyond the rather obvious and/or conventional opinions. [The next section, "The Concrete Trojan", depicts "The City of No Seasons" as a destructive, deceptive woman, and travels to Elephanta and the suburbs to find other disagreeable sights-- high-rise blights, dreaded "black holes" (i.e., "The Crematorium") and "In the Hellhole of Dharavi".]

In Parts Three, and especially Four and Five, however, Mishra shows his talents best, with many sharply realized scenes of close interpersonal relationships together with a few semi-philosophical explorations difficult or impossible to paraphrase. In "The Rubicon", which opens III, a loving family man with a pregnant wife imagines guiltily a secret lover's coded knock on the door, with its "nuances of familiarity,/ impatience of the pauses,/ the deliberate pride"-- or, he concludes, is it "a morse of my heart"? As in several other similar tightly conceived poems, a rich range of emotional ironies encourages rereading, and with each experience of the imagery, our understanding of the personal situation grows more complex. In "Grasshoppers Dance", "Today we pick and salvage/ our relationship's bits and shreds,/ ..../ I sulk, a miserly bidder./ In their harnesses: the horses grow restive;/ in the sky: flamingos sow fire;/ among the glades: grasshoppers dance".

There is a touching lullaby for a deathly sick son, then an evocative recounting of a legendary twelve-year-old son's suicidal self- sacrifice to crown the Konarka Sun Temple, which motivates a husband and wife one romantic night to "plant a seed" there. There are other poems of love for marital partners, for ancestors and fathers, for an aborted foetus, while "The

Wound" courageously sees slum sex-life as (most often) an ugly, life-devouring animal, "a snare". The final, especially strong poem in this section, "The Closed Door", sharply observes another hesitant, repetitive relationship-- a grown child/ aged parent masked dance.

"The White Hush", the double length section IV, begins by evoking a viciously fought-out marriage, a bad "Graft", continues with a "Boomerang", in which a woman ultimately "rejoices" in being deceived, subservient and frozen by her marriage, and a series of other sexual encounters, some from the disappointed or frightened or, more rarely, loving and excited male's point of view, others involving both sides in the encounter. What stimulates the imagination is the wide variety of personally challenging situations and moods that engage this poet's art and intelligence, the range of perspectives and complex emotions succinctly constituted through arresting, freshly compacted images. The diction is rarely flat and conventional, often dazzlingly evocative, dense, extensive, pushing passionately along to expand our comprehension of both human relationships and the possibilities of poetry.

The Indian English tradition of semi- confessional, dramatic sexual encounters formerly epitomized by Nissim Ezekiel's "Nude Poems" has here moved through and beyond characterological satire and social commentary (though several of these remain at that point) to reveal realms of consciousness we knew existed but never saw or felt so terribly, so poignantly, so sensitively. (In the next, shorter, final section, "Weeds of Hope", oddly some examples, e.g., "Intimacy" and "Farewell Snake", come closer to being Ezekiel-like dramatic ironic satires.) And not all of these thoughtfully and minutely

observed situations involve sexual partners or opponents; a potentially anti-feminist one questions a little daughter's persistent teaching of her female dogs to be male, despite a pregnancy. "Ricochet" (like "Boomerang"?) explores purportedly thousand-year-old female attitudes towards customary ideas of female sexuality, specifically the "sacred", the "sacrifice" and the "shame" of menstruation: "The words made about you/ an impervious chamber./ The canons turned into cannons./ You were entrusted with the righteous trigger,/ you pulled it, ricochets killed you". The line crudely punning with "canons" plays out a less subtle intelligence than the imagery commands, but "righteous trigger" and "ricochets" in the finale recover our confidence in this analysis of female indoctrination. A parallel feminist analysis of "The Phallic God" moves with even more directness, with a precocious sureness of poetic touch. Some doubt may again be raised, however, by the concluding unavoidable (immaturely intentional?) golf imagery mixed with flip slang-- "the trap by the holes/ of her course where vultures came to score".

After putting a very few such reservations aside, these poems comprise as impressive a total accomplishment as anything written today, whether by older or younger poets, whether in India or abroad. Nevertheless, Prabhanjan Mishra has had the good sense to recognize that his proper audience is in India, for the implied cultural ambience, the allusions, the situations-- as, for instance, most obviously in "Siva"-- though potentially extendable to other lands, have grown from a distinctly Indian mixed experience, part Oriyan, part cosmopolitan Bombay, part Western Christian-classical (see "Ambrosia" and, for a well-apportioned, almost unanalyzable

mixture, "The Heart of a Slug"). Unanalyzable for other reasons are several of the final poems and many poems or passages in "The White Rush", which reach into riddling realms similar to those of Wallace Stevens or, closer to home, C.P.Surendran. "Apogean", for example, opens, "Time's malevolent apple,/ core-rotten, worm-holed/ from world to world.// The black hole, hungry and sombre./ Burpless, unfathomed, uncharted./ You won't curl up in its pretense.// He hurls you, you turn:/ the top, the satellite./ Spin and warp fill your veins".

Here, unequivocally, poetic language and consciousness have been expanded to probe the intricacies of obscure moods and personal dilemmas, suggesting some inspiration from "Jayanta Sir", to whom this volume is dedicated-- also, of course, like Mishra, an Oriyan physicist turned poet. But usually these enigmatic situations occur among intensely interactive people; the puzzlements are rarely, as usually in Stevens or Mahapatra, the results of solitary, abstruse semi-philosophical meditations. To be comparing a new Indian English poet favorably with such forbearers or, as earlier, with Nissim Ezekiel, surely indicates that we are dealing with a culturally mature poetry. Even more exhilarating is the realization that we are reading a young new poet whose productivity and commitment betokens further intellectual and emotional excitements in volumes of poetry yet to come. The possessors of this appreciation can count themselves and their contemporary poetic culture convincingly, perhaps "authentically", rich.

R.RAJ RAO

THE POETRY OF BOMBAY CITY[1]

Bombay is India's most advanced city, synonymous with the words "civilization" and "progress". There is over here a tremendous amount of detail that must be transferred onto the barren canvas of life to make life realize its full potential. In the words of Dom Moraes, "Bombay is a gritty, impossible, unforgettable place. It has child beggars, pavement sleepers and sprawling urban slums; noise, tangled traffic, skyscrapers, fashionable apartment blocks; the very poor, who have migrated from villages in the surrounding regions to seek better fortune; and the very rich-- merchants, industrialists, film stars. It is also, in a very special sense, India's most cosmopolitan city" (Moraes 1979: 5). The slums, the traffic jams, the hawkers, the high-rises, the whorehouses, the electric trains, the beggars, the lunatics, all these may be seen as significant components that go on to make the finished picture meaningful. The meaning is in the action, the struggle for existence, and in the final analysis, the tranquil silence that the city's complexity inspires. In that sense Bombay aids the growth process.

Every day hundreds of people arrive in Bombay. The railway stations, bus terminals and ferry wharves bring in an influx of immigrants from all over India. They are labourers, professionals and businessmen who land in the city with bagloads of ambition. Camouflaged in this motley crowd of seekers is the artist. He too comes here to make a living. His concern is with the detail, the aesthetic transfer onto the canvas. Sometimes the entire groundwork of arriving, seeking and settling has been done for him by his parents and grandparents. He then like a host of others is born in the city, the city is his

native place. And he continues to stay on; there is no place he can go to from Bombay. As Nissim Ezekiel says, "I cannot leave the island,/ I was born here and belong" (Ezekiel 1988: 182, "Island"). Or, as he puts it in one of his most well-known poems, "My backward place is where I am" (181, "Background, Casually").

As a city Bombay is unique. It is modern in the western sense of the term, and yet primitive. Its modernity of sensibility fails to find an objective correlative in the reality of experience, resulting in anarchy, chaos and disorder. It is this above all that fascinates the poet.

Adil Jussawalla's "Approaching Santa Cruz Airport, Bombay" (*The Literary Endeavour*, 22) and Ivan Kostka's "Coming Home (to Bombay)"(60) confine themselves to the act of looking at the city through the tiny windows of an aeroplane. Even from mid-air, what Jussawalla sees is not the city's Lilliputian unreality, but "A union of homes as live as a disease" that helps him realize the absurdity of his own place in the air, with the scavenger birds. Kostka's poem suggests he is willing to accept the city on its own terms for the sheer thrill of getting back. But its corollary is doubt. Has one made the right choice by returning to Bombay? Can Bombay be loved? Can it be hated? In the end poets have their revenge on the city by focussing on its seamy side, generating thereby a tension in their work.

A large number of poems attempt to show us, with deft use of imagery, the urban madhouse that Bombay is. To Kolatkar, "This whole circus is you alone" (30, "Fire"). Aroop Mitra notices Bombay's "Slummed backyards" (28,"Cityscapes"), Dhruvakumar Joshi its bootleggers and

prostitutes (40, "Brief Investigations of a City I Call Mine"), Dilip Chitre in "The View from Chinchpokli" (42) and Vilas Sarang in "Letters from the Rain" (129) their (to use Chitre's phrase) "unprivileged compatriots" defecating in the open. Both Nirmala Pillai in "Charity" (84) and Nissim Ezekiel in "A Morning Walk" (1988: 119) and "Bombay Central" (*The Literary Endeavour*, 87) are repelled by beggars. R.Parthasarathy is choking in the polluted air and traffic-laden streets of Bombay. He declares in exasperation, "I am through with the city" (95, "The City Reels Under a Heavy Load"). Melanie Silgardo can see children sucking their thumbs to the bone (76, "Bombay"). In "Hill Road, Bandra" (92) Placid Edmunds is laughing at people who buy "things which they don't really need"; in "Part-Time Pujari" (64) Joy Deshmukh at the B.A.R.C. officer who doubles as a priest in his free time. To Prabhanjan Mishra, the city waylays us and laughs at our bleating impotence (93,"City of No Season"). In a humorous way, Austin Lobo shows us what Bombay is by talking about all that it is not, can never be (35, "Lie Poem"). Hemant Kulkarni sees the street "stifled/ by the weight of dead air" as "a painter's paradise" (56, "A Street in Bombay"). And in my own poem, "Garbage" (98), the city is seen, I think, as a symbolic dustbin.

There comes a point, then, when beauty, the soul of art, is perversely seen in grotesqueness alone. We have come a long way from the times of the early Ezekiel when hills were evoked as a polarity of slums (1988: 117, "Urban" and 119, "A Morning Walk"). Poems like "Bombay Prayers" (*The Literary Endeavour*, 67) by Keki Daruwalla, "Ode to Bombay" (47) by Chitre, "Fragments ..." (54) by Gieve Patel, as well as several of the poems cited above, are alarming in so far as they take with calm resignation the city's sickness for granted. What began as an act of playfulness has ended in scepticism.

But if poets become disillusioned so easily, there is little hope for ordinary mortals who come to Bombay in droves. At least poets have their intuitive worlds to withdraw into; the masses, on the other hand, have no option but to sweat it out on the roads. Thus, Jussawalla in "Sea Breeze, Bombay" (21) is thinking associatively of refugees from Sind and Tibet. Those were people who suffered unspeakable hardship, but the blow was perhaps mild in comparison with the plight of today's "immigrants" who perennially live abominable lives. In "Servants" (53) Patel is narrowing the scope to profile just a few of these wrecks who happen to be domestics in his house. He catches them "recovering from the day" and he knows they "are not informed because/ [they] Never have travelled beyond this/ Silence....". With overworked bodies and unfunctioning minds it is little wonder they are compared with animals, and chances are Patel has the beasts of burden in mind. Vera Sharma's Kankamma (126, "This Bombay") is more garrulous, and even as she fills her bucket acquaints her mistress with all her miseries that range from homesickness to insecurity. Ultimately all her woes can be traced to a single source-- "this Bombay". Tiernan Boyle in "Vendors' Dilemma"(124) highlights the piteous plight of a species hotly in the news: hawkers. The hide-and-seek game between the hawkers and the municipal authorities is a familiar sight in Bombay, and more often than not the hawkers lose. Charmayne D'Souza in "Train of Thought" (36) reflects on the whitewash afforded our souls by shoeblacks who themselves live subhuman lives.

A large number of poems, many of them by women, are on the allied theme of loneliness. Despite their efforts to put on a bold front, the personae in Eunice de Souza's "Return" (52) and Menka Shivdasani's "Married Woman, Single Girl" (79) are at

heart lonely people. In "Finality" (125) Vanashree Joshi confesses, "I dot the city's anonymous/ crowd. I lose my/ self in endless streets." And Vera Sharma's mad woman (128, "Madness") finds only spirits to communicate with.

Among the male poets, Rajiv Rao in "Dirge" (104) poignantly brings out the falseness of life. Kersy Katrak in "Colaba Causeway" (72) has "grown remote from pain" and "remote from love".

But the desolation of urban life drives different people to different destinations. The morbid, the weak, the helpless begin to think of death and haunt the cemeteries and burial grounds. This is what Hubert Nazareth's "Dadar Beach" (58), Kamala Das's "The Joss-sticks at Cadell Road" (66) and Katrak's "Malabar Hill" (68) are about. Das and Nazareth land up in cemeteries, Katrak in the Towers of Silence. But the poets do not find solitude even here. Nazareth sees children urinating, youngsters fornicating and airing opinions, old people reminiscing. Das finds crones following a corpse, while Katrak spots families on picnics (surely they must have a bizarre sense of entertainment!). In the second half, Katrak's poem acquires a philosophical dimension as it dawns on the poet in the peaceful settings of the Towers of Silence that long after the flesh has withered away, the bone shall prevail.

As for the rest, there are more earthly solutions, as Placid Edmunds' "Juhu Beach" (91) (We'll hire a room just for noon/ And fuck") and my "Only Connect" (96) suggest.

Then there are the dreamers. Both in their dreams and day-dreams they wishfully think of the things which are not, and thereby seek redress from the load of life. Apart from Lobo's

"Lie Poem", notable instances are Joy Deshmukh's "Ganapati Procession Hero" (63) and Meeta Chatterjee's "One Room Kitchen" (75).

Anyone familiar with the history of Bombay would realize the importance of place names in the city. Bombay, as everyone knows, was once a group of island villages which by and by joined hands to form the metropolis as we know it today. Villages became localities but retained at the same time something of their native flavour. The aroma of life that one can savour in, say, Bandra, would thus be very different from that in Chinchpokli or Chembur. Byculla, Parel, Mazagaon, Malabar Hill, each has a unique identity distinguishing it from the others. In general, Bombay's western corridor stands today for class and opulence while its eastern corridor represents poverty and contamination.

Numerous poems attempt to capture the local flavour and local colour of a place. Amit Chaudhuri's "At Churchgate Station" (26), Chitre's "The View from Chinchpokli" (42), Katrak's "Colaba Causeway", Nirmala Pillai's "Mumba Devi" (85), Ezekiel's "Bombay Central", Edmunds' "Hill Road, Bandra", Peeradina's "Bandra" (112) and Sanjiv Batla's "At Mahim" (119) would fall into this category in a very obvious way.

Of these, we may attempt a brief analysis of "The View from Chinchpokli" and "Bandra". In the former poem, we find Chitre painting such a bleak naturalistic picture of a typically working class area surrounded by mills and factories, that we are not surprised that the decay has set into his own system. The central metaphor of the poem is desecration. The terms of reference are laid down by the images of "Hindu hero" and

"Hindu god" that the poet evokes, and the sanctity of self is challenged by the heterogeneity of caste, class and religion that makes up life in Bombay. What stands in opposition (and apposition) to the Hindu-hero-god is the presence of untouchable mill workers defecating "along the stone wall of Byculla Goods Depot" or "crossing the railway lines"; and Christians, Jews and Muslims who will "inspire a brilliant critique of contemporary/ Indian culture." Their paradigms would be excrement of the poet's "unprivileged compatriots of Parel Road/ Cross Lane"; "the sulphur dioxide emitted/ By the Bombay Gas Company, blended with specks/ of cotton/ And carbon particles discharged by the mills"; and the bedbugs, cockroaches, mice, mosquitoes, lizards and spiders with which the poem ends. In juxtaposing a chaste, Hindu view of India with the polluted view from Chinchpokli, the poet is in effect contrasting a fatalistic approach to life with an existential one. And this is perhaps how the sensibility of Bombay differs from that of India.

To Peeradina, Bandra is a playmate he has been closely in touch with since childhood. It has grown with him, he has seen its emerging buildings, its exploding population, its rising traffic, its shops and restaurants, its stables and abattoirs, its places of worship, its erotic couples, its whores and bullies, although its meaning still eludes him. The poem opens with the lines "I love the environs/ of your body" and this sets its tone. In the sections that follow, the image-collages are all physical, and at one level have to do with deformity and disease. Thus proliferating residential colonies are compared to sixth fingers on hands; sewage water is a running boil on a swollen limb; and there is the revolting spectacle of the Slaughter House with "meat, blood and intestines/ swarming with flies". Beauty is

invariably speckled with ugliness. Lovers kissing on the rocks off Bandstand are doomed to witness an arse bared and lowered on the horizon; a scene beginning with "the bounty of Bandra-girls" and a film actor zooming past in his Mercedes, ends with "the cripple's disjointed salaam....". And so on.

Bombay's Irani restaurants, where millhands, ruffians, idlers, loafers and even artists and intellectuals often while away their time on bun-maska and endless cups of chai, become the subject of kolatkar's "Irani Restaurant Bombay" (33). The poet's technique is an effective ally of his vision, as he cinematically observes a wall-portrait of the Shah of Iran watching a stale pastry in the glass showcase; cut to a fly buzzing over a loafer's wrist. Some more focus on the pictures on the walls, and Kolatkar's favourite device, surrealism, takes over, as the wall-portraits, the loafer, the glass of water on his table, other tables, chairs, mirrors, a cat, and the cashier all reflect each other in a topsy-turvy tangle. In the second last stanza, there is the chilling image of a corpse rising from a block of ice in a morgue, and one wonders whether this typifies the spirit of Bombay: never say die.

Speech. Since Bombay houses people from every conceivable region of India, it is only natural that there should be a wide variety of speech patterns going. In "Bandra Christian Party" (51) Eunice de Souza attempts to speak like Goans:

> Fred the comic slaps hubby
> on back
> now the party'll go men go
> says Fred
> goans giggle
> Fred laughing loudest
> (he's the big thing
> this side of Hill Rd.)

Speech is an area that has remained largely unexplored in the poetry of Bombay city. Following Nissim Ezekiel's use of Gujarati English in his "Very Indian Poems in Indian English", poets could consider writing in Marathi English, Parsi English and Tamil English.

A good many poets have felt overwhelmed by the practical demands of life in Bombay and have dealt with them in verse. Going out into the thick of the action for survival, these poets are stared in the face by hardship: the hardship of finding a job, of commuting to work, and of keeping their heads in the midst of it all. On a deeper level, their poems ironically expose the folly of being in the rat race.

The most interesting poems here are about getting into the nightmarish trains and buses, and emerging drained at the other end. Every morning lakhs of people use public transport to get to their offices at faraway Fort, Churchgate and Nariman Point, and every evening those very lakhs travel in the opposite direction to get back home. "One result," says Dom Moraes naughtily, "is that on both trains and buses, the Bombay male can indulge in a favoured pastime ... 'Eve-teasing':that is to say, fondling and ogling the prettier women in the crowd"(Moraes 1979:24). Notice, then, how Amit Chaudhuri in "At Churchgate Station" observes that "in the bus/ someone's hot breath irritates/ someone's bare, brown neck....". The surging mass of humanity appears to him like a "squirming fish in an aquarium" even as he reports that " ... many/ step down as usual at this traffic light/ and rush onward to make the next change/ in a long unending chain of changes". But the most profound lines are these:

> Here, at the Churchgate railway station,
> where the crowd mills at its very densest,
> and not a single gap remains in between,
> one feels the greatest distance separating
> man from man....

Santan Rodrigues in "Homecoming in a City" (*The Literary Endeavour*, 120) uses nearly the same setting as Chaudhuri, though the indefinite article in the title suggests universality. But Rodrigues is a Bombay poet and his images are clear: "v.i.p. briefcase", "flock of people", "traffic lights", "6.15 ... double fast", "bloody queue for the home-run bus", "packed compartments", "hoardings". Ezekiel also is in a crowded train in "The Local" (89) but we are not quite sure at which hour of the day-- the rush hour or the slack. However, the uncertainty that passengers face daily at the railway stations is wittily conveyed in the opening stanza itself:

> A slow train, perhaps
> or is it fast?
> No one knows for certain,
> And we ask one another.
> It's generally slow, sometimes fast.
> To Andheri? Yes, as a rule,
> but may be to Bandra only.

What looks like an ordinary journey goes on to become "A daily lesson in life's uncertainties" as the train refuses to start on time. The poem ends on a speculative note as "The train has stopped between stations". In between, the poet looks both within the compartment and out of it, and sees the lighted electronic indicator on the platform; passengers rushing in and out of the train, playing cards, reading newspapers or ogling at women; beggars at work; hawkers selling chikki, pens and toys.

While Menka Shivdasani's "Destination" (78) reflects on the futility of the exhausting ride, her poem "Moving On" (77) is governed by a strong sense of irony. Her word-pictures aren't always as sharp as those of Chaudhuri or Rodrigues, but the situation in the latter poem hits the reader instantly: it's World Tourism Day and the poet is travelling in an overcrowded bus at peak hour, "hanging on to a leather strap". Later she laments:

> They didn't tell me
> I'd have to stand right through,
> pay for it as well.
> I was supposed to know
> being Intelligent.

Closely related to the scourge of commuting is that of unemployment. Not all people who pitch their tents in Bombay are lucky to find jobs at once. So while the employed commute to reach work, the unemployed commute in search of it. No resourceful person in Bombay would dare stay home on a working day even if he or she has nothing to do. Unemployed people often describe themselves as free-lancers; but the term is only a euphemism. In "In Bombay" (122) Tara Patel sees herself in such a mess, and describes her state and the state of those like her:

> In the beginning one leaves the house
> in the morning as usual.
> Pretences increase, imaginary interviews
> outnumber the real ones.
> Waiting to be interviewed is a test
> by itself ...

Unemployed, one makes friends who
are unemployed.
Picked up at the employment bureau
where silence is articulate.
The unemployed dare not lose
their temper.

There are a couple of poems on the theme of land-reclamation. Raul d'Gama Rose's "Land Reclamation Bombay" (107) and Sanjiv Batla's "At Mahim" are both about stuffing truckloads of dust into the sea's mouth, to speak in the manner of Bhatla. These poems derive their strength from violence, as the poets comment on the battle between land and sea in which land is victor. Raul d'Gama Rose, for example, is watching the sea choke as they lap mud down her throat. Even nightfall is seen as the descent of "a rusty blade/ slicing/ the bottlegreen tanglement/ of her stark nude back".

While on the subject, it is interesting to note that to Manohar Shetty the island resembles a reptile with "mutant serrated teeth" with all its carnivorous implications (73, "Bombay"), while according to Melanie Silgardo, in "Bombay",

Your islands grained and joined
are flanks you kicked apart
when some dark god
waved diverse men into your crotch.

Nissim Ezekiel says, culture "when it is surrounded by poverty on the scale we have it in India ... suffers a whole host of distortions and exaggerations" (Ezekiel 1992: 79). The poetry of Bombay demonstrates, among other things, the consequences

of grafting urbanness on a people whose value systems are still quite unsuited to it. Discordance results: the pulls and counter-pulls of city life cause them to be at cross- purposes with their surroundings, or to go off on a tangent. There is a clash between the older fatalism and a new existential order, and often the poetry is born of that clash. Its function, then, is frequently cathartic; the aim is to purge the bowels of the mind of the discordance. Defecating is an extended metaphor for such cleansing.

NOTES

[1] The essay is based on introductory comments to a special anthology number of *The Literary Endeavour* (Hyderabad), Vol. VIII Nos. 1-4 (1986-87), Guest Editor R.Raj Rao, on "The Poetry of Bombay City". All parenthetical page references are to this issue, unless otherwise indicated.

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M.K.NAIK

NEW POEMS FROM OLD FRIENDS

Gieve Patel, *Mirrored, Mirroring*. Madras: Oxford University Press, 1991. 47 pp., Rs.55/-.

Salem Peeradina, *Group Portrait*. Madras: Oxford University Press, 1992. 61 pp., Rs.70/-.

Makarand Paranjape, *Playing the Dark God*. Calcutta: Rupa, 1992. 88pp., Rs. 50/-.

The three books reviewed here are all from poets who have earlier published collections to their credit. In one way or another, the poems of each are concerned with the relationship between Man and Woman, or the nexus that binds Man to the manifold and mysterious Universe. But each of these collections has its own orientation. In *Playing the Dark God*, Paranjape enacts the complex drama of youthful passion, while Peeradina's *Group Portrait* is a joyous celebration of fulfilled domesticity; and the oldest of the three poets-- Gieve Patel-- feels (perhaps naturally) that his "tryst" is "inward", as he looks into the magic mirror of the universe and ponders over its relationship with its Maker, the "Mirrored and Mirroring" God.

Patel's earlier two collections-- *Poems* (1966) and *How Do You Withstand, Body* (1976)-- showed him mainly as a poet with a nagging social conscience, who tried to balance his deep compassion for the underdog by both a clinical detachment (which perhaps comes naturally to a practising physician) and a deflating irony. And as for technique, his favourite strategy appeared to be the situational mode in which a real

life situation triggered off a poetic response. *Mirrored, Mirroring* registers a distinct thematic advance, in that the poet is now seen to be moving far afield, as he reflects on issues such as God, religion, life, Nature and Man. In doing so, he employs several approaches in keeping with his changing moods: thus, in the opening poem, "The Difficulty", he playfully observes, "In the beginning/ it is difficult / even to say,/ 'God',/ one is so out of practice/ And embarrassed/ Like lisping in public/ about candy/ At fifty!". But the very next poem, "Simple", registers a more somber reaction: "I shall not/ be humble before God.// I half suspect/ He wouldn't wish me to do so". The poet explains that if he denied God earlier, it was not from "arrogance" or "excessive self-regard", but simply because he refused to have his nose "ground into dirt". But he has once more turned to God now, because "I have been given/ cleaner air to breathe// and may look up/ to see what's around". In the title poem, "Mirrored, Mirroring", we find the poet engaged in metaphysical speculation on the age-old question of the relationship between the Maker and the made: if the universe is, in a way, "God's effort/ to understand Himself", where exactly do all those multitudinous creatures He created fit into the scheme, and where does Man stand in relation to God and these creatures and to his fellow-men?

Humility is the keynote of "A Variation on St. Teresa", in which the poet confesses, "Whenever You withdraw/ only a little way from me I/ immediately/ fall to the ground./ I wait upon/ the strings You hold". But as a counter-weight to this comes the ironic juxtaposition in "God or" of two separate ideas: one, that "God or/ something like that/ (is) shot/ through each part of you, down/ to your/ small fingernails"; and secondly, that in spite of this, there remains that curious

"persistence/ of veins" in you. Even more ironic than this curious duality in Man is the spectacle of appearance and reality that this world of men which God created presents to the eyes of God. In "Speeding", the poet observes that Nature is enjoyed best from the window of a speeding train or from a high apartment, for then "each detail is spared you". Hence, "The fate of God/ Is to see His universe so,/ In overview, and He shall find it good". But let Him become "Embroiled in detail", as He descends, and His fate will be that of "A captive husband forcibly held down,/ Made to witness His wives and His children/ Tormented by the overlords/ Of His own creation". In spite of this, in "In Just Two Years, Said the dream", we find the poet praying, "Do take a break from Your Temple Routine, my Lord,/ Walk right into my newly completed house". One hopes that in his "newly completed house", the poet continues to be vouchsafed even subtler and far more complex evocations in the near future.

Poetry of this kind has naturally little use for the situational strategy, since direct reflexion is what the theme automatically demands. But the situational mode continues to be employed in poems dealing with other subjects. Thus, in "From Bombay Central", the spectacle of the Saurashtra Express, poised to embark upon its long journey, triggers off more mundane thoughts and reactions to the "eternal/ Station odour, amalgam/ Of diesel oil, hot steel, cool rails,/ ...human sweat/ ...dung, urine,/ Newspaper ink, Parle's Gluco Biscuits". "Hill Station" is an amusing record of the speaker's experience at a small time Hill Station, where what impinges most strongly upon his consciousness is the sexual motif as exemplified in both the monkeys on the trees and "that couple next door". And the sight of squirrels ("Squirrels in Washington") who approach

you boldly but halt some feet away, sets the poet thinking about a possible "hierarchy of distances" between creatures in the universe, the non-observance of which "would at once/ Agglutinate all of Nature/ Into a messy, inextricable mass".

Patel uses imagery rather sparingly, but that makes the sudden appearance of a telling image all the more effective, as in "Heraldic shafts of sunlight"; and "Give/ With frost in the heart", or when he describes the Express Train waiting to start as a "Good pet", "Chained patiently to the platform". In some poems, the poet has tried to use a stylistic device which is as old as E.E.Cummings: viz., word-breaking, as in "In clotted har/ bours..." and "Water gur/ gling...". This kind of dislocation perhaps does serve a definite purpose in a poem like "Haunting", which describes the ebb and flow of the tide in the sea; but it is difficult to find enough justification for it everywhere, and it is clear that indiscriminate use is sure to nullify the artistic effect of any experiment of this nature. Thus, perhaps only more than critical ingenuity can explain the rationale of the unusual word-breaking in a purely reflective poem like "God Or": "trans/lucence, the sun/ blaz/ ing through, lift/ ing the most of you...". Surely, a poet who has been writing for almost two decades should not now have any need to resort to a stylistic device which is rather shop-soiled any way.

Group Portrait is Saleem Peeradina's second collection, a sequel to his *First Offence* (1980), which was essentially a chronicle of a youthful sensibility's response to urban and rural landscapes. This response was a curious amalgam of a strong sense of personal involvement resulting in evocative description, an ironic awareness of the incongruities in the varied realities

presented, and a subdued but unmistakable under-current of understanding and even compassion.

But if the poet of *First Offence* was a youth looking at the world around him with eager (and sometimes eagle) eyes, the voice we hear in *Group Portrait* is that of a "Family Man" (the title of the opening poem) looking into the "Family Mirror" (the title of the opening Section).

Group Portrait comprises three Sections, and the order in which they appear is suggestive of where the poet's priorities now lie. The first Section presents, by and large, vignettes of a happy domesticity, with the "Angel in the House" presiding lovingly over an "all-women household" of two daughters and no sons. Feminine love and feminine wiles ensure that there is not a dull moment for the proud householder in the happy home. "Sometimes he's an over grown boy/ with three mothers"; and " the lady is often the child/ and the little ones bristling with womanly designs". Pampered and fed, cajoled and bullied by turns, he is, however, sure of one thing-- "a three-tier welcome", when he returns home in the evening-- "the best part of his day". In the concluding poem of this Section, the speaker, nursing wild and irrational fears concerning his growing daughters, suddenly remembers his "cautious, palpitating mother, who fretted/ Every time he stepped out of the house..../ Collecting horror stories from news reports,/ She pickled them in the oil of her imagination". He now remembers wryly how he had then sworn "he'd never inflict the same on his kids", thus establishing an ironic link between the present and the past.

This strong thematic unity which holds the first Section together seems to be missing from Section II, "Transition", which offers a medly of description ("Landscape With

Playing the Dark God comprises thirty-three short poems presented as a dramatic sequence in three acts, consisting of eleven poems each, with a Prologue and an Epilogue, and an "Intermission" at the end of Act II. The protagonist sees himself as a latter-day Krishna, the "Dark God", as an academic "surrounded by sixteen thousand (an apt number) books", who nevertheless can always find time for "affairs and indiscretions", "grand passions and betrayals" and in fact, for the entire "familiar domestic scene: adultery".

In the process, the eternal triangle of Wife-Husband-The Other Woman gets stretched in several directions, making for some diverting formulations. The clever womanizing Husband, who ingeniously tries to convince the Wife that their marriage is the Reality, and his (too) numerous flirtations just so many illusions, is interesting enough. But it is perhaps the poet's evocation of the various avatars of Woman that is far more appealing: woman as shy virgin; coy mistress; former flame turned happy housewife in another home and yet not averse to sharing a magic moment from the romantic past with an erstwhile lover; seductive siren wallowing in sex; in fact, Woman playing the diverse roles of Kanyakumari, Rukmini, Satybhama, Radha and Gopi, opposite the ever-obliging and eternally youthful "Dark God", Krishna.

Paranjape's imagery in *Playing the Dark God* registers a definite advance since the days of *The Serene Flame*, which betrayed a tendency to lapse into a faded romanticism (of which the very title, with its stale whiff of conventional mystical musing, was a tell-tale example). In contrast with this, he now employs images like "she brought several suitcases/ Full of unhappiness", and "Lead in her arm-pits/ Ice-cubes in her

Locomotive"), recordation of a situation ("Garden") and reflection ("The Fire"). The final Section, "Beginnings", shows a welcome return to thematic cohesiveness. This is a brief but evocative chronicle of growing to maturity in a middle class family, with all its typically middle class mores. Among the high points of the chronicle are the following: the feeling of being "double- tricked", when the boy is told that his grand- parents have gone on a trip, and learns later that they will never return; growing introverted at thirteen; the strong urge to "vault/ Over the parental wall", a few years later; the youthful resolve to have "no worldly ambition", except the one to be "remembered for daring to be a complete man"; and his final awakening to his true calling, viz. that of a poet-- "He had heard the call: an agitation of the spirit/ in the act of finding a resolution in words".

If Makarand Paranjape's first verse- collection, *The Serene Flame* (1991), mainly comprised "songs of innocence" in celebration of youthful love, the "flame" does not burn as serenely in *Playing the Dark God*, as the poet awakens to the fact that flames may not only not burn serenely all the time-- they can also sear and scorch the heart. In other words, the "songs of innocence" have now graduated into "annals of experience".

This change necessarily means that the predominantly lyrical mode employed in *The Serene Flame* now has actually yielded place to a more objective strategy. The title, *Playing the Dark God*, itself is highly suggestive of this. The poet's aim is obviously to present scenes from the fascinating, age-old drama of adultery, which, in spite of Byron's asseveration, thrives not only where "the climate is sultry".

veins". And, as in the earlier collection, here also we find engaging flashes of wit like "Books. like women, are various/ Some meant to be covered/ Others uncovered"; and "Truth improves even adultery". Paranjape's two collections have certainly raised expectations which, one hopes, will duly be fulfilled in the years to come.

BOOK NOTES

Receipt is acknowledged of the following books which have been sent to *Kavya Bharati* in recent weeks. Inclusion in this list neither supposes not precludes the possibility of a review in a future issue of *Kavya Bharati.*

Amal-Kiran: Poet and Critic, ed. Nirodbaran and R.Y. Deshpande. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1994.

This is an extensive collection of critical and analytical studies of a writer who, in the anthology's preface, is claimed to equal any outstanding figure of the present age in quality and quantity of literary output. The first three extensive sections of essays introduce the readers to the biography of this author, his critical writings and his poetry respectively. The fourth, briefer, section includes sketches, photographs, bibliography and other memorabilia.

Bairi, Ajit. *The Night Bird's Call and Other Poems,* trans. Umanath Bhattacharya. Calcutta: Mila Bairi, 1990.

These twenty-seven poems are translated from seven different volumes of Bengali poetry published by the author, and from several other magazines and periodicals. As in the title poem, some expose a sympathy for birds and animals, trees and other plant life; while others reveal a sensitivity to life in large cities, such as Jaipur and Bhopal.

Deka, Hareswar. *The Protest*. Guwahati: Smti Reeta Deka, 1993.

A collection of more than sixty brief poems, each translated by the author from his original versions in Assamese. Many of the lyrics are reflections on an active, restless life, concerned with personal, social and military conflict.

Kulothungan. *Earth is Paradise Enough*. Bombay: Allied Publishers Limited, 1993.

Kulothungan is the pen name of Professor V.C. Kulandai Swamy, an internationally known scholar in the field of Hydrology, who has been Vice Chancellor of three different universities. These poems, translated into English by the author from his Tamil originals, are genuinely meditative, but with a strong ethical concern for forging a new world, purged of social evils, capable of growth. A rationalistic and humanistic spirit dominates these lyrics.

Lockwood, Michael and A. Vishnu Bhat. *Metatheatre and Sanskrit Drama*. Madras: Tambaram Research Associates, 1994.

The authors provide here a set of scholarly essays that focus upon what has only recently been named and identified as a separate sub-genre of drama. The first section, "Essays on Metatheatre and Sanskrit Drama", includes among others a study published in an earlier issue of *Kavya Bharati*, and an extensive bibliography related to metadrama and metatheatre. Section Two of the book presents an edited text, a translation of, and a commentary upon each of two Sanskrit farces that were written in the seventh century A.D. by the South Indian king, Mahēndravarman.

Naik, Vihang. *City Times and Other Poems*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1993.

The title of this collection is also the heading for the last of its six sections, in which the city is unfolded as a marketplace, as a haven for underdogs, and as a seed-bed of change; and is observed by evening, at mid-night, by moonlight and through fog and haze.

Nair, S. Chandramohan. *Rippled Dreams*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1994.

This is the second volume of poetry published by the author. These twenty-five poems, in his words, "are woven around men, women and the world; the viewpoint...(being) completely influenced by an ironic vision caused by the fluctuating vicissitudes of the great comic epic called life".

Nazar, Prem Kumar. *The Silken Knot*, transcreated Bhupinder Parihar. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1994.

This book is a rendering in English of forty Urdu Ghazals. The Introduction, the Preface and the Afterword all contain observations and description of the Ghazal as a genre, and discuss to some extent its history. The transcreator of the Urdu couplets here was author of a substantial review in *Kavya Bharati 5* focused on longer books of English translations from Urdu poetry.

Rajeev. *The Other Face*. Trivandrum: Revathi Publications, 1993.

A first book of poems, which compositely illustrate in form the Eliot ("Portrait of a Lady") introductory citation, "I must borrow every changing shape/ To find expression....". The motifs of these verses include various aspects of poetry writing, the imaginative relation of language and reality, and the haunting nature of city life.

Rizvi, I.H. *Wounded Roses Sing*. Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, 1993.

These lyrics, from the author of several hundred Urdu and English poems, commemorate heroes of Greek mythology, current day politicians, victims of disease and social disorder. Among these are interspersed a variety of love poetry and other more reflective verses.

Thiruvalluvar. *The Kural*, trans. P.S. Sundaram. Madras: P.S. Sundaram, 1987.

A presentation copy from the Translator of his rendering of the 1330 couplets of this ancient Tamil classic. The translation itself later became a volume in the Penguin Classics series of Penguin Books. The couplet form is preserved throughout the translation and is occasionally enhanced by the use of rhyme. An extensive preface, ample notes and principles used for the transliteration of Tamil words into Roman script are also given.

Viswanathan, R. *Petals and Patches*. Madras: Macmillan India, 1994.

A collection of lyrics, most of which were broadcast from A.I.R., Calicut, some of them vignettes from out-door nature, others focused on relatives of the author, ironies of literature and expression, or characters from Indian drama and fiction.

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