KAVYA BHARATI

THE STUDY CENTRE FOR
INDIAN LITERATURE IN
ENGLISH AND TRANSLATION

AMERICAN COLLEGE
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FOREWORD

Kavya Bharati is "a Review of Indian Poetry". So perhaps its readers should not object because this issue of *KB* is devoted more predominantly to original poetry than some earlier issues had been. In fact, a hasty count suggests that more writers have contributed poems to *KB* 8 than to any issue before it. Eight writers appear here who have never previously graced the pages of our journal.

This is as it should be. *Kavya Bharati* continually tries to combine the new with the tried and proven. We are always on the lookout--sometimes rather pointedly--for writers whom we can justifiably publish for the first time. We are grateful for the many friends of our journal, readers and former contributors alike, who help us to locate genuine talent that will be new to these pages.

Meanwhile we look forward to what future issues already promise. As announced earlier *Kavya Bharati* 9 (1997) will be devoted to translation. English translations of poems, originally written in at least eight Indian languages, will be in this issue, along with essays related to translation theory and reviews of translated poetry that has already been published. There is STILL time to submit quality material in any of these catagories for *KB*'s consideration.

The year 1998 will mark *Kavya Bharati*'s tenth anniversary, and plans for a special issue to celebrate the occasion are beginning to take form. *Kavya Bharati* invites thoughtful, carefully wrought poetry and challenging review articles and essays for this tenth anniversary issue. We hope the tenth *KB* will continue to justify the increasing interest which subscribers and other readers each year seem to be showing for our publication.

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KAVYA BHARATI
a review of Indian Poetry

Number 8, 1996

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Poetry Section

LAKSHMI KANNAN

(The following five poems are all taken from an unpublished collection entitled *Unquiet Waters*.)

CONUS GLORIAMARIS* : THE SONG OF THE SEVEN SEAS

Beaten, tossed about by the surge
her body soft and vulnerable as a
marine mollusc to the stinging brackish waters

waves upon tumultuous waves washed over her
as she tried to befriend the sea.
Folds upon satin folds of waters draped around her

as the waters squished. Growled. Sibilated,
caressingly etching whorls that recorded
the resonance of her being.

Fully moistened, she slipped out of her exoskeleton
leaving it behind as her pearly souvenir that
glimmered iridescent on the floors of the ocean.

Just put your ear to the apex of the animate shell,
will you? You'll hear not only her brown voice
but voices shaded yellow, white and black

from across the seven seas.
Daughters of the oceans, each one of them,
female born to a female energy. Zoetic.

*Conus Gloriamaris: Large, spiral shell of a conch, a marine mollusc. Named so because of the striking beauty of its colour and shape.

DISCOURSE WITH HER DAEMON LOVER

That was decorous,
the way the waves rose, then fell evenly
breathing like a well-bred woman.

The waters lapping, lapping
a shore that waited, always waited,
grateful for the briny froth that laced it.

Emerald and blue, the waters shimmered
holding the cerulean sky above
an evening sky over an evening sea

The sea held no threat to the people.
She was alive, but correctly so
her waves breathing rhythmically, performing

for the people on the shore, until it stood bare
under the darkening, inky sky.
She then went through a sea change.

Heaving up from the bottomless floors
of the ocean, her waves rose high
in a passionate exchange with the moon

the tall, glassy jade green wave arching high
stretching, stretching to touch her daemon lover
glowing over the vast expanse of her bosom

in a naked adoration.
Endless sheets of tumultuous waters rose and fell
regardless of the storm that blew around her.

She came into her own
possessed, possessing
the moon that slivered silvery over her waters.

I TAKE THE SHAPE OF

I take the shape
of the receptacle that holds me
I take the contours of the earthen pitcher
tall, squat or lean
I take the form of the bottle
or the glass on the table
I even take on the colours of the utensils
in which I dwell.

I am the waters that you can see through
I am the liquid that is almost not there
I am the one in receptacles
of various kinds, my shape not my own.

If you can but break the pitcher, just once
and set me free
I would flow into the stream
gurgling, gurgling,
I'll catch the sun
in a jewelled glitter.

If only you'll break the pitcher, just this once
I'll run over the smooth rocks,
swiftly, swiftly,
to join my mother, the river
till we melt together
into the ocean of our being.

MOTHER

When the sky burns
singeing my hair
when the scorched earth cracks open
baring its dry cavernous nothingness
I return to you
my cool well
I return to your healing waters
that never fail. They're magical.

Around you, the grass is bleached
by the white rage of the sun
Around you, the mud is a hard cake
beyond you, the river is a sinuous dry curve
with unyielding mud dunes
I climb into the cool recesses of your well
to soak in the secretive reserves
of water.

I left the river bed once many times
to wander under skies of another blue
I roamed in lands where rivers flowed
without moistening me
where oceans shimmered distantly
where the banks offered no rest
to my world-weary limbs.

I returned to the smell of damp earth
in your waters.
They were sweet, with a hint of salt
that rounded the taste.
I came to bury myself in your well
that restored me to myself.

MA GANGA*

Dip your head well into the waters,
there, like that.
Come on, hold your nose with your fingers
and just dip. Have courage
O no, you won't drown or die
Ma Ganga is your mother, after all.
She'll protect you
she'll wash off all your sins.

She took her sins and walked to the river bank
lugging a grimy laundry
to wash her own private dirty linen
in a public *ghat*.

'Sins?'
O yes, she had tried to be good
and that had prostituted her but instantly.
She remembered how being 'good'
had meant taking a lot of filth
and turning filthy in return.
Goodness had sunk her deep in a mire.

Now her whole body itched
with the dirt of living
a holy dip is just what she needed
to rub the dead cells off the soul
to scrub the skin off the bone
till there is no sinning flesh left on the body.

River Ganges rushed, gushed, swished,
herself sullied with decaying flowers, rags,
recycled plastic, bits of paper
and other crumbs of life floating down her back.

The muddied water flowed on uncaringly
hardly aware of the filth.

Gingerly, she let herself into the waters
then caught her breath as the cold, cold waters
slapped about her, wrapped around her
the speed of the flow catching her unawares.

They hit her between the eyes, the waters,
they ripped the grimy skin off her bones
knocked her consciousness out
and dissolved her name.

Clean, clean speed, sheer speed
nonchalant amid the plastic, the filthy rags.
She swirled and hurtled on with Ganges, running,
running, hurrying into the sea.

* The river Ganges that flows down from the icy Himalayas. Always personified as a woman, she is considered very sacred. Bathing in the river is believed to wash off all the sins committed in one's lifetime.

DARIUS COOPER

AN ARCHIVE OF MYSELF--
DICHOTOMIZED BETWEEN THREE OPPOSITIONS

1

I was born between
a sea and a mountain-range.

From the sea I absorbed many stories
of white invaders who came
wet behind their ears
to our silent shores
of sun and vocal squabbles,
and enjoying for a time
the friendly latitudes
of an untutored generosity,
they plundered
city and village,
farm and forest,
room and closet,
to establish progressively
the hegemony of what
they called 'civilization.'

Even after In
dependence, I--
a post-mid
night child of 1949--
was continually reminded of their presence
everytime I posted a letter
under the collective surveillance
of five viceroys
at the general post-office;
or rode on an electric train
pulled swiftly up the ghats

by a Metropolitan Vickers engine;
or travelled down in their lifts
all along a smooth
network of wires
oiled and greased by Lockley of London.

I emerged
not merely from the bio
logical womb of my parents
but also from a historical mimesis:
striding forth,
after the dark placenta
of a native childhood had collapsed,
to play cricket
in dazzling white lordjim flannels,
and drinking, after a
well deserved century,
a steaming pot of plantation tea
under a white shamiana:
a perfect miracle morality tableau
played out immaculately
in an evergreen pavilion
where even the birdseed
still came all
the way from England.

And in the careful conspiracies
of the Empire's gothic classrooms:
after the chairs had been folded at morning assembly
and the evening hymns canticled and canteburied,
an endless clothesline of the invader's alphabet
was strung up
"to connect the thought with the passion,"
which I and my hyphenated generation

chose to accept from smoothened white pages
carefully bound and cut
by industrious hands
somewhere along the Thames and Hudson,
scorning the rough parchment and creased folds
of the local Tarachand Brothers publisher,
whose blotched illustrations and careless ink
always made you see the word and the image
DOUBLE--an exact facsimile of
who I was and what I was becoming,

especially:

on gloomy monsoon evenings
when the awkward splash of the local fishermen
at Nariman Point, off Cuffe Parade,
became shimmering sundappled punts
as three men in a boat
slowly floated past lawns and meadows
where robust Shropshire lads
and lazy lyrical couples
lying idly under greenwood trees
conspired with a blind Merlin
confusedly rehearsing Camelot.

Ah! In that aqua-marine
where Nelson had fought
many a one-eyed battle,
I saw the transparent visions
of those mermaids
so miraculously missed
by the menopaused misery
of my old friend Prufrock.
I can still smell their scent:
a confusion of Pears soap and Cuticura powder

drifting from all kinds of forbidden places
and circulating like my dreams:
unshaven and crosseyed at One A.M.
round and round Trafalgar Square,
but happy, so happy
to be so far away from native courtyards
that had always smelt of cow-dung.
With no Gods to bow to,
no monuments to salute,
except this one-handed one-eyed Captain,
"My Captain, O my Captain,"
staggering and singing a non
sensical jabberwocky jingle
about the changing of trains
at Charring Cross and
"Come Watson, the game is afoot,"
I melted like a gently exhaled vapour
into a winter incarnation
which became the best of times
and the worst of times
to hide my area of darkness
behind an imposing magna carta
of scarves, coats, gloves, and pull-overs.

And then one day . . .

tired of being quenched
by the seawater whose salt
I thought had made me,
I turned towards the mountain-range
that had always been there.
With liquid eyes I saw water
as I had never seen it before
harnessed for paddy and electric power
by my own people.
I felt isolated, ashamed to mingle with them.

I didn't have to.
Putting down their implements of labour
passed on to them
by their heroes in mythology,
they came and lifted me up
--an awkward stranger in braces and tie--
who left the big city on holidays
to join his father
as he worked with
these supple-muscled natives
on tunnels, bridges, and level-crossings.

Now as the Southwest monsoon
roared outside tunnel nine,
I heard stories that flew
straighter and truer than any
of the Crusaders' Christian arrows.
The Sherwood forest of my imagination
suddenly evaporated like a porous myth.
It quietly folded up its geography and left;
the rain abated, and as
I crept out of the tunnel:
Shivaji Maharaj--'the mountain rat'--
came riding out of the sun's shakti
carving out the guts of his enemies
with his carefully concealed tiger's paw.
Later, in the moonlight,
around the campfire,
I saw him scaling
an impregnable mountain peak
with a gigantic ghorpad/lizard,
his only anchoring device,
to save the virginity
of one of the villager's abducted daughters.
History, unable to measure his height,

only made me taller
as I listened to his exploits,
and when I returned to the city
to resume my studies,
I spent whole weekends
exploring many of Shivaji's
famous mountain forts and hideouts.
And that day finally arrived,
when standing on Pratapghad,
with the sun
setting on the British Empire
directly behind me,
I tore the magna carta,
throwing away that imagined version
I had so studiously cultivated
out of the vast collection
of scarves, coats, caps and pull-overs.

2

My own voice hesitatingly emerged
between the rhythms of rock an' roll
and the bhakti beat of abhangas.
Poised like that calender baby
near my uncle's Multitone Murphy radio
whose short-wave knobs
had to be constantly adjusted
by the skill of a
carefully placed rubber-band,
I listened late into the night
for the steady immigration
of shakes, rattles, and rolls,
all the way from Radio Ceylon.
Weekends found us static
on the waves and hums

of borrowed musical transfusions:
Wasn't Mohammed Rafi's "Meri Deena"
more original
than Paul Anka's "Diana"
now that Las Vegas had corrupted him?
Elvis only sang "Margarita" to Ursula Andress
when the bulls slept at Acapulco.
Our Rajendra Kumar's ditty to "Priya"
literally shook the whole asmaan.

Talat Mahamud's
"don't shower me with so much love
for I am like a cloud just a vagabond"
had Salil Chaudhury's Sa-related cyclic
thrashing the opening bars
of the giggling Amadeus's 40th in G Minor.
And when Dada Burman
borrowed Tennessee Ernie Ford's "Sixteen Tons"
and gave it to Kishore Kumar
to tinker with it in a garage
as he repaired Madubala's stalled car,
that had stalled in the rain,
raindrops
no longer fell
on my head.
Elated I turned to the emaciated Dylan
and from his coffee-house pilgrimages
in Greenwich Village
he laid bare for me
suddenly at a babyblue sixteen
the lonesome death of my own mother
every ten days of the month
when the menses in her blood
transformed her into a "pollution",
a pawn for her pious mother-in-law's

religious games
which banished her to the margins.
And as I screamed:
"It's all right grandma, she's only bleeding,"
the old witch went on cleaning
her prized possession of deities
with a zend-avesta enthusiasm.
Years later when she died
clutching the strangled neck
of the cockatoo
Susan Alexander Kane left behind
for Charlie at Xanadu,
my mother had to bathe
her stinking Haversham corpse
for the protesting dasturjees outside.
Then Leonard Cohen silently
stepped into my lonely room
and sat quietly in the corner
stitching his women's desires
to the roar of his own blood clots.
I welcomed him like a drunk
from yesterday's midnight choir,
and like a bird balanced on a wire
I was poised to take off
for the country of my dreams,
but when I landed on a hot humid day
in Philip Marlow's Los Angeles,
a third rate Hollywood actor
took over a first rate country
and turned it into a cheap commercial.
Immediately I lost my voice.
But not for long.
Dylan's steel harmonica
was now replaced by
a pumpkin tambura,

and Tuka, Mira, and Kabir
dancing wildly on their barefeet
entered my devastated temple
and made a defiant God hurriedly leave
his appropriate place on the shrine
and sleep under my troubled breaths.
I could sit down and wrestle
with this tonguetied God,
and occasionally when God cheated
and no letters came from home,
and Indian grocery stores got torched or looted,
I would chastise this God and sulk.
And it was then that the Goddess emerged,
not from my God's repeatedly broken ribs,
but as an independent presence,
extending her glowing image towards me
through veils in which I sometimes
glimpsed a Marlene, a Diva, and a Durga.

Numbed by ambulance sirens and LAPD helicopters
searching for stolen cars at three in the morning
under a powerful searchlight
that exploded in my tiny room like a million artees,
I woke to Bhimsen, Kumar, and Kishori,
their hymns tinkling like anklets
around the lost voices of last night's nightmares.
Tuka's ahanghas in Bhimsen's transparent swaras,
Mira's pranaams in Kishori's pure vessel of throat,
Kabir's dohas in Kumar's onelunged ulatbamsi awaaz,
broke the back of many a racial slur
that dripped down in venomous paint
from the wall opposite my tiny apartment.

And years later,
when my own Krishna's bloody head

emerged from my Mira's bleeding vrindavan wound,
a churchbell mysteriously rang out
from the red Jewish synagogue
thousands of miles away
in the cantonment town of Poona.
And then when the telephone rang
from the Christmas ward of Santa Monica,
one aged parent rushed to the balcony
towards that bell pealing for a star
while the other glued to the urgent
rings of a reach out and touch
someone instrument of AT&T.
And in the halting voice
of their own son
who had emptied their courtyards
and dried up their garden
they saw the vocal formation
of their family's first grandson.

3

2394 Sholapur Road
stretched like a lazy dog in summer
all the way from the Peshwa Peth in Pune
to the British race-course in Poona.
The palki to Pandarpur
that will wend its way back into this poem later
took the same route in 1955
that Churchill's tommies did in 1945.
One of them,
let's call him the unknown soldier,
drunkenly climbed 2394's stairs
and wooed my mother's beautiful sister
through the small grilled window
in which I had often seen her hide
her expelled presence from a mad husband.

Her mad father who had just
returned after driving
the first train for the Shah of Iran,
ran out from his brooding
place in the kaatirya,
and in a rare display
of nonGandhian enthusiasm,
chased the inebriated soldier
all the way from Poolgate
to Dewan Master's BBC household
in his sadrakasti
at the stroke of bigben midnight.
He returned eventually
with the soldier's brown cane:
its silver knob
bearing the English monarch's face
stamped all over his colonies.

I was given that baton as a present,

but another uncle,
recently returned from a
failing Manchester mill in Colombo
spoiled it all
by asking me to drum it
to the alphabetical rhythms
of Churchill's speeches
on the phonograph.
"Speak and write like him, my boy,
and there will be a place for you
in Nehru's India"
were his parting words
which I chose thankfully to ignore
as I stiched knowledge
out of what

the cantonment and the peth
had to offer.

It was from the cantonment
that I discovered
the precariousness of boundaries:
the level-crossing at Ghodpuri
which divided
the Anglo-Indian engine-driver Tommy Derum
from my father's parsee brother Bugs
who ran his WP locomotive recklessly
and destroyed his marriage
with the same carelessness
with which he brought
his express to a halt
at the station.
Tommy Derum's daughters
were fast and loose in their tracks
as their father was slow and methodical.
Shuffling awkwardly
in our motormechanic school uniforms,
we lavishly gave our white goddesses
glossy photographs of Hollywood idols
and in return
learnt the Hollywood art of kissing
Connie Francis style.
We carried their lipstick
on our collars proudly.
The Derum sisters wore Maidenform bras
and once in a while
they let you feel their Anglo-Indian parts
with your trembling desi Indian fingers.
When Tommy Derum retired
he did not go to England.
He opened a tuckshop

in our school
and dreamt of sending his daughters there,
but they broke
his great India peninsula heart.
One got pregnant and was hurriedly
married to the Muslim timber-merchant's boy.
Her father-in-law promptly exiled them
to Kashmir where all the besharam
filmwallahs shot their famous seduction scenes.
The other ran away
with a socialist Maharashtrian teacher
who had come to substitute
and we never heard from her again.
Tommy Derum now took up hunting
with a vengeance
and threw away
all his railway medals.
Famous, once, for stopping his engine
on the monarch's silver rupee,
he cleaned his house and disappeared . . .
and there were rumours
he had been mauled by a leopard
when he drunkenly
challenged the beast
as one of his daughters
defying it to change its Anglo-Indian spots.

On the other side

I had friends who lived in peths
that bore the names
of each day of the week,
but it was inauspicious
to enter "Wednesday" street on Wednesday
or "Tuesday" street on Tuesday.

You had to enter it
a day before or a day after
and imagine
what it would be tomorrow
or had been yesterday.

2394's most auspicious day
was the day the palkhi
carrying Vithoba's sanctified slippers
stretched its legs
below our balcony.
We all waited for that white horse
that walked dignifiedly
before the holy carriage.

For fifteen years I never missed that moment . . .

And Vithoba's invisible feet
now came dancing
once again into my tiny Los Angeles apartment.
They came through another level-crossing
in this--the country of white goddesses.
But my spots were Indian.
My feet were black and dusty and tired.
And I had lost that British soldier's baton.
I was lost, abandoned,
wandering in a strange palki
like those enfants du paradis,
trying to surprise myself
by creating an archive
of
my
self
dichotomized between three oppositions.

STRETCHED BETWEEN RAGA AND RAGE

Four fingers
stretched across mute sitar-strings;
the first

still plucks at the guru's Himalayan rage
at the lazy rendering of a note.
Shoulders brutally pressed
against the tree's uneven bark.
Pain, ascending and descending
for three nights and three days
before the fingers yielded
their right musical
birth of notes.
"Tradition must flow
from your finger-tips, disciple,
like the sap, flowers and birds
from this tree.
When a real musician plays
his genius grows
a sixth
unseen but heard
finger."

Still stretched across mute sitar-strings
the second

disturbs schoolmaster Father,
spilling ink all over
his rejected manuscripts.
Mother, fading and finally obliterated
just above the primus-stove,
the smell of chillies and spices
unbearable in the air.
Sister crouching but mysteriously serene
in a recent widowhood
among green bangles.

Brother, dipping an unsolicited lust
in the menstrual blood
of the neighbour's daughter
while shaving with his
borrowed razor blade.
"How can tradition flow
from the finger-tips, son,
when a repentent
blood, sweat and tear
amputates progressively
the next mocking
finger."

The third
stretched

recoils from the playful itch
in the center of her palm,
opening, like a snake's hood,
for the grasp
of calculated plenty,
while he talked on and on of
melody, mood, modesty, and
the authentic musician's
humble stance.
"Who cares about tradition, you fool.
To love and be loved
one should acquire the skill
of grasping and breaking
fingers
magnanimously."

Stretched between raga and rage
the fourth and fifth fingers
collapse:
sometimes for the musician
sometimes for the man.

BETWEEN THE RAMPARTS AND THE LOTUS

Between the ramparts and the lotus
the princess stands,
the harsh desert winds
soothed by the imagined koyal bird
singing of brooks and grass and flowers
stirring to life
somewhere inside seeds.

All over her transparent body
passion writhes.
Even the god of dance
lends her his hundredth reflection,
as she dances
for two bluebells
held in her lover's palms.

Poised over his gloved hand,
the silent hawk
carries in its cruel beak
a string of golden buttons.
They are for the princess
though the last is tinged
with the blood of his rival
dying somewhere in a marble room,
while the parrot chatters
on and on and on.
His impatient horse
tramples his saddle.
But ignoring the faithful beast
he offers his kingdom
as a ripe acre of fruit
to the meditating sanyasi.
"You go into a trance, my lord,
for your God, for your King.

But why not for a love
that goes beyond the honour
approved and sung about
in our epics?
Irrationality
has its place
in passion too!"

Snow breaks all over the mountains.
The sanyasi is unmoved.

He rides on till his horse drops dead
flinging him into her waiting arms.
The next day, with a lotus in his hand,
the king finds the fugitives
frozen beside a dead horse.

Wind and breath have reaped their harvest.
Of what use then are lotuses and ramparts?

IN MEMORY OF MY THREE LINE ANCESTORS

1

The flower bent towards me.
And like a fool I searched
for the trace of wind.

2

The snake raised its hood.
Mesmerized by a large raindrop
it bit itself, and died.

3

Every flower that you pluck
dies in your glossy hair.
And by your desire you add nothing.

4

The toys were made of mud.
But the little child never thought that
one day they would break.

5

Into this world the child comes
with open eyes and closed fists.
And yet . . . and yet . . .

6

Adding one more page to our histories
is not enough.
Leave a little space for legends.

7

The bird is sufficiently tamed.
It is the cage itself that cries for release:
"Ah, open room."

8

This cool and sparkling river
does not begin or end anywhere.
My friend, it just flows.

9

Between the world's anger and his grace
the holy man had spaced
only five of his ten begging fingers.

10

The world has always leaned on cripples.
But like the gods
we want to grow more limbs.

11

My feet are firmly on the ground.
But that bird, balanced on
a single branch, frightens me.

12

This year I shall not break
any of my fingers' nails
against memory.

13

Friend, even stolen sandals
protect the feet
of the thief.

14

To sit on an abandoned chair,
surely,
is no disgrace.

POOVAN MURUGESAN

BRICK CARRIERS

Double stacks of oven-red bricks balanced
on their heads, the women walk up
winding stairs like rope walkers in
slow, steady, cautious, bare-footed steps
to bestow the masons on the third floor
with work. The women all look alike,
young, slim-waisted and full breasted.
They hiss like cobras under the weight
of their loads on vein-covered bodies.

It'll be the best house in Shanti Nagar,
the owner beams. The view from the third floor
will span miles of groves, temples and theatres.
The sun would rise and set under his watchful eyes.
Good therapy for his triple-bypassed heart
and diet- and exercise-driven body for sure.
The world is but a large playground.

The supervisor sulks and complains of the
slow progress and the dull-witted help.
It's lunch time. The welders, masons,
carpenters and brick carriers walk off.
The bricks bask in the sun in jumbled heaps.

The women are eating a hurried lunch now,
rice and buttermilk with hot pickles
off aluminium pots, and breast feed
their babies. The older kids play
hide-and-seek in the empty skeleton of the
building, trading places with their mothers.
The world is but a large playground.

OVERNIGHT EXPRESS

Gliding out of the station
stealthily with only a wispy
green light as a guide
and with craned necks
sticking out to the last glimpses
of goodbyes and gopurams

Picking up steam on a
steamless engine, creaking,
clanking and thudding past
a kaleidoscope of views--
tile-roofed shacks, sewers,
dwarfy gods under banyan trees,
paddy fields, playgrounds,
empty lots, barren hills--

Stretching out in cramped
bunkers, we let loose
the mind cassette and
it runs faster than the train,
both forwards and backwards
Play it again life, I say
And it does

Heaving into the station
like a giant as it is,
the morn still in its buds,
but we have been up and ready
long before dawn
washed, brushed and packed
We spring up on our feet and
jump out in search of hellos
in a mayhem of vendors' babbles

And all set to rest for the day

ROBIN S NGANGOM

STREET LIFE

I've had decadence forced on me.
I let the rain waste my day,
and arriving at streets
which do not even know my name
I take off just like that,
waving to silhouettes, buying drinks for anyone,
even primates for whom I have no great regard,
hating the houses which warn of dogs
instead of welcoming me.

I allow the rain to whip desire's skin
after falling in lust with an assortment of women,
pursued by an obstinate heat,
and an old nose for adultery.
I covet the well-groomed bodies of vehicles
which thread through the eyes of the street,
before darting in and out of shops
interspersed like snares,
choosing clothes and shoes which
the manly discarded, and even perfumes
to throw off my real self.

Reaching barbers' hideouts
I spend hours there in a trade union
with men who deal in a hairy business,
watching fingers which pick noses
and teeth in disgusting turns.
I let them fondle my head for a long time.

Until I reached the blind alley of night
and I slowly uncovered myself
after observing shops murdered even before they were born,
and listening to the dead orchestra of the street.

Thus frustrated in all my sickening aims
I fall back on the luxury of a murky sadness,
having no thought for country or fellowmen.

THE STRANGE AFFAIR OF ROBIN S NGANGOM

Not once can I say
I am the captain
behind this wheel of fire.

I remember misplacing
a bronze bell
somewhere, sometime.
I left behind many untended hearths.
Rushing back I discovered
something had changed me.

I can say
I am this or that,
that I envied the character
of water and stone.
As a boy I was made a sheep,
now I am enchanted into a goat
that the townspeople
enjoy driving to the square
with a marigold garland
between my horns.

At twenty-four
I invited myself to Bohemia.
The kingdom of Art,
where people never grow old,
was my affable neighbour.

Moved by curiosity,
I found myself lingering
at backstages, where painted girls
and poor blind boys
came to do their parts.
In the evenings now,
I often mix my drink with despair.
Love, of course, made me entirely useless.

This is the story of my people.
We sowed suspicion in the fields.
Hatred sprang and razed the crops.
Now they go to gloating neighbours,
begging bowls in hand,
fingers pointed at each other.
Their incessant bickering
muffles all pity.

Our intentions are clear.
Slash and burn,
let fire erase all traces,
so that suspicion cannot write
our murderous history.
Somewhere inside the labyrinth
we met, locked horns, and
went our feuding ways.
Our past, we believe, is pristine
even as we reaped heads and took slaves.
When we re-write make-believe history
with malicious intent,
memory burns on a short fuse.

As boys return to Christmas,
escorted by hate and fear,
they take a circuitous route
to outwit an enemy
who will revel too much in the birth
of a merciful son. When these boys
reach home, their dreams will come
dressed in red.

II

Hands filled with love,
I touched your healing breasts.
Like the beaten-up past
scars appeared on your body.
I ask, who branded the moonskin of my love?
Who used you like a toy doll?
And my hands returned to me
stigmatised with guilt.

When I turn with a heavy heart
towards my flaming country,
the hills, woman, scream your name.
Soldiers with black scarves
like mime artists
turn them in seconds into shrouds.
For the trucks carrying
the appliances of death and devastation,
for the eager rescuer in his armoured car,
for the first visitor to the fabled homeland,
the graves of youths who died in turmoil
are the only milestones to the city.
But the hills lie draped in mist.
Instead of the musk of your being
I inhale the acrid smoke
of gelignite and pyres.

With cargoes of sand and mortar
Mammon came to inspect the city.
He cut down the remaining trees
and carried them away
like cadavers for dissection.
Morning papers like watered-down milk
sell the same bland items:
rape, extortion, ambushes, confessions,
embezzlement, vendetta, sales,
marriages, the usual.

There is talk on the streets,
in dark corners, in homes, words
caught by the ears of a restaurant.
We honour the unvarying certainty,
and pay routine homage to silence.
Everyone has correctly identified
the enemy of the people.
He wears a new face each morning,
and freedom is asking yourself
if you are free, day after sullen day.

III

Uprightness is not caressing anything publicly,
Integrity is not drinking,
Worthiness is contributing generously to a new faith
to buy guns for unleashing ideological horror,
Service is milking the state
and when you can lift no more
to start burgling each other
so that we can become paragons of thievery,
Chastity is forbidding our women
from exposing their legs,
Purity is not whispering
even a solitary word of love
so that it will not be mistaken
for unpardonable obscenity.

Nothing is certain:
oil
lentils
potatoes
food for babies
transport
the outside world.
Even
fire water and air
are slowly becoming commodities.

Patriotism is the need of the hour.
Patriotism is preaching secession
and mourning our merger with a nation,
patriotism is honouring martyrs
who died in confusion,
patriotism is declaring we should
preserve native customs and traditions,
our literature and performing arts,
and inflicting them on hapless peoples,
patriotism is admiring
the youth who fondles grenades,
patriotism is proclaiming all men are brothers
and secretly depriving my brother,
patriotism is playing the music of guns
to the child in the womb.

Stones speak, the hills speak
when we finally fall silent.
History, hunch-backed friend,
why do we fear you,
why do we love, hate, lie,
conceal, merely to enact you
in the coarse theatre of time?

IV

Today, I stand alone and acknowledge
the left-handed gift of a man
without a woman, and
a tiny land bound by fire.
Slave to an unexamined life
all that I've done
I've accomplished blindfolded:
love, fear, anger, and old despair.

The penitent year wears sackcloth
and pours ashen leaves on its head,
the sky's dress is in shreds.
When stars appear, they hold up the sky

like nuts and bolts so that
the firmament will not fall.
But we who sleep under these stars
will not let each other dream.
Love is also a forgotten word.
The ability to suffer, and the ability
to inflict the utmost hurt
on the person you love most,
this is how I've known it.

The festival of lights
happened during childhood.
Today, I'm again with widows
who cannot light lamps anymore.

Maybe the land is tired
of being suckled on blood,
maybe there is no peace
between the farmer and his fields,
maybe all men everywhere
are tired of being men,
maybe we have finally acknowledged death.

My love, how can I explain
that I abominate laws
which punish a man for his past,
only the night seems to understand
that we must bear it again.

When I am gone
I would leave you these:
a life without mirrors, and
the blue ode between pines
and the winter sky.

But where can one run from the homeland,
where can I flee from your love?
They have become pursuing prisons
which hold the man
with criminal words.

SUDHAKAR MARATHE

THE DROUGHT IS OVER

It rained at last.

At last after summerstretch
with everything like desiccated ghosts
waiting waiting for exorcism
by a thunderbolt

It rained at last in the night
it rained all day
it rained grey
till up and down became one
and the horizon was just
one armstretch away

Round eyed I watched
like some fish behind glasswall
till the hours streamed away

And at last with a sigh
scarcely loud
the shroud lifted
miles and miles of leaves
absolved of trackways in dust
breathed again.

Then drop by drop they lost their text.

Thus I received this blank book
to compose here and now.

It rained at last
as my gods had promised
as Frazer and Weston too had promised
(their ghosts can ride again now
the green man is moving)

Troubled no longer
(though scarcely wiser)
I may transcribe again
once again, at last
the rainbird's word.

EX TEMPORE

The sound of summer returned
In midmonsoon drought
With the gurgling of sunstilled doves.
Suddenly after, noonhaze grew
On rainfed grasstip
Bushfringe and treetop.
My hot pulse skipped a hop skip
And raced ahead to echo potter wasps.

Raindrenched fears dried out
And shivered in longer memory
Than threefaced alien gods

To a thumping earthquake dance
Of dry summer devils
Half buried in ex tempore native sands.

ANJUM HASAN

CURFEW

It was dark in the middle of the afternoon. We'd drawn
the curtains. The men who had swarmed through the garden
with scythes, jumping over the gate and the hedges
in their flapping, faded red shawls, had suddenly vanished.
Look, my grandfather said, they're burning the shop.
But he wouldn't let us see. Soon the sky was on fire.
We'd cried all afternoon, our chests were hollow.
How long can one be afraid?
It would be different to walk around the rooms
in that strange light and touch everything,
think it was a new game.
All our games grew out of surprises that the earth
and its light made on our bustling street.
But on that, most surprising of days,
our eyes burned, and the whole family moved together
from one room to another,
edging away from the eclipse of death.

I was nearly seven then
and we thought in our sadness (because the wind
blew winter away) that everything had changed--
because people had died and no one would ever forget them.
But I'm not thinking about that now.
Now our games are different
though I could go searching, even in the dull afternoon
when it's raining or going to rain
and there's no silence anywhere,
for a quiet, truthful man.
We're all tired of games.
It's better to be alone and let
every hand and face rub you down
and still know you've something left.
There's no other way of living
in this harsh city.

THE PREGNANT WOMAN

She feels the sun on the back of her neck
on blue September mornings when trucks raise the dust.
In the afternoon rain washes the streets
and later, the sky is washed too.
There's no returning, neither
any going away - with a baby inside her
she feels the truth of that.
It soothes her to watch the traffic and the clouds
and know how distant everything is. She isn't ill
but in the night her child lies awake inside her.
That's like being ill. Not knowing what your body
is thinking.

The other girls who watch her go, shining and tender
under her umbrella, fear she might trip on the pavement
and burst open and still not cry.
But she must be crying all the time.
Or waking up before dawn and
going slowly through the rooms,
waiting to be sick.

She's alone in this and doesn't want to talk much.
In winter the street will look different.
Everything will be quieter, harder
and the gutters choked with orange peels.
Her breasts ache already, thinking of that
immense winter.

Earlier there was a man and it was different.
They would make accidents happen
to each other's bodies, even on the street.
Now she's alone and doesn't care.

She doesn't want to know if the boys, the really young ones,
are staring hard at the whiteness of her face
in the clouded evening.

But the salesmen still look at her.
They always look, the salesmen.

RECOLLECTION

I want to have a fever now
and lie thinking in the dark.

Between the trees is the blue of the clouds
and the mountains. Lanterns go out in boats
on the lake, swinging in the trembling darkness.
The light's made of ice there,
in those forests that fill the sky.
No one remembers it any other way --
September, the roads cool, the quiet, wide sea
of the sky.
Even the boy who sits drinking and shivering,
glances at the sky and passes a hand over his mouth.
He remembers the feel of fingers
above his elbow and wants to lie down
and be washed away by the lovely evening.
Memories make the blood beat about his ears.

Downstairs, the long evening is on the walls.
It's enough to think of poor women returning home,
close as a single thought
in the blue darkness. There's enough silence
in the memory to fill the whole night.
But I press my cheek to sleep.

There's this boy now, sitting foolishly drunk
at his table.
Tomorrow I might have to comb my hair
and go into the blazing streets again.
I want to dream of him,
sitting there and shivering like that.

Even when the window is almost black
there's nothing to do, the house passes
quietly into the night.
The stars won't come out for a long time yet
and afterwards so many people will get drunk
at the same time. They'll all talk noisily
in the warm night before falling asleep.
The night's warm as blood.

But I could, lying here, pretend not to know
what he wants of me.
I could watch his eyes again in the dark,
and touch his elbow
and make him weep.

NIRANJAN MOHANTY

From KRISHNA

X

That afternoon, beneath the sequestered
grove as we sat, the colourful birds
refused to sing, for you were the song

that spread across the vale of their
emerald joy. You constituted the myth
of their salvation. All the birds

perched on the grove to drink
the nectar of your smile. Holding
my hands tenderly you asked:

"What is love?" Burying your face
on my lap, you waited for an answer,
when all the birds began to sing.

Abandoning all worries, you slept
on my lap until a nightbird warned:
"Hey, your husband is around."

My sadness deepens, every time
I think of history that would be
written in our absence.

Is love a sin? Is our together-
ness an unpardonable crime?
Many such questions as these

madden me much before
your unintended absence
maims me. Where's there

an answer to all my queries,
interrogations? Where's there
an end to my endless waiting?

Where's there an end to this
secret dripping of blood
or tears, when our eyes refuse

to see things as they are
and our hearts refuse to dream?
Only the heart's contrition

goes wild in the midnight.
I don't know the language
of time. I know not who I am.

I treasure chagrins within me,
cluttering the memoirs and memories
of what I had been doing all these

clamourous years. I burn myself
like clinker. I churn myself
to get closer to myself, I follow

my shadow, assuming it to be
myself. Nowhere did I get me.
Only when I listen to the sound

of your footsteps on the withered
leaves in the woods, and a linnet
sings the song of your arrival,

I come closer to myself. I become
myself once again, not knowing
exactly why. Do you know

the heart-healing art?
The secret clues of magic chart?
You always keep me alert.

What would people call me?
A lecher? A charmer of snakes
and women? A notorious wanderer?

A vagabond without a roof?
An incredible idiot?
A showy seducer? Master

of vulgarities? Incarnation
of lumpen cruelties? Caretaker
of boisterous banalities?

A believer in uncertain
certainties? I'm sure, histories
would be rewritten, and poets

won't choose to write on me
or on my sempiternal love.
Why should I care? Let them

do it as they like. But I shall
go on flowing, touching the vale
of your love only.

Everything would change:
the people, their language, manners,
houses, roads, schools, books, poems,

posters, faces, eyes and sighs.
The modes of living and dying.
The avenues of lynching and lying.

The cupboards of memories.
The wardrobes of dreams.
Even the metaphors, metonyms

in the poems would keep
themselves changing. Voices
and colours, vapours, prayers,

sinners, rivers, vices, voyages.
Words and their syntactical
orders. All must change.

What shall I change myself to?
My songs of love only would fly
like white pigeons in the sky.

I'm Krishna. Call me Lord
or a fraud. I won't mind.
I'm the guide, the guard,

the guardian of my love.
I'm the sun, the moon
on the forehead of my love.

I glitter in her bright bangles.
Spiralling myself like a snail's shell,
I sleep in her milk-white navel.

I'm her breath and whisper.
I'm the sum total of her sobs.
I'm the metaphor of her tears.

I'm the gardener of her dreams.
I'm the dream in her sleep.
I'm the gist of her silence and song.

How can I know where exactly
I belong? I wish I could prolong my love
before the world melts into a song.

HOSHANG MERCHANT

IN MEMORIAM
(For My Father 1917-1996)

Flesh
Shadows
Blood
Water
My body is a shadow
haunted by water
I live in a house
made of walls of water
The monsoon washes away the ire
of my fathers from Transoxiana
A trait I share with my lover
who has become my father

2

I took my lover's hand
at Fort
showing him my childhood haunts
I caught a hand
in a city of 4 million people
and cried Father!
And you? he said
He could not see
(Busy setting his great house in order)
He passed me by in a crowd
In a city of 4 million souls
My search ended
in rage

Two days later he died of old age

3

No my heart is a house
built of water
Shadows of a large bird fall
over a well
The bones are picked clean

All rage ends

4

And when he saw me
as one looks long
into the face of an ill-
-beloved son
just before death
I smiled the smile of my mother
with her eyes

Our mother is Death

5

Now I talk easy with the dead
in the house of dreams
as I never did in life
The telephone is dead
Father visits my house he's built
The one with bricks of fire
And it becomes a pyramid
I carry a canoe
into dry streets
We are pharaohs in a necropolis
I awake rejuvenated

6

I have washed my hands
off my own blood
My father's house
with mirrors by the sea
moulders in a bank vault
My father has left no legacy
The leaves fall
and grow into poetry

7

We have to make threes:
In his dreams
my father, he and I
bicycle to his childhood home
The streets like dreams are free

8

Now blocking the gate of history
is the justice of Naushirwan
And the ghost of Ardeshir
The script on the coins is dead
My lover and I join hands in the dust
And come up with father's earth

9

My earth is an earth I made
with one and a half syllables
I bypassed blood
Tears don't stain like rain
My house is a flood of poems
The dead receive no mail.

13 September 1996

LOVE-POEM

for Srinu

"My father's world is an answer to a riddle that is lost"
-Arvind Krishna Mehrotra.

1

It is not man
writes language
It is language writes the man

2

I need a wall
and I create
--on the rebound

3

Infinity has no centre
The self is centre
but the other is infinite

4

The moment the gopi thought:
Krishna dances with me alone
Krishna fled

5

Love is
the dance
in Infinity

6

Mohammed said:
Die before you die

7

A child loved me once
in the present
without memory
and without hope

8

This poem is the man written in that child's language.

POEM

Children they say are either turquoise or silver
The boys turquoise, the rest silver
Between turquoise and silver is the bachelor
Between conquistador and the Ancient Spirit is the Indian
Mother Mary forgive us our sins
Mother Mary forgive us our sacrifice
The ground is prepared The pilgrimage has started
The leader takes a head count
for the ascent to the Virgin of the Lakes
On the way down there will be one man less
He will lie under the ice
under the stones under a cross
There will be more springs the next thaw.

HUMAYUN AT ISFAHAN

In Shah Tahmasp's hunting lodge
far safer than at palace
or on his own throne
Joined by his host
only on hunts
Fed on venison
Bored to death
with boys he preferred to girls
(being emperor)
whose likenesses ended up
on the pleasure palace's walls
along with his: at Chehel Souten--
40 columns: 20 standing and 20 reflected
where the chroniclers missed nothing:
Not the sad expression
Not the longing for a home
made away from home
Not the shame
brought on an illustrious forbear's name
Not the hope for a son yet unborn
Not scorn for one's host
who having stayed home
instead of roamed
appeared slightly barbarian
though sprung from one's own stock . . .
INDIA:
became a state of mind
so did the empire
and finally the emperorhood
So was friendship. . .
Not god, not man, not killed prey
not unborn son doted on him
Isfahan like the world was refuge
and prison
And life vanished like wine-bubbles
poured by a willing boy-slave . . .

"LASHEEN" - I

I

The young Christ
has entered the Temple
He has overturned the tables
of the money-changers

He follows the footsteps
of one who changed a staff
into a serpent

The age of literacy is over
The age of miracles has begun again

II

The child born 16.10.1970
under the harvest moon of October
It was already 5:25
and night beginning
The mother lay on the floor
and rolled over
This bonny baby with a shock of hair
stepped out into the world
and laughed

It was the beginning of a long air

III

There is no such thing
as perfect silence
Give me silence
and I shall set to music
all I hear.

IV

In his palm
The forking serpent of the heart
The will to live separate
The lines to the moon
The line plunging down to life
The support-systems that make a single life possible
--Will my love die before me?

V

I have entered his mind:
It is filled with liquor fumes
In his head grass grows
burns and fills a room
The smoke is heady
and goes down to a heart
A hand raises a glass
and the fire glows with its ruby-heart

VI

Mr. Anais Nin!
Please record how
Henry's bike veered past
The husband's car
--whistling!

Please record how
Anais, fresh from orgasm
rose on the half-shell
of the typewriter cover
and said:
I shall pay back
I shall record.

VII

In the desert
life is airconditioned
Insurance is sold
against the simmoon
The camel is a mirage
And the caravan passes
There is no water to reflect a moon
--I bring a palmful of water
to bring home the moon

VIII

When a friend
cuts through the peninsula
I seek him out through crowds
Gifting him chicken, beer and bread.

IX

At the farm-house
young trees:
palm trees, fruit trees
I'm the young master
I may not drink or womanise
The old servants respect me
They wish all the trees to bear fruit for me.

X

I painted my vehicle
jet-black
I streak in the sun
berry-brown
I shall carry you to night
and beyond
And there life will bear fruit
as only it can.
I, the child, am only its vehicle.

DIONYSIUS' BASIN AT NYSA
(modern Kermanshahr, Iran)

1

The infant god
must've been born bearded
like the Eastern grain
from which he springs
again and again

2

They must've bathed
The young god in this basin
Born as he was from the swamps
(He must've needed quite a bit of cleaning)
And he must've dirtied himself again
in laughter and in horse-play

3

One day the play must've turned serious
He must've learnt you can't play around
with blood, tears, semen
By that time it would've been too late
to change
Tragedy was birthed for the east
As his half brother Apollo ruled the west

4

Theirs was a struggle unto death
of the lion and the gryphon
of Persia/Babylon and Greece
of Winter with Spring
On the grassy uplands
The struggle goes on
Devotees bathe themselves in this basin
The King of Kings honoured him

II

This morning I stepped out of the bath basin
The mirror showed me fat and bearded
and greying
I'm descended from the King of Anshan
I mirror him
He stares out at me from the American
bathroom mirror
With such sad eyes.

Last night
the rain seeped into my sleep
I couldn't sleep
thinking of the Gujarati letter

My life empty as the line
that loops into a circle
only to end in an arc
like the line in the letter
Empty like an abyss in space
Like some raindrop fallen to earth.

SPARROW

A sparrow came to hear me lecture
But she silenced me

I watched the sparrow
The children watched me

We three stood thus suspended
for a long time.

Keats and the sparrow on the window sill
The Japanese sparrows pecking among the poems' pebbles

Then she flew off
And sang on the window sill

I was no longer teacher
I had become that sparrow

Who taught me a few things.

SUKRITA PAUL KUMAR

THE BURDEN OF HISTORY

Crawling
on
wrinkles
of
grandfather oak
and
feeding on
grey specks
of
ancient tales,
ants
halt,
heavy
and
dull;

Birds
on the
dancing branches
take off lightly
into the
blue.

POEM

Each moment
I shed
my loneliness
as
the oaks shed
their leaves
perpetually
and
like the oaks
I feel
at once
the pangs
of
the new
sprouts.

JOY T.R.

SEASON'S GREETINGS (BOMBAY 1993)

New Years will come again;
but should this one?

* * *

Corpses
fresh from the crossfire of gods and goons
waited for Christmas to pass.
Whose's this beloved pyre left by the creek?
The burnt black of a doom
surveys our separate fates.
A charred stupor stood witness to stumps
without a whisper.

Why did our wisemen sit silent and watch
the tricks Sakuni played?

Our own wandering echoes
from smouldering fields are reborn
in each head
that fell to faithful bullets.

* * *

Fallen ramparts brooding over sea-storms;
empty caves breathing of foregone ghosts;
ancient hairy roots in matted metaphors --
how long to shore up the boast of a past?
The land thirsted for small daily dreams
that dried up in the fires of the plains.
The mighty mountains that guarded
a kingdom of clouds and winds
crumbled to the valley in ogrish rubble.

* * *

Despite the dawn again today
and birds breezing by my window,
despite the school bus with its crowd of laughter,
despite the same smile that smiled back,
I hate December.

It can't bring the messiah anymore
to whip them up in our temples, or
blow up our domes and steeples.

How can I write something pleasant?
New Year lies dismantled
between hungry guns impatient on either side.
Let me hang my soiled words
and set out to look for my brother's head
along the trail of tears on a pilgrimage.

THE SOUL OF AN EASEL

He was looking for a metaphor
in the cliché of blood
among stones,
    gods,
    scrolls,
    calls --
        all scattered across
                rivers and rites,
                peaks and prophecies
                of the land.

Suddenly,
the face,
steady and poised,
concentrates like an unsheathed sword;
strikes right,
left,
up,
down,
centre
ripping the ribcage open.

Pale is the initial scare of the strokes.

Then it oozes red
emptying veins,
baring bones.
The fissure widens
as the surge of muscles recedes.

The face collapses
like a spent hand into the sheath,
like a word that drops into silence.

And there's the apparition:
a soul stretched on an easel
in our own flesh,
in our own blood.

CHRIST'S DISSENT

If my mother was right,
she wanted to forget the shame
she shared during her temple days.
She never mentioned Christmas,
nor celebrated my birthday.

Carpenter by trade yet haunted by dreams,
I wandered through dark days,
checked with priests and prostitutes.
I listened to wild nights,
and whispered to mountains.

I had to know at last
a kiss could betray
and a cock's crow scare
the very brave at the fire.
Those three nails never reached
the source of my dreams.
But you embalmed the wounds
with '*Kenosis*'.*

Virgin wombs still bear Lord's grace
in homes cloistered by holy threads.
Maundy Thursdays bargain for blood,
Good Fridays still wash off hands:
Can you exorcise the mafia
from Vatican payrolls?
I was a fool to trust you
and be tabernacled by your guards.

Why to rake up a lost cause
Easter after Easter?
My blood still answers the guns
as justice dies Harijan or Naxal,
as love dies Hindu or Muslim.
But you're well in with the "two masters"
and own the Rock I can't break now.

Please
let me go
and hang myself
at least now.

* *Kenosis* is a Greek word adopted as a technical term into Christian theology to mean the elaborate doctrine built around the death of Jesus. It stands for his act of self-denying sacrifice to appease God, the Father and thereby to redeem humanity. Literally the word in Greek means self-emptying.

BIBHU PADHI

I WISH I KNEW YOUR NUMBER, NANDINI

Your letter reached me today.
Since the time it came to my hands,
I don't know how many times
my eyes have travelled over your words,
their shapes and sizes, their
slight tilt to the left or right.
I don't know how many times
I've tried to read
the faintest of your lines.
Since the time it reached me,
I haven't been what I used to be
except at that moment when
everyone looked away from us
and I drew you close to me.
There're now nine days
and several miles between us today.
Today, I don't know what to do
at these times, at these
terribly cruel times, except
writing a few odd lines.
I wish I knew your telephone number,
but I don't have it, and hence
these words that are seeped
in you and your love for me.
These words take their own
turns of pain, responding to
the pain behind all your words and lines,
behind your dream of these loving lines.
Nandini: Do you know that it is because
you love me so much that
I have been able to write
these absent-minded lines?

JAMES B. SWAIN

NO NAME

Around Cedarville, the hills won't hide you.
We are plain, rolling land; and the slight
Indian child who took my hand, led me
many a happy and depressed day
on past Cedar Creek, up past the graveyard
to Zunker's corner, then north to the old Zipsie
place; then further, even, with the cattle
blowing and splay-legged on the barnyard ice;
led finally to open heart surgery
and convalescence beginning with this Easter--
a child Sardar!
Dr. Hardeep Chopra,
my surgeon, spoke before surgery
of his Sikh mission group . . . I said nothing,
before or after surgery till now,
of my small, Sikh Jesus . . . Glory be to God
that such silences exist, even
around barn swallows. We know not what we do;
we know not what snail, snorting cow
or playing child create in us new heart for,
because we have no name for them and love them.

COLLECTOR

I live in a house decorated with gods
that come from the four corners of the world--
that were inserted into niches, mantels,
cross-roads, graves, temples, door-posts, trees,
to warm the cold wind and cool the hot wind
for the donor's sake and that of the tired traveller . . .
All of which images, now, incline
toward one another, bringing the eye
to the third and even fourth dimensional
balance of the mirrored shelves, lighting
the patinas peculiar to brass, stone and wood . . .
I also use the mirrors to adjust my tie . . .
What disappoints me about my collection
is that I have travelled far and wide
to find what, I am afraid,
many gift shops sell here now.
I'm one up on all these merchants, though . . .
Not one of mine was made for me to buy!
I bargained for used ones at a low price,
old ones--I never buy anything without an antiquarian
catalog--at a fabulously low price;
real ones bought for me by native agents
I could trust to keep my color quiet.
I live in a house decorated with gods
whose use I have myself authenticated.

MOLSHREE

SIDHARTHA

When you left us Sidhartha
I waited at the doorstep, wearing the bangles and the *tikka*
Symbols of my marriage to you
I waited so that you may return
Tempted even for a moment like the rest of us
Tempted to see me and to love me
Once more Sidhartha

And as the world ran to you
Thirsty for the flood of enlightenment
Under the Bodhi tree you left me
You left me then for good, for freedom, for wisdom
You shed your inhibitions and became the everknowing Buddha
The man with the halo, who millions followed
As I, Maya, the girl you had brought as a young and nervous bride
Waited for you

Now I am the soul of all those who wait for someone to come home
I grow old and bitter and curse you for accepting me, loving me
And leaving me
And then I die, not for Moksha
But to be reborn in penance
Again and again

WHAT PUSHED ME

After the mid day sleep
Sprawled semi conscious, with the fan going round and round
Above me
I contemplate suicide
And think of the many ways to die
Many tools even in a home
The bottle of phenyl lies innocently near the sink
The sleeping pills in drawers
Popping out of their packing

I think of those around me
Their faces become distorted
Closer and closer to mine
And I vomit
Vomit out undisgested little bits of my life
Words beating against my chest
The fear of losing my mind cell by cell
How they all raped me
One by one
They fed on my spirit

It comes back to me
The white structure and the tiny bit of light
Squeezing through the windows
The crayons and clay and hair strands of my doll
And his face lowering over me
His semen flooding out of him
As he pushed himself against me
And my mommy wasn't there
She never was
Even years later when I told her
She wasn't there

They wonder what pushed me
My home pushed me
The strong ties of the great Indian family pushed me
Non existent father figures pushed me
And the shrink thinks he can patch us up
Mommy, Daddy and me
And they'll pay him too
Their conscience money
They'll pay when I'm dead and white and ugly
and senselessly silent

The phenyl bottle will lie there
Where I heaved many times
And the pills will be swirling
Round and round

AAKANKSHA VIRKAR

OBLIVION

The music
snakes across the room
seducing the stoic furniture,

does it turn your eyes
to the sun,
    handcuffed in a tragic sky
to twisting leaves,
    maddened by the profound silence of trees
to the vase, on your table,
stretching sinuous and solitary
    battling through uncompromising space --
do you fumble, and wonder
and choke back shadows?

but your mind
is cluttered
by briefcases and papers
    and chronological memories

perhaps it is better
not to know
that the hollow sleeves of your shirts
jeer at your vulnerable flesh
that your newspaper
    shivers in your hands,

dreaming of flight and unknown languages
that your coffee
    steams savagely,
swearing charred revenge

perhaps it is better
for you.

SONJOY DUTTA-ROY

MIRRORS, WATERS AND WALLS

Like a mirror
you reflect me back to myself,
stay like a wall
behind, between, opaque
from which I bounce
back into my solitary shape.

Perhaps you could say the same
about me.

We play a game of multiple mirrors
convex, concave, plain,
with shapes that make us cry
and laugh at our own
contortions, distortions, acrobatics.

You once said that I was like the deep waters
reflecting your face so beautifully
that you plunged into me and lost yourself,
only to realise
that I washed you back to the shore
back to you.

Changed, or the same?

I think I have changed,
learnt to swim in the deep sea of your being
where I search for the beauty
you reflect on my face,
your beauty hidden in the grotto
the waters carry me into
wave by trembling wave.

Why is it
that after the waves recede and waters dry
leaving sand and salt on the skin
we solidify into mirrors and walls
waiting for the touch,
the right touch,
to make them melt again
into a fluid translucent transparency?

THE BALL AND THE STONES

Our playground
was a secret
hidden in the ruins
of an abandoned mansion's
abandon.
We played
with seven flat stones
and a ball.
The stones built pillars
the ball destroyed.
The teams changed roles
till
clocks at homes chimed
'Homework time'.

A team
of geologists and historians
dated and deciphered
the rocks in the ruins.
Behind a boulder
unnoticed
lay seven flat stones,
a torn ball.

STEPHEN GILL

LAST DANCE

Beyond fragrant bounds
of contentment
nations glimpse new lands
to grow golden crops
of their greed.
Gypsy clouds shall witness
the dawn of that growth
that strengthens
in the murky marshes
of self-glory.

Arrival of those days
shall be under
the shades of ruthless locusts.
The fetters
which have been cranking
for centuries
providing music for ordered life
shall free humans to fly
to crash in the void of eternity.

Science would write
the last chapter
and religious bigotry
shall provide the title
to the last dance
on the hills
inhabited by the children
of racial insanity.
The clouds shall rage
to bear witness.

ABSENCE

I breathe
in your memory's lonesome cave
glutted with tears
dropped from the candle
to mourn your absence.

I am hungry here
feed me with your warmth.
I wish you were beside me
under the endless canopy
stretched by the unfriendly night.

Outside,
the land slumbers
under the passionless embrace
of the frigid flurries.
Night,
a nameless rumpled road,
watches the ghost-like winds
breaking my soul-crushing monotony.

Where is that goddess
whose river of emotions
runs still
under the rocks of empty night?

Where are those lips
wine-like tempting
which used to solace me?
I am thirsty here
in this snake-like tunnel.
Offer me the water
that flows from your heart.

SOLITARY VISITOR

Lone visitor to my lonesome home
tonight was your face again.
Like fallen leaves in autumn
it makes its abode
in my yard again.

Like a boat
it tosses on dark waters
of my dreary life.
I wish
someone could lead
to cast your memory
upon my sea of forgetfulness!

There is something strange
about your face
I can discern it
even with eyes closed.

A pilgrim,
it keeps returning
like the stars breaking
on midnight lakes.

A melody
that I die to hear
from my window of dismay
when down goes the sun
is your face.

C. MANJULA

THE SWING

What a snivelling old swing it is.
A withering wooden chunk
Dangling dangerously,
Cramped by a crumbling cord on one end
And an iron rod on the other.
A miracle--it has remained intact all these years,
With the rod sick of the cord
The cord tired of the rod
And both resentful
Of the plank that prolongs the pact.
With each sway it throbs with discord.
Why should it stay at all?
Am I to demolish this doomed existence
Or wait for doomsday to catch up?

MARK MAHEMOFF

TRASH AND TREASURE

An excitement moves between us,
something that makes you keep your distance
yet distance strengthens it,
a bond not felt before,
friendly and sexual,
devoid of romance.
You say, "Sometimes I want to give you many hugs."
She smiles and says nothing
but that's of no concern
and we keep walking past Darlinghurst cafes,
through the veins of Kings Cross,
amongst filth and tourists,
tragedy and celebration:
a dangerous exuberance
best left unanalysed.
From nowhere an Indian restaurant appears
like so many places around here
that start up, fail
and are gutted like fish.
With her back to the window
a woman wrapped in cloth
sits on her legs
and hugs a sitar.
The only flesh exposed
is a foot as smooth as fudge:
a total revelation
on this night of trash and treasure.

POEM FOR D.L.

You say,
"I never get bored of you,"
and my neglected heart
heats up like a stove.
I say,
"You're a nut!"
and you laugh maniacally
confirming my statement.
You're the disruption
I can't do without,
the Leo that trips up
my Capricorn heels.
Sometimes I wish you'd leave me
to the eloquence of silence.
Or maybe we could turn
our sorrows to confetti
and throw it in the air
and never stop smiling.

PRIYADARSHI PATNAIK

WORDS

I

There was a man who used a
lot of words.

He went in search of words and
words came in search of him
and he used up
his life searching
and being searched
and came a time
when he could not understand
them and they
could not understand him
and he stopped to
think and found he did
not know what to
do with words

II

he left with his words and
started and they
made a
trail behind
him where ever he
went and he
walked till he
could walk no
more and sat down to
think and found he
had to begin again

III

he began
by giving away his words
for he found words
he did not know how
to use
did not use
until he had only a handful

IV

and saw
he could say all
that could be said
all he had to say
with them

V

then he did not need any more

BLUE RAIN

I stand against a blue rain
a blue wall
cobalt blue
against my green door
my red floor.
If I walk out
I will walk into it
and be gone just
like that.

How is it possible that
you wake up in the
middle of the night
and stand against a
blue rain
like a still blue knife
cutting memory from
you nonchalantly without
a sound!

NIRMALA PILLAI

BEAUTY PARLOUR

The smell of sweaty perfume,
dusty powder hung in the air.
The green light burning to hold
the aging desperation of their faces.
I glowed in fragile perfection
in the furtive fires of time's imperfections
my thoughtless youth sniggering
at their flaccid skin puckering to hold
the cream and powder in.
Running my hand in the silk cascade
of black hair mocking their effort
after a *henna* bath, fluffed out
to let the light filter in,
showing their white scanty undergrowth.

They crawled a cruel lullaby
on my skin, grooved a curse
upon its fairness with dark roots
the inheritance of our Vanity --
Desperation drove my hours
the hungry suicides of my reasons
came up with the sands of time
fishing out fresh young smiles
of faces waiting in the wings.

JOHN OLIVER PERRY

A SURVEY OF RECENT POETRY FROM RUPA AND OTHERS

Certainly it was not mainly for prestige, as Oxford's Rukun Advani used to claim, that the Rupa and Indus new poetry series (somehow related) have increased in a few years from a trickle to comparatively a flood. Someone is making commercially viable editorial decisions. A few Rupa poets carry already established reputations, like Bibhu Padhi, whose quietly even-toned *A Wound Elsewhere* (1992) followed an earlier Indus volume, *Going to the Temple* (1988), or Sitakant Mahapatra, the prize-winning Oriyan poet, appearing in mostly his own English versions, some by Jayanta Mahapatra, in Rupa's *The Death of Krishna* (1992). Anna Sujatha Mathai (*The Attic of Night*, 1991) had been publishing for quite a while, and Ashok Mahajan (*Uniformly Crazy*, 1993) had offered rather slight *Goan Vignettes* in a single 1986 experiment by Oxford, while Sanjiv Bhatla (*Haiku, My Friend*, 1993) has moved over from Disha (*Looking Back*, 1990).

Almost all the others are new to publishing or at most have had only a previous thin volume self-published, perhaps through P. Lal's poet-subsidized Writers Workshop. By now two or three of these budding talents--Tabish Khair, Makarand Paranjape, and Ranjit Hoskote (as co-translator)--have issued their second volumes under the same label. And Paranjape has also done *An Anthology of New Indian English poetry* (1993), heavily drawing on the Rupa series and providing a much needed supplement to his tradition-oriented, archaically revivalist historical anthology for Macmillan (1992).

The main impetus for wondering who makes Rupa-Indus' commercially viable editorial decisions and on what terms is that they are quite uneven, indeed shockingly capricious. Several of the Rupa volumes sport on their back covers measured praise from

first-class poets like Nissim Ezekiel, Keki Daruwalla, Jayanta Mahapatra, graciously encouraging the young to challenge their aging reputations and thus to develop further a distinguished and distinctive contemporary tradition of Indian English poetry. At least these paternalistic pats on the back do not fall on the worst of the new books offered for review. For one example, Shalini Gupta's *The Secret Room* (Indus, 1993) is unrelievedly puerile in rhyming and adolescent in feeling, perhaps because "she began writing serious verse in 1988." Another immature poet, Pradip N. Khandwalla, seems oblivious to crucial contemporary meanings of his title, *Out* (1994), as well as of his self-chosen style of minimalism. Professor Krishna Rayan graces that book by explaining "the possibilities [in minimalist form] either of a rich density or of a pregnant spareness of utterance" and the way such verbal tidbits become grouped to gain significance. None of these high aims is achieved here, however, not even in the final, tritely conceived hyperbolic paradox chosen by Rayan: "Many feet / tread water / only a few leave prints." Amit Jayaram's good political intentions merit praise, but *A Temple in Ayodhya and other poems* (1993) are tinsel-eared jingles drowning in clichés. Are there many people eager for the shallowly liberal social, moral and religious pieties rehearsed there, or is it merely a publisher's political gesture or low-cost experiment?

Configurations (1993), by Rachna Joshi, shows how a Syracuse University (USA) M.A. in creative writing and work at a Canadian literary magazine can help to evolve some sensible ideas about poetry and its making. The style is simple, plain enough for homely familiar subjects. She says that her typically middle-class Indian metropolitan up-bringing produced an "urbane, mixed-up" sensibility, which perhaps explains why all the natural scenery seems esoteric, as if glimpsed from a touring car. The usual urban alienation and loneliness problems of an immigrant, however, rarely get attached to particularized American scenes. Very soon the stylistic plainness becomes soporific, sluggish, flatly abstract, the thoughtlessly lineated prosings of a quite ordinary mind: "Born with a far-reaching mind, / she was taunted for her lack of

mediocrity. / I can almost visualize the gathering of forces--the/patriarchal trolls, / pushing her into / the nightmare of orthodoxy, the rapacity / of custom. // Someone said that we repeat the patterns of our parents / when we choose our lovers", and so on ("Recidivist," 22). When she asks herself, "What can I say?" we are led to wonder whether she has anything to show us. "These commonplaces rise again and again / the mundane phoenixes of my life" ("The Bus--The Mind," 28). With occasionally long, rarely awkward rhymeless lines Rachna Joshi, thankfully, avoids a pretentious style that a less knowledgeable writer might try in order to offset the lack of precise or profound or passionately felt or otherwise interesting or intellectual experience.

Direct descriptions--of Sunday afternoons, moonlit nights, snowfall, oppressive city streets--comprise the strongest passages of Shanta Acharya's overly assertive *Not This, Not That* (1994). But, as the Upanishadic title proclaims, she also vainly aims to be philosophically suggestive, if not genuinely "mystic." Once again the most conventional Indian intellectual's ideas of mysticism are presumed sufficient to make a culturally valued and valid poetry. Repeatedly, sometimes with environmentalist concerns, Acharya invokes wind--among trees, flowers and, of course the sun--together with silence and then, pretentiously, she approaches Nirvana. In a brief poem so entitled--"At the centre / transcendence / vortex of death / nirvana."--the ending is an all too rare, sharply critical remark: "Critics / repose at the periphery, / always at a safe distance; / a strange catharsis / simulating nirvana." Naive and complacent--"Peace is all I aspire to"--brief hymns, prayers and sketchy meditations praise natural (i.e., feminine?) creativity "unravelling / with beauty / life's mystery" while men, a generalized easy mark, remain unaware "gorillas in cages."

According to Acharya's purportedly non-Western, transcendentalist aesthetic, "Under our very different sun . . . the sacred realm of art" is "no longer sacrosanct;" instead, it is a "vulnerable plot of green" (more environmentalism?) "crisscrossed by the paths of haunted minds / frantic to defend / their humanity

through art, / by means of a means, / the green season of the mind." With such motivations her poetic results are predictably "mundane." The later anecdotes, usually set in India, feel trite and heavily assertive because of the crassly clichéd expressions. Questions generated from situations are shaped so as to predetermine the answers. "Guilty of living her little, selfish life / and not knowing how *exactly* to help and share," (emphasis added), she defensively recognizes in the next poem that "Artists may not be able to change the world, but they have the potential to transform the thoughts and actions of people around them; redeeming the gift of life, the gift of freedom, the gift of thought and free speech, gifts that we have taken for granted." (Where would end-linings create poetry here?) These words conclude the next to last poem, without anywhere a hint of the proclaimed powers "to transform." In those circumstances, silence may well be the preferred means to bliss.

Nowadays most poets--or their editors--also know that the privileged first (or second or final) poem conventionally is about making poems or about art or about something else indicative of the writer's aims--aesthetic, philosophical, poetical--which should therefore guide the canny reader. Except that often a poet aspires to models neither achieved or approached. The young journalist poet in *Gemini II*, C.P. Surendran, for example, initially invokes Wallace Stevens in "Sunday Morning", though modestly asserting his disclaimers, his differences: "This bed. Perhaps this bed is all." Indeed, a little like Stevens, the subsequent work is sometimes intricate and 'curious,' in both active and passive senses, with strong single images condensing complex feelings, as in "Primary Colour": "Peregrine the night / Releases all from / Ambivalent wings / Defines motion / And stillness / By intent; assumes / Blindness and rules: / An empire of dispensed justice / Not perhaps free from / Blood, but equal like / Iron is hard or stone / Looks for shape. / Nothing arrests its sway / Born of flight, / Recondite purpose."

However, on the next page a "Lazarus" poem merely recounts, more or less narratively (with gratuitous movie-making imagery), how a revived (spiritually reborn? newly aware and supposedly strengthened?) idealistic dreamer "joylessly surrendered himself to murder" and other such evils. He does so because it became obvious to him that "Blood counted for nothing here. . . . He could not err / And be condemned to another's forgiveness." The poem concludes, rather tritely: "When it was time, he wore dark glasses / and became one with the crowd. / No one guessed he was from the dead." Though assuredly what is revealed through the Lazarus image is not simple, neither is it as open-ended and provocative, as Stevens-like, as the previous poem. There the fervent search for purpose is enriched by and contributes to a similar theme in at least three other poems, "Legacy," "Harmony" (one of the several "Saturday" poems), and "Dire".

Surendran's demanding and insistent riddling quality is overtly asserted and its curious motive exposed in "Renunciation II: The King Thing In Dream," which begins, "White ruins blazing? or just desert designs?" Then even more enigmatically, "From a huddle of voices, the King, a Bedouin, / Of tin, pleads guilty [of having alien thoughts? of just being himself, king, nomad, a human being?] of the peace of the hills, / Not of the shrifting dunes." (Surendran commands attention to each word with that unexpected, crucial--not merely playful--shift to "shrifting.") Like a jar in Tennessee, but more dream-like, the protagonist receives a shrift astounding for tin, a mercy "almost not there, and always / in riddles."

> Surrounded by iron, wheels, coiled spring, dust
> He surrenders to the spirit of the metal, its iron skills,
> And exacts from the difficult silence
> A promise in passing: rust.

That final rhyming word emphasizes how the iron things of this world, though necessary and efficient, are temporary, passing, like water, called earlier, "flowing / Root of all ills," whereas "such a thing / As tin!" (non-rusting? resistant to water?) can gain mercy "always" from ("of") sacred earthly places, whether distant

peaceful hills or the shifting sands of here and now. Somehow, therefore, in this dream narrative, mercifully, "tin," with its unchanging quality, has gained, been transformed into, a transcendent virtue. The poem challenges us to decide what, in ordinary language, is the Bedouin king's (and thus perhaps our) "tin"; certainly it is not merely human sinfulness nor the 1920s slang word for money!

Other poems use riddling phrases mainly or more simply to represent a muddled, stricken and thinly strained stream of consciousness, as in "Saturday Poems--War." A good example is "Renunciation," which follows a heavy consumer of alcohol from a lonely "Breakfast for one. Beer and wine" through lunch with "My cat, Your snapshot and me. Secret rum / In mint tea" to "Dinner . . . a feat / In rectitude. Water and Whiskey." followed, rather enigmatically, by "No despair. // A silver of music around the ankles. / Endless retreat of inaccessible feet." This final snapshot of a dancing traditional woman remains elusive, but the poem, like several others reflecting on urban(e) sex or being/getting old or the like common eventualities of life, finally releases its withheld meanings more easily than do Surendran's most thought-provoking work. Perhaps some of the lesser poems will repay further re-reading, but most, once penetrated, will not, for they give closed accounts of, not insightful probing inquiries into, the torments of urban loneliness. Those limited achievements, however, should not detract from the solid, serious and satisfying challenges that a large handful of other finely wrought poems offer and from the great promise these project.

Jaithirth Rao appears first in *Gemini II*, perhaps because of seniority; the 53 pages of his poems (versus only 36 of Surendran's) are easier, looser, less promising. The opening keynote poem, provocatively entitled "Of Semi-Domestic Animals," dutifully signals multiple ironies: "I want to write a poem / Tight as a porcupine / Lonely as a lizard / Inspiring as a grasshopper. / Let me try." The "grasshopper" simile must be highly ironic, yet appropriately appreciative of this poet's rejection

of heavy sublimity. Nevertheless, the next stand-alone line is oppressively portentous: "That was before the rains came." Midway in this short poem he asserts, "The time for sonnets and / even epigrams is / over. / . . . There are a thousand / languages / perched on lonely knees." ("Even" is often a futile intensifier for flabby phrasing.) Dependably a J. Alfred Prufrock "loneliness" provides the key motif and tone, and, as in this poem, clichéd thoughts and pastiche expressions abound. Random lineation increases our boredom with the speaker's Eliot-echoing expression of ennui: "I have seen souls / flickering on tired / balconies." Unimaginatively, inspiring more doubts, he ends: "My poem is the / silence / that hangs in the air / between the two of us." Since silence is so repetitively invoked --"Between menstrual moons . . . we discover, rediscover / the warmth of lips, hands / and soft wounds of silence" seems a particularly gratuitous instance--we must wonder again why so unnecessarily it has been broken. "Cobra-like we shed our skins and wander naked mute on an endless plain" seems to mean only that, as "half-legal aliens," they gave up their Brahmin heritage in "the Borough of Manhattan" ("A Distant Person").

Paralleling the sense of purposelessness that motivates the pervasively lugubrious tone and a set of equally aimless, fatiguing sexual adventures are the poet's vain stretches for verbal excitement: "incestuous water-taps," "idolated membranes of three continents" and the like forced phrasings fail to make us look hard and deep for meanings as the curious choice of "shrifting sands" does in Rao's contrasting "twin," Surendran. More commonly the expression is as pale as the thought, so that line-endings have no function: "If you're constantly afflicted by [age-old skin problems] in a distant land, if each follicle of hair that broods upon your arm reaches back to the aimless rhymes of some warped grandsire . . . if such is the fate of your skin, then even genuine heartfelt smiles from strangers . . . leave you not warm, not cool[,] merely tepid" ("Exile," the first of many such complaints about a self-chosen life away from home, yet he cannot answer the crass question, "Why did you go away?"). Problems of return, e.g., in "Homecoming I

and II" among others, are somewhat more incisively investigated, but the convenient trick of fobbing off explanation with the word "silence" persists and diminishes the whole effort immensely. Back in the precincts of his abandoned heritage, "a land of indifference," a bittersweet aftertaste remains that u'.imately "disappear[s] into crevices of silence / sweat and silhouettes"--a quite unsatisfying concluding melange, a modernist gesture without much imagistic suggestiveness.

The next poem ("October 1988") begins, "Beyond countries of silence [again!?] / we return / in search of autumn caprice," but ends wishing to worship "Govinda, Protector of men," so that the prayer "Lord, refuse us not" seems a fitting and affecting simplicity. Similarly, later invocations of "The Seven Holy Cities," of "A Visit to Puri," of Ashoka in "The Gift of Mura," and "For Mamalla's Gods," despite feeling isolated from the decadent sensibility exhibited elsewhere, have a relaxed charm.

Interest in poems need not be a function of complexity, difficulty or obscurity, as in Surendran's, but simplicity must be earned and right for the occasion. Rao's experience, insofar as it has been indifferently articulated here, is, however, quite indistinguishable from many others' and, for that reason, will attract only readers looking for a comfortable mirror of their banal thoughts. His "twin," however, may establish a significant new voice in the Indian poetry scene, if he can produce enough finished work to gain our confidence and attention.

MAKARAND PARANJAPE

THE HOLY TONGUE: AN APPRECIATION OF K.SATCHIDANANDAN'S POETRY

K. Satchidanandan, *Summer Rain: Three Decades of Poetry*. New Delhi: Nirala Publications, 1995. 188 pp.

About twenty years back Satchidanandan wrote a poem, "On Friends". The gist of the poem is that enemies are better than friends. Enemies, because you expect nothing from them, never let you down. Friends, on the other hand, can be especially dangerous: "friends look for sentiment in your poetry, enemies / grasp only the essence. Friends damage your poems by / dissections and discoveries of what exists not. Enemies, on the contrary, do not see even what you have moderately / meant, thus leaving the poem to survive intact."

(Un)Fortunately, I am both a friend of Sachi's and a fellow-poet, so I am well aware of the risk I undertake in celebrating the arrival of his selected poems in English translation. But, of course, poetry is not meant to be taken literally, but understood in its right context, with a considerable degree of sympathy. What the above-quoted poem, then, means is that it is better to be an open enemy than to pretend to be a friend. No doubt, I would never have agreed to do this review if my friendship were a mere pretense.

The fact is that Sachi is not only one of India's most versatile and talented contemporary poets but a very genuine, affable, and unassuming person--in short, a really fine human being. Though I don't know Malayalam and therefore read his poems only in English translation, I have heard him read them in the original and have some idea of their power and appeal. I am certain that in the quality and seriousness of his poetic endeavour, in his sustained and continuous engagement with his art, in his range of subjects and concerns, and in his use of contemporary idioms and themes, Sachi is one of India's most significant and gifted living poets.

As such, *Summer Rain* is a landmark publication. It includes 115 poems, the earliest of which was published in 1967 and the latest in 1993. During this period Sachi published over ten collection of his poems in Malayalam, besides six volumes of criticism. Sachi has also translated twelve volumes of European, Asian, African, and Latin American poetry into Malayalam. Widely travelled, he is well-acquainted with international trends in arts and letters, and thus has a repertoire which would be the envy of any contemporary poet. He was also active in several movements, both cultural and social, in Kerala. Editing journals, teaching, performing, championing literary and political causes--all of these have been a part of his daily life as an organic intellectual. For some years now, Sachi has been the editor of the Sahitya Akademi's English bimonthly, *Indian Literature*.

Many of Sachi's more ambitious poems in Malayalam are untranslatable. He has tried to remap the entire culture of the state, writing about its ethos, mythos, geography, history, and vegetation. Along with other poets such as Kadammanitta, Sachi has experimented with folk forms, trying to break free from the shackles of high-brow poetry. Though many of these poems are not included in *Summer Rain*, this collection nevertheless is reasonably comprehensive and representative. It affords an opportunity to a wider audience in India and abroad to read and enjoy Sachi's work. To a younger compatriot poet such as myself it is compulsory reading because it allows my poetry to be fertilized and enriched by the vitality of a senior poet writing in another Indian language.

There are several noteworthy features in Sachi's poetry but, for want of space, I shall emphasize only a few here. To begin with, one of the most astonishing and remarkable things about Sachi's poetry is just how cosmopolitan it is. Though he is rooted in linguistic and cultural traditions of his own state, the range of references in his poetry is incredibly wide. From Latin America to Africa, from Eastern Europe to Mongolia, from ancient India to modern China, Sachi's poetry embraces several worlds of experience. As an example, I would like to quote "The Night Visitor," a poem dedicated to Josip Osti, a Serbian poet:

Waking up I discover in my room
A poplar leaf packed in silver
By Trebevic's winter,
A Persian wine cup with a wave of
River Miljacka red with spring-fever,
A few coins with Austrian seal
Wrapped in a Turkish scarf
Embroidered with a couplet on love,
The model of a Minar made of children's bones
Placed on a marble tray with swastika sign,
A young Christ imprinted on a piece of
Red flag soaked in tears,
Black strands of hairs on the bedsheet
Smelling of cherry blossoms
And the still-warm breath of someone
Brimming with the fragrance of pines.
Who was the night-visitor?
Sarajevo. (141-142)

Poplar leaves, Trebevic winters, Persian wine cups, the Miljacka river, Austrian coins, Turkish scarves, eastern *minars*, Nazi swastikas, crucified Christs, red flags, cherry blossoms, and the fragrance of pines--all these and much more inhabit Sachi's poetry. The order of the images is significant. Despite the brutal violence of our times in which *minars* are made with the bones of innocent, utterly blameless children who are crucified in war, the poem ends on a note of optimism, even romance, with the "still-warm breath of someone/ Brimming with the fragrance of pines."

This brings me to the second important feature of Sachi's poems. Though there is in his art an acute awareness of the fallen, brutal, and bloody nature of man, there is always a hope of regeneration. The poems are soaked in blood, but still somewhere a flower blooms. Perhaps, the most powerful exposition of this is the title of the poem itself. Written for Kim Chi-Hai, a Korean writer sentenced to death, written against the background of communal riots in Tellichery, the suicides and murders of fellow poets, and the threat to the Silent Valley forests, this poem is a cry of anguish from the depths of the poet's soul:

My life has been like a river of drifting corpses,
--one dead for every tide.
I was born in the land of cannibals,
in the generation of fratricides. (135)

And yet, the poem is transformed into a magnificent prayer, an incantatory invocation of peace, glory, and liberty:

Peace to the bells of blood that tolled in
the slaughter houses
in the name of gods, races and nations.
Peace to the great tree of the martyrs on which
the sphinx of tyranny flourishes, head down,
on the sacrificial blood.
Peace to the maidens that sought love's
expiation in death.
Peace to the sacrificial chambers of the mighty
revolutions
whose dreams of the New Man only bred new gods.
Glory to the irresistible life that sees
the hopeful flame of action
beyond suicides and renunciations.
Glory to the restless hands of the brave of earth
that knead the dough, break the mountains
and scatter chains.
Liberty to the men blind with lust and lonely with
egotism!
Liberty to the woman abandoned and
unsupported!
Liberty to the children denied milk and affection!
Liberty to the human throng tied to the sacrificial
post of the God of Greed!
Welcome, welcome to the ceaseless rains of wrath
that with the imperfect's sword of light
strikes again and again the dragons of tyranny
and the devils of injustice! (138)

This powerful benediction sums up, as it were, Sachi's entire poetic credo. We may express its central tenets as follows. 1) Violence, cruelty, injustice, and human oppression are not to be overlooked or denied: they are very much a part of our daily lives. 2) Much of

the horrors unleashed by man upon man are a result of human greed, selfishness, and desire to dominate. 3) In the pursuit of power, the pristine purity of beliefs, dogmas, and religions--both traditional and modern, both sacred and secular--is distorted, degraded, and destroyed. 4) There is absolutely no excuse, no justification for human barbarity, regardless of which ideology or belief-system is used to legitimate it. 5) Human suffering or well-being is the ultimate test and standard, the sole measure of determining the validity of any political, social, or ideological system. 6) The poet's allegiance is to truth and compassion, to a moral force which does not decay regardless of the extent to human brutality. 7) Poetry is an instrument of peace and liberty, upholding human dignity and justice whenever and wherever they are violated.

This brings me to the third important feature of Sachi's poetry, the issue of political commitment. Sachi came into national prominence for opposing the Emergency. He wrote powerful poems like "The Tree of Tongues," "Who is the Enemy?" and "Resurrection," all of which are included in this collection. Of these poems, "The Tree of Tongues" is the most graphic and arresting. A "good" goddess, obviously modelled on Indira Gandhi, demands the tongues of all her followers in sacrifice. She wants to silence all voices, all speech. But one tongue grows long and sprouts. The goddess is angry. She wants to know whose tongue it is that has dared to defy her ban. It is the tongue of Thiruvarangan, the first bard of Kerala, whose successors all the modern poets are. This tongue, which has grown into a tree, wishes to remind the goddess of her own genealogy, to awaken her conscience:

> "The good goddess too
> was flowered in that song.
> If the minstrel's race goes extinct
> Who is there to sing the song?
> If there is no tongue to sing
> How will the folks know the truth?
> If the truth is not known at all,
> How will the land wake up to light? . . ."(112-113)

But the goddess is unmoved. She takes out a sword to strike down the tree of tongues, to cut off its very root. But where she cut:

> A thousand leaves of tongues unfurled
> The buried truths gleamed on each leaf
> And the tree of tongues spread out wide
> And in the land where it flowered
> The folks invoked the sacred name
> "O Tongue, the Holy Tongue, Thirunavaya!" (113)

Like the ancient, itinerant bard, the modern poet too awakens households, quickening their comatose consciences to life. The mouthless hill, India itself, bursts into tongues. Ultimately, for Sachi, the word is supreme; it is truly *akshara*, the indestructible.

Sachi's commitment to democratic and egalitarian values made him much more than a fellow traveller in his younger days: he was then known as a poet of the left, a poet with an avowed revolutionary commitment. Yet he was never narrowly sectarian, never insensitive to alternative traditions including spirituality. Never fanatical in his outlook, he did not hesitate to attack the "Revolutionary Machine" in a poem by the same title. In this poem, an "intellectual comrade" turns into a monster with cogs instead of teeth, receivers in place of ears, a piston for a nose, and so on:

> He began hating all those things
> supposed beautiful on earth;
> the Valmiki *Ramayana, the Book of Job*,
> the Japanese Haiku, Jataka Tales,
> Shakespeare's dramas, Lorca, Van Gogh,
> *Ajanta, ananda bhairavi*, folk songs,
> white horses, green parrots, wild roses. (106)

And all these things the poet can never renounce, even in the name of revolution.

What I wish to suggest is that Sachi's political philosophy has been eclectic rather than dogmatic. Though he is an out and out humanist, he is also attracted by the world's spiritual traditions, particularly Buddhism. In his poem on "Indian Lenin," he likens

the great Russian revolutionary to a Bodhisattva:

> . . . I read in those eyes
> compassion, joy, brotherhood, self-giving.
> Come back to India, O, Bodhisattva,
> we reel under tyrants,
> we are yet to recognise our strength.
> We fight among ourselves
> instead of fighting the common foe.
> We have forgotten the tongue's job,
> sweetened by the enemy's honey.
> Come back, take shape as
> kind knowledge, truthful word
> and dauntless action.
>
> This time it is the outcast mother
> that dreams the white elephant
> carrying the lotus of freedom. (153)

In other words, the matter of political commitment in Sachi's poetry is much more than the espousal of any easily identifiable "left" ideology. True, his leanings are to the left, but not to be confused with any party line.

There are several other issues and items of importance worth discussion in *Summer Rain*, but I cannot do justice to them here. Instead, I would like to end my brief discussion with one, recurrent formal characteristic of his poetry. From the very beginning, the kind of poem Sachi has revelled in writing is what might he termed the "catalogue poem." He takes an idea and then lists its various permutations and combinations. The very first poem in this collection, the celebrated "Five Suns" illustrates this penchant:

> In my blood is a sun:
> a flaming, flickering sun
> youthful and crimson
> spreading a vermilian scent
> scattering sparks around.

In my eyes is a sun:
a soft and azure sun
his eyelashes dipped in blue
prancing and dancing
with his blue feathers outspread. (17)

The poem goes on in this fashion, from the suns in the blood and eyes, to the suns in the bones, nerves, and soul. What happens, however, as the poem progresses is that the suns change from being youthful and joyous to pale, leperous, and, ultimately, black:

In my soul is a sun
a dark black sun
smelling of emptiness
cold as snow
dark as death. (17-18)

The poem is so effective because the sun in the soul is quite opposite to the sun in the blood.

Sachi has several such catalogue poems. Another favourite of mine is "The Uses of Books":

Books pose questions
at the time of learning,
serve as the sleeper's pillows
at the time of abandon,
entertain the well-fed
at the times of abundance.
In times of scarcity,
hungry men stand on them
and reach out for the last piece of bread
on top of the mantelshelf. (98)

Again, almost predictably, the poet returns to his radical humanism, the concern for suffering, starving man, for whom a book has no other use than to take him closer to bread.

As it happens, the very last poem in the book is also a catalogue poem. It is the highly effective "My Body, a City." Here, with a spectacular flourish of imagery, Sachi takes us through a poet's body parts. The end sums up, without false modesty, the value of the body of the poet that is Sachi:

Remember:
When you burn this body
You are burning a city.
Remember:
When you bury this body
You are burying a people. (188)

These lines are more than a self-tribute. They are about the value of poetry itself, about its ability to feel, sense, touch, taste, smell, and see the world for what it is. And through this act of synthetic perception to move, alter, and ultimately transform it.

Since I began on a personal note, it is meet that I end similarly. What has affected me most about Sachi and his poetry is his deep and abiding faith in the gift of the Muse. Perhaps, this is not really surprising for a poet as talented and well-known as Sachi, hailing from a state as highly educated and cultured as Kerala. Where else do books of poetry run in dozens of editions, with print-runs as large as 10,000 each? But that alone cannot explain Sachi's faith in his vocation. It is a deeper certitude that has emerged after years of struggle and survival, after long fallow periods and sudden bursts of afflatus, after several professional trials and frustrations. As such it is hard-earned faith; that is what makes it so genuine.

Knowing Sachi and reading his poems has strengthened my own faith in poetry. I know I must carry on, if not pursuing the Muse like a mad man, at least waiting patiently and expectantly for her visitations, however rare or frequent they be. Sachi's poetry teaches me never to take my art lightly, never to slight the gift. Because, as he puts it, poetry is something truly elevating--special, serious, even tremendous:

Poetry is refuge and action
the sowing and the reaping,
the drum and the honey-comb,
the sea and the fisherman.

M. DEVA KUMAR

DUAL VOCALISM IN THE POETRY OF KAMALA DAS

Kamala Das has been undertaking a hazardous voyage from tradition to modernity in her poetry and there is in it every attempt to break the conventional code of morality. She has always refused to accept traditional facts. In this process is involved an ambivalence proceeding from a kind of duality. Despite the fact that she succeeds in breaking the conventional code of morality in many of her poems, she has always given importance to domestic peace and security in her private life. This is the fact which brings in the duality. The result is, Kamala Das the woman who figures in the poems (the poems treating the theme of unharmonious relationship with her husband) and Kamala Das, the person in her private life, are ambivalent.

It is interesting to notice that the protest of Kamala Das the woman, figured in her poems mentioned above, and in her autobiography (which is a work of fiction) and Kamala Das the person, who could lead a harmonious and happy life with her husband when he was alive, offer a mysterious contrast to an investigator. But the intensity of feelings conveyed through "Poem" and "A Widow's Lament" (*Kavya Bharati* 7, pp.1-2) is sufficient testimony to explain the deep sentiments she shared with him.

"He plunged himself as a blade / Into the recesses of my heart / and, to love was to hurt / that rosy opulent season." (*Kavya Bharati* 7, p.1). Here, her sorrow has a pinching quality. In "A Widow's Lament" she tells, "I have torn to shreds the tarot cards of my fate, / I walk the highway alone. / He was a sunshade, he was my home, / now I walk naked as a babe" (*Kavya Bharati* 7, p.2). It is easy to realize the distinction between Kamala Das the woman in her earlier poems and Kamala Das the person in her lyrical outbursts in these bereavement poems which enable one to dismiss the unfriendly view that many readers and critics maintain

regarding her private life. She never has "a substitute for a substitute . . ." (*The Descendants,* p.7) and was not an object to appease the husband's sexual hungers by ". . . jumping my routine hoops each day . . ." (*Collected Poems,* p.59).

This revolt against her husband in the earlier poems was springing from her realization of the Narcissistic elements in him, if Sreenivasan's reading is brought in. The identification of a Narcissus figure provoked her to a quest for feminine identity and freedom to such an extent that she too developed the Narcissistic features. The transformation results out of a condition in which the object-libido turns to ego-libido (Sreenivasan, p.67). This results in the protest of the woman protagonist in her earlier poetry, for this psychological phenomenon takes place in the level of her creative potential. In the period of creative activity there is the development of ego-libido and in her association with her husband she retreats to the state of object-libido. Unfortunately, this protest element was taken for granted by many as a token of disagreement between husband and wife in their private life. This duality is only a part of her technique, and this can be substantiated by making a contrastive study of the revolting woman in the earlier poems and the devoted woman in the bereavement poems. The knowledge of this standard of analysis will enable one to reinterpret the works of the woman poet.

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JOY T.R.

THIS IS HOME: CITY IMAGERY IN THE POETRY OF ADIL JUSSAWALLA

I

Modern cities are an offshoot of industrial revolution. Beyond and besides industry and commerce, cities grew also as cultural and artistic centres. It's a fact that modern cities like Paris, London and Berlin have attracted a lot of intellectuals and artists. Some of these not only offered the required intellectual and artistic climate and stimulus, but they themselves became subject-matter and concerns for writers, thinkers and poets. Thus a lot of brain-storming debates went into the planning and nature of cities; a lot of artistic works took up the theme of city; an urban skyline began to shape itself in its elegant high-rise buildings as well as in its shabby and pathetic slum dwellings. Literature of praise and curse emerged out of this new urban reality. Nobody can forget the plight of London and, for that matter, any modern impersonalised city in T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland":

> Unreal City,
> Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
> A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
> I had not thought death had undone so many.

One city in India that promoted and provoked many poets and much poetry is Bombay. Dr. Raj Rao guest-edited a special number of *The Literary Endeavour* on "Bombay Poetry: Poems on Bombay City" in 1987. Dom Moraes has written about "A literary identity for Bombay" in *The Hindu*. Moraes thinks that "the facets of the city presented by various writers will eventually accumulate into a whole. And then Bombay will have a literature of its own"(Moraes 20).

In this essay I intend to look closely at Adil Jussawalla's poems on Bombay to assess the "intellectual and emotional complex" (Ezra Pound) presented by his images on the city.

Among his poems between *Land's End* (1962) and *Missing Person* (1976) three are found to be strong on city imagery. They are 'A Letter for Bombay' from *Land's End*, and 'Approaching Santa Cruz Airport, Bombay' and 'Sea Breeze, Bombay' from *Missing Person.*

II

"Devi", in the Indian religious context, means goddess (Mani 587-91). But in the literary tradition "devi" especially when it is not written as a capitalised word, stands for the beloved or a dear relation. 'A Letter for Bombay' implies "devi" in its human as well as divine connotations. As salutation at the head of a letter, devi is the beloved. To his dear one the poet writes about his own life reminiscing back through the young "careless, gardened days" in Bombay.

> Then I saw they were over, those careless,
> gardened days, and whether
> The rain praised my performance, next year's
> children
> or the aged woods, I do not know, save
> That it drove me away.

In the nostalgic phase of a young man living away from home, it is not unnatural that the home-city metamorphoses into his beloved, although the romanticism in it may be dated.

The poem, even if 'A Letter for Bombay', is an "I"--infested one, egotistically autobiographical. There are twelve instances of "I", eleven of "my" and seven of "me". On the other hand, apart from the three appearances, of "devi", "you" and "your" together make only eight appearances, five of which are in the very last paragraph. Alienated in the foreign city and culture of London between 1957 and 1970, that one writes to somebody dear is nothing but normal. Still the image of Bombay personified in the "devi" evokes, even though indirectly, divine as well as mundane impressions about the city.

In the first two instances, "devi" is in the cursive script pointing to the mundane aspects of Bombay.

> April 14th; devi, three reports of cloud
> Hit rooms musical with Gramaphone, rhymes:'44
> . . . . . .
> '45: devi, the ill and crippled came to my father.

From this perspective of the mundane, "your formalities" are nothing but the social and cultural formality of education in the Bombay of the poet's teens and of India's independence, as is clear from the third stanza.

> Why should I praise your formalities? School was
> a treason
> To bursting! It was your street-cries and
> great-gilled palms, it was
> The boat-tipping sea taught me: change of home.
> nearer a sea-change brought me, further
> from speech.

The reference may be to the Macaulay-drawn English system of schooling as treason played on the poet by the devi. But the devi's other side which is more natural and native--"your street-cries and great-gilled palms" and "boat-tipping sea"--taught the poet what he prizes more now. That is to say, the informal and non-formal education he absorbed through the living experience of a childhood and a youth with his family, peers and foes, off and on the city streets and city-groves, is far more important, for which he feels indebted to the devi. His indebtedness towards Bombay is further reiterated in the fourth stanza. Even abroad,

> . . . in a pouch wriggling against my ribs,
> I carry a quintessence of you, nor wholly
> without potency.

For, more significant is his nostalgia for Bombay that grows out of his intense sense of estrangement and loss of identity in a foreign metropolis.

Manners alter. Manners maketh me UnMan.
I unmake Manners: they say one does not return
to an early romance
Improperly conducted: and I believe it true.

The strange and bold coinage of "UnMan"--perhaps received from Shakespeare (*Romeo and Juliet*, III, ii, 14)--underlines the identity crisis. Curiously enough, Bombay becomes inevitable as home for the poet, very much like Nissim Ezekiel who is "here to find my way in it"('Island'). And Jussawalla has indeed come back for good from London, where he draws "Fear and Love to my room".

In the last phase of the poem, "Devi" gets the distinction of capitalisation and suddenly transforms into the realm of the divine to make up for the poet's lack of "a legendary muse" in the western classical sense.

April again: Devi, I come of age. Of age
That shapes me masks of splash and grit, rocks like
yours, instruct me in my art,
Lacking a legendary muse, give my chaos form.
Should you refuse--the rock of your hovels raising
your voice
Still further--demand nothing; touch me only as far
As the parted psyche can stand; divided city, combine,
And I shall return and pass beyond your storm.

She seems to have assumed one of her five forms, the form of the Indian Goddess of Poetry and Art, *Saraswathi*. According to the ancient Indian notion people will lose the talent even of speaking without the blessing of this Goddess (Mani 588). To justify the transformation of "Devi", the reference to "rocks like yours" can imply the usual rock idols of Hindu gods and goddesses besides its metaphorical sense of strong support.

Here, the "Devi" of Bombay in her contrast to the Muse of London (in the autobiographical context of the poet) elevates Bombay from the usual image it has as the most westernised Indian city to a more Indianised one. Or better, in his disillusionment with

the West, the poet makes his home city (his Indian harbour and port) the poetic symbol of his Indianness. Now, as a man and artist "come of age," he wants to make the choice for his Indianness in the symbol or icon of the Devi of Bombay. He is ready to "return", and earnestly invokes Her not to refuse him.

Thus the image of Bombay as the artistic symbol of Indianness, as Saraswathi against the Western Muse, though it looks arbitrary and strange in the native Indian backdrop of Bombay, becomes inevitable for Indian poetry in English. The poet brings it suddenly through his bold Indianism of one of the most 'unenglish' words, "Devi" as if in a desperate last attempt to recover his identity and root. Bombay as the symbol of relevance for the literature of Indians writing in English stands out as a foresight in the poem written in 1961, since the marginality of such a literature has been or was a matter of great critical debate in India. The forecast becomes pronounced first in the context of Bombay's present status as the "city of so many races and languages, Indian, Middle Eastern and European, that there is no one tongue in general use"(Tindall 17). A supportive reference could again be made to Dr. Subhas C. Saha's privately circulated questionnaire accepting the tilt of "the centre of interest and activity in Indian English Poetry" from Calcutta to Bombay.

Nevertheless, the poet is not without his own doubts about the validity of the new Indian status expected of Bombay, because it remains still a "divided city" which he wants very much to unite; it remains as the symbol of psychological tension in the poet: ". . . touch me only as far / As my parted psyche can stand. . . ."

III

As if to keep his word to "Devi," the poet did, in fact, come back to Bombay. Maybe as a prologue to his final return, Jussawalla has written another poem, 'Approaching Santa Cruz Airport, Bombay', "on a trip home" in 1966-67(King 246-47).

Besides recording "his ambivalent feeling on returning to India" set "within a general political and social context" (King 147), his poem projects, in a subdued way, a lone image of Bombay. And that image is of "home".

Of course, in the context of his so-called personal exile in a foreign land, home means home country. But as one born and brought up in this city, home can mean Bombay too. Moreover, the very Bombay particulars of the setting, like Santa Cruz Airport, the elite passengers like "a doctor" and "the Indian diplomat" in the flight and the slums, justify the image of home here for Bombay.

> A union of homes as live as a disease.
> . . . . . .
> . . . in the air,
> With the scavenger birds, I ride.
> . . . . . .
> We are now approaching Santa Cruz . . .
> . . . The slums sweep
> Up to our wheels and wings . . .
> . . . And this is home. . . .

Finally, the demonstrative in the expression, "And this is home" is very much of a linguistic pointer to the specificity of the home, i.e., Bombay. Because, as G. Leech observes in his *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry*, "this" is one of the words which have deictic function--"that is, they have the function of *pointing* to aspects of utterance's particular environment"(Leech 183).

There is nothing so originally poetic about the image of home in itself. In this poem, however, the poet qualifies the image of home:

> . . . And this is home,
> Watched by a boy as still as a shut door,
> Holding a mass of bread crumbs like a stone.

In these last lines of the poem, the "boy" who watches the home is compared to "a shut door." The stillness of the boy compared to the shut door poses a metaphorical pointer to the psychology of the boy in two ways: one, the boy is psychologically shut out of his

home. Two, as a shut or open door goes naturally with home and not with the boy, it could be that the boy is astonished at finding the shut door of his home--his home as if shut out from him. This second interpretation could be supported by the mentality that can be deducted from the picture of the boy in the last line holding "bread crumbs like a stone" to hit at the shut door that denied him his basic needs, or that denied him a home of his own. If "stone" brings out the anger or the disillusion, "bread crumbs" reveals the denial of the basic needs.

Again, the persona or the poet makes the mental soliloquial note, "And this is home", as he swoops down in the plane. This home he watches like the boy we already have seen above. Then the "boy" is the boy of the persona, the mentality of the persona at the sight of Bombay, his home: on the one side, his own apprehension about what would be beyond this "shut door" waiting for him in the home city; on the other, the guilt-ridden doubt about whether he should open the shut door of himself or keep himself away like a shut door.

Going back to the same short expression--"And this is home"--the conjunction "and" in that context can function as a connection to the picture of home already revealed in the poem. So, this expression works out like a natural conclusion of what his home is like. It is a summation of what he heard and saw from the aircraft about India at large and the city in particular: the picture of his home as *diseased* ("A union of home as live as a disease"), as *dying* ("The various ways of dying that are home"), as devoid of pride (". . . 'We've lost all hope, all pride.'"); the picture of his home with full of poor people and ever-increasing population ("Birth / Pyramids the future with more birth"). And there is the resultant psychosomatic reaction described in these lines:

> Feel the guts tighten and all my nerves shake
> The heart, stirring to trouble in its clenched
> Claw, shrivelled inside the easing of a cage.

The sum total of all these adds fuel to his ambivalent attitude

towards home or towards what the home keeps in store for him behind the "shut door".

Linguistically and semantically the poetic balance tilts heavily towards revealing the protagonist's or the poet's mind at the thought and fact of home-coming. This fact is true from personal as well as political perspectives. The backgrounded image of home in this poem projects a Bombay that is undesirable; it orphans and estranges the protagonist like the shut door of a house. He cannot reconcile himself to such an image of Bombay because of his fears, intensified by what he heard and saw during his flight to Santa Cruz.

IV

The images of Bombay in the poem, 'Sea Breeze, Bombay' are these: (1) Surrogate city; (2) refugees' harbour and port; (3) gatherer of ends, and (4) sea breeze. Gillian Tindall's observation regarding the surrogate character of the city and its growth into a mighty Indian port and trade centre may have its own historical truth: ". . . there are people to this day who maintain that Bombay was not necessarily the best natural site for India's West coast port . . . and that Bombay was built up pig-headedly, because the Company had spent so much on it over the decades that they refused to admit defeat" (Tindall 86). And the striking parallel between "surrogate city" and the modern biologically surrogate mother would be almost impossible to imagine in the sixties when the poem was written.

> Surrogate city of banks,
> Brokering and bays, refugees' harbour and port,
> Gatherer of ends whose brick beginnings work
> Loose like a skin, spotting the coast.

Still, in the background of the trauma of independence and partition, when the whole nation was passing through a state of economic stagnation and near-barrenness, the role of Bombay as a surrogate mother for breeding the seeds of future development of the country is relevant.

The other two images--"refugees' harbour and port", and "gatherer of ends"--are as if having lost their poetic power. For, the inflow of multitudes of refugees and businessmen crossing over to Bombay from other states and countries is an accepted common fact: the Portughese and the British before and after the East India Company; the Parsis and the Jews sensing the consequent business opportunities; the Sindhis and the Punjabis during the partition and after; the steady arrival of people from all parts of the country seeking job and dreaming of money. The list and history of migrants to the city from its "brick beginnings" have merited a full-length study in the book, *City of Gold: The Biography of Bombay,* by Gillian Tindall.

Despite any number of regional or religious, cultural or political conflicts, and the heterogeneous mixture of people and trends, Bombay, according to the poem, functions like the sea breeze.

> Restore us to fire, Still
> Communities tear and reform; and still a breeze
> Cooling our garrulous evenings, investigates nothing,
> Ruffles no tempers, uncovers no root,

Bombay does not seem to oblige to the repeated call for revolution by the poet--"Restore us to fire" (Lines 9, 13). In various ways and at various levels, Bombay ultimately cools down any outbursts of tempers. It does not bother for a thorough investigation into the roots of things. It's as if the city is winning over all the contradictions and conflicts of its people and situations, whether political or personal. It's just like an evening breeze smoothening the garrulous differences between a couple or two chatting friends.

V

In 'Sea Breeze, Bombay' Jussawalla has kept Bombay at its geographical plain (like, for example, Ezekiel). His personification and personalisation of the city, in fact, take a romantic leap in the "Devi" of 'A Letter for Bombay'. The personal "you" or "Devi" in the poem shifts into "home" and then to a "surrogate city" in the other two poems. As time goes by, the poet appears to have recovered from the personal and romantic obsession he felt for Bombay from a far off London he "can neither leave nor love, and properly belong to . . . "(Jussawalla 189).

Another important aspect of the city-images in these poems is that they tend to integrate themselves around one major image. That is the dominant image of home which is obvious in the second poem, 'Approaching Santa Cruz Airport, Bombay'. The images in 'Sea Breeze, Bombay' also show the submerged urge for home:

1. A home to which one wants to belong: surrogate city.
2. A home where one wants to anchor and shelter one's exiled life: "refugees' harbour and port".
3. A home where one patches up one's "torn and blistered" (Chitre) ambitions and plans to gather again the ends and to start from the "brick beginnings": "Gatherer of ends".
4. A home where there is "a breeze/cooling our garrulous evenings", that does not bother to ruffle tempers or to uncover the unpleasant past.

The remaining image of devi, (both with and without a capital), would just be a welcome guest in an Indian home; the domestic character of the image cannot be denied. Besides, the tone and form of the poem as a letter, a letter sent to the beloved from an away-from-home-London (in which the image occurs) only strengthens the image of home.

"An 'image' may be invoked as a metaphor, but if it persistently recurs, both as presentation and representation, it becomes a symbol, may even become part of a symbolic (or mythic) system"(Wellek 189). And, as we see, Jussawalla's image of home "persistently recurs" directly or indirectly in all the specific instances of city imagery. This consistency approves its status as a symbol for Bombay. Bombay, then, is a symbol for home in its political as well as existential implications. The age-old human craving for home, for escape from existential alienation and for loving domestic recognition, establishes the universal dimension of the symbol of home.

Yet Jussawalla's home is not the conventional one. "Something is rotten in the state" of this urban home. It is a home of the orphaned and the exiled, a home of the refugees and fugitives, a home of the existential as well as political aliens and natives. The overall political awareness that Jussawalla brings to all the poems is something noteworthy. His point of view is not that of a strict formalist or of a mystic. It is a rationalism informed by his political and social outlook. Even his "home" ultimately turns out to be a political asylum, where he still finds himself estranged.

M.K. Naik writes in his essay "Echo and Voice in Indian Poetry in English" (1970): "The imagery of a poet is a true index to the quality of his sensibility, and the Indian poet's imagery should bear the hall-mark of the individuality of his experience". And Adil Jussawalla has shown his individuality and sensibility in his treatment of the Bombay experience. So he adds his poetic bit to the literary identity of Bombay, which points to the strong possibility of a Bombay School of Urban Poetry.

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PAUL LOVE

THE COLLECTED WORKS OF EMKEN
(Clerihews, Epigrams, Limericks, Parodies)

Emken, *Indian Clerihews*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1989. 31pp.

(Emken), *Indian Limericks*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1990. 30pp.

Emken, *Indian Potpourri*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1993. 33pp.

(Emken), *More Indian Clerihews*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1992. 30 pp.

Late in the previous decade a literary phenomenon appeared that called itself "Emken", the likeness of which the realms of Indian poetry have never before quite seen. Subsequently no less than four volumes of verse were published under this pen-name. Though no strenuous attempts were made to conceal the identity of the pen-name's owner, "Emken" he was on the title page of the first volume, and Emken he shall remain, at least for the purposes of our present study. For this review proposes, at least "in a merry sport", to comment on the contents and achievements of Emken's work, and to say something about the various poetry genres which it claims to include. The variety of these four volumes--limericks, clerihews, parodies, epigrams and all--is one of their more striking features. And through his many-sidedness, Emken seems to be saying to his readers, "If you don't like me in one form, try me in another".

I

A few readers can go back far enough in memory to recall an old verse that they may have grown up reciting:

There was a young man from Japan
Whose limericks never would scan;
When asked why it was
He replied, "It's because
I always try to get as many words into the last
line as I can".

Emken's limericks do not scan. That is, they don't if one adopts the scholarly, critical definitions that have been given for this genre. Most such definitions agree on the basics: that the limerick is "a verse form composed of 5 lines rhyming aabba, of which the first, second and fifth are trimeter and the third and fourth dimeter" (*Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics,* ed. Alex Preminger et al., Princeton University Press, 1974). Most limericks seem to follow such a definition rather consistently. For example,

There was a young man so benighted,
He never knew when he was slighted,
He'd go to a party
And eat just as hearty
As though he were really invited.

Emken's deviations from this pattern are nowhere as serious as those of our Japanese friend. Sometimes they are only metrical near-misses that could be "set right", seemingly with a single stroke. In many cases the deletion of one or two words would help the rhythmical pattern. Try the following Emken limericks to see what would happen if the bracketed words were omitted.

There was a young beauty of Ooty
Who was naturally somewhat snooty,
She said, "Paradise
Was bigger in size
But not half (as) full of beauty as Ooty.
(*Indian Limericks*: 10)

or

There was a (fat old) Nabab of Lucknow
Who whined: "I'm not in luck now;
When I was thinner
A forty course dinner
I could eat but I don't have the pluck now.
(*Indian Limericks*: 9)

Conversely, a metrically schooled reader of Emken might long to take editorial licence and occasionally add a word or two. In the following examples, by adding the few words in brackets, the metre of the limerick would come closer to the pattern prescribed:

There was a young (lady) called Minny
Who owned a cute little mini.
When she started the car
You could hear from afar
Minny's mini's (high-pitched) winning whinny.
(*Indian Potpourri*: 17)

or

There was (a) young man of Burma
Who married an Indian called Varma
She smoked Char-Minars
And harangued seminars,
(Til) he knew (that) she was his *karma*.
(*Indian Limericks*: 14)

A few Emken limericks do, without emendations, just about fit the rhythm that the definitions talk about. Here is one that comes very close:

There was an old man of Cape Horn
Who claimed that he never was born.
What brought him then
Into the world of men?
He said he came out of the horn.
(*Indian Limericks*: 30)

This example closes Emken's first book of limericks and perhaps gives an appropriate finish to the volume.

All of this discussion of the limerick so far does seem to beg an important question. Isn't Emken in India writing primarily for people attuned to a very different sense of rhythm and metre from what is felt by the western critics who formulated and defined this genre? Ben Jonson, the seventeenth century English poet, claimed that his contemporary and compatriot John Donne "for not keeping metre deserved hanging". Most of Donne's readers have disagreed. And I have not read or talked with a single one of Emken's compatriot readers who are the least bothered by the metrical short-comings of his limericks. This is a troublesome issue, for to western ears the regular, bouncing, jingle-like rhythm of the limerick is one of its inescapable features. But the pleasure with which Emken's limericks have been locally recieved does remind us of his modest claim that he is at most writing "serious trivia". This fact in turn is perhaps a gentle reminder that the usefulness of heavy-handed criticism for such light verse is, after all, limited.

II

When we look at the clerihews of Emken, his contribution is easier to assess. To begin with, they give a first introduction to this genre for many readers, who otherwise would not have known of its existence. Again one first turns to a formal definition, and learns that a clerihew is "a form of comic poetry . . . [which] consists of two couplets of unequal length often with complex or somewhat ridiculous rhymes and [presenting] a potted biography of a famous personage or historical character" (*Princeton Encyclopedia*, 141). Invented and named by the British detective novelist, William Clerihew Bently, in the eighteen nineties, the ridiculous rhymes of this form remind one vaguely of the poems of Ogden Nash, or the tongue-in-cheek verse of the American critic Clifton Fadiman, who wrote clerihews himself.

But perhaps readers will profit most from the description given by Jacques Barzun ("Ars Poetica: The Muse is Speaking",

The Clerihews of Paul Horgan, Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1985) who states that the clerihew

> is of all the kinds of verse
> The most informative and terse:
> One line invokes a well-known name,
> Three more disclose, for praise or blame,
>
> In words that make one want to quote,
> A single vivid anecdote. . . .
>
> So let us concentrate on form
> In clerihews it is the norm
> For rhythmic anarchy to reign. . . .
> Line two is factual and curt,
> The third is planned to disconcert--
> A "sprung" or "contrapuntal" stab;
> The varying last may clinch or jab,
> While strange but rigorous rhymes in pairs
> Impress the memory unawares.

Whether or not Emken is aware of Barzun's description, it shows that he is particularly well suited to make sorties into this genre, for perhaps two different reasons. First, as many of his readers may know, Emken in real life is a distinguished literary critic whose detailed knowledge of dozens of writers gives him many "well-known name(s)" to work with, and makes them easy prey for verses of this very kind. And second, the clerihew almost demands a certain cavalier attitude toward metre (a "rhythmic anarchy", says Barzun), with which Emken seems at least somewhat at home.

With these parametres (perhaps "freedoms" would be more apt!) in hand, Emken plunders the field of English Literature from Chaucer to Auden and Allen Tate, and for good measure adds several handfuls of clerihews ranging from Greek and Roman writers to Hollywood film stars. His "cinematic" clerihews are quite plentiful, showing a surprisingly eclectic interest for the serious literary critic Emken is in real life:

Frank Sinatra
Hated Cleopatra
Complained Frank
She stank.

(*Indian Clerihews*: 25)

Here of course Emken plays tricks with history, as he often does in his clerihews. But in other instances he has his actors and actresses quite accurately paired:

Richard Burton
Could never stand a curtain
Behind it stood Liz--
Talking, he was certain.

(*More Indian Clerihews*: 27)

For his last jab at Hollywood, Emken strays out of the typical clerihew form or non-form, but in so doing reminds one almost eerily of the fallen Princess Abishag in Robert Frost's "Provide, Provide" (Emken has a clerihew on Frost also):

Twinkle, twinkle
Big Film-Star
Some day they'll ask
Who you are.

(*More Indian Clerihews*: 28)

Most of Emken's clerihews do focus upon literary figures. There is a liberal sprinkling of diatribes on European writers such as this one from ancient Greek drama:

Aristophanes
Said, "The fun is
That the Socratic dialogue
Was invented by a frog"

(*Indian Clerihews*: 29)

The telescoping of matter here is quite typical of Emken, and of the clerihew in general. But in this one from medieval Italy, he shows on the other hand that the clerihew can be quite blunt:

Dante Alighieri
Had a simple cosmological theory.
His definition of Hell:
"Where all one's enemies dwell".
(*Indian Clerihews*: 31)

And for ridiculous amalgam of details, one can't do much better than the following from modern Europe, which is quite worthy of Jacques Barzun's description of the genre:

Emile Zola
Adored Coca-Cola.
He'd stored it in a vat
In his *Dram-shop*, where he sat.
(*More Indian Clerihews*: 20)

By far the majority of Emken's literary clerihews, however, are taken from British writing, medieval and modern. If one really wished to do so, it would be easy to cull a systematic nonsense-verse history of the literature of England from what Emken has given us. Some of his entries in this history, of course, have woven around them the mythological chatter that makes the typical clerihew so outrageous:

Sir Thomas Malory
Didn't count every calory
Life in the Middle Ages
Had its advantages.
(*Indian Clerihews*: 9)

Onward he plows into the Elizabethan lyricists, with juxtaposings that are still more ridiculous:

The Earl of Surrey
Detested Curry
But would buy a handful of rice
At any price.
(*More Indian Clerihews*: 14)

Occasionally as he moves on in English literary history, Emken jolts us with judgements that are bitingly apt:

The moral of *Paradise Lost*
Is that an apple cost
Far more in ancient Eden
Than in modern Sweden.
(*Indian Clerihews*: 11)

From Milton, Emken progresses/regresses through all the periods of English literature, preying upon Pope, Blake and all the Romantics, plundering the Victorian essayists and poets, giving Auden, Yeats, Eliot, Spender and Joyce their due, and even throwing in a handful of clerihews on American literary figures for good measure. Practically no writer who has ever been trapped in a conventional university syllabus escapes Emken's reductions. Here is the history of English literature with a new twist.

Yet when one remembers, as mentioned earlier, that Emken in real life is a distinguished critic of Indian literature in English, with more than a dozen volumes authored or edited (as listed in the blurb for *Indian Potpourri*), the reader wistfully regrets that not a single one of his clerihews encases a figure from Indian literature. This neglect may be deliberate. It could be a clever defense mechanism to protect him from the reactions of those among whom he lives.

But it would be at least mild fun to see what the clerihew could say, pertinently or absurdly, about the important women and men who are making Indian literature today. For if the clerihew has a value as a critical tool its ability to expose the relevant through the ridiculous might be its justification. The punning, the awkward rhythms, the outrageous rhymes of the Clerihew make this verse form an ideal means to reduce its subject to absurdity or at least to size. The clerihew's chief justification is satire, light and gentle, not vindictive. But this kind of satire is often an effective tool for revealing details of an author's work that might otherwise go unnoticed. The knowledge of such details is one of Emken's many merits. As gentle and indirect satire, he might have been able to use his clerihews to give us more than one useful insight into the work of writers who are his compatriots.

III

At least a word should be added about the "Parodies" and "Epigrams" that help to make up Emken's latest volume. Some of these would seem to be among his most successful verse. They appear more relaxed, or at least less forced than some of the Limericks and Clerihews--perhaps in part because there are no formal considerations that divert or constrict. Particularly some of the "Parodies" of literary subjects and figures seem easy and pleasant and effective.

Again, Emken's view is eclectic, and his subjects range from sixteenth to nineteenth century authors. "Some books are . . . to be chewed / and some eschewed" does for Francis Bacon. Shakespeare's *King Lear* is not spared, but updated in what Emken calls "The Bootlegger's" version: "'Ripeness is all'? No, not quite / It's the over-ripe that's just right". Alexander Pope gets his come-uppance in what Emken seems to have learned from academia: "A little learning is a prestigious thing-- / Drink not, but swear by the Pierian spring". And in what he calls "The Doctor's Keats" ("Heard maladies are sweet / But those unheard of are sweeter") Emken's punning is done concisely and gracefully enough that it might cause even his severest critics to smile. For in the best of his parodies his ability to say one thing pointedly, briefly but pleasantly, gives a charm to these morsels that his clerihews, by definition, would never permit. Even when the parody is somewhat more expansive it does not lose its effectiveness:

> As Controller of Examinations
> Browning would only embarrass
> Us; he states that '*Pippa Passes*'
> But not in which class.
> (*Indian Potpourri*: 26)

Similarly, in the best of his "Epigrams" Emken seems able to combine bluntness with a degree of grace, as for example in his response to ". . . Attending an Amateur Musical Concert":

Why Music and Sleep go hand in hand
One can understand
When one remembers that Orpheus
Rhymes with Morpheus.
(*Indian Potpourri*: 29)

Rhyme again is effectively explored and utilised in other epigrams:

Why should or shouldn't
The word 'Minister'
Rhyme with
'Sinister'?
(*Indian Potpourri*: 33)

In several instances Emken graciously, if shrewdly, seems willing to let women have the upper hand. This is true in his description of a couple attending a literature seminar:

She thinks
Of Aristotle,
He
Of the bottle.
(*Indian Potpourri*: 29)

Similar is the case in fixing the blame for the human loss of Paradise:

How bad
Of Ad-
am Eve
To believe.
(*Indian Potpourri*: 31)

These incidentally are two of the most succinct of all of Emken's productions, and each of them is among his more effective pieces, perhaps for precisely that reason. But what Emken explicitly calls "The Case for Feminism" is more expansive and illustrates another of his favourite tricks, his predilection for playing with words--punning in some instances, analysing here and sensitising himself there to a word's many different aspects:

That Women are the superior Sex
Is in every sphere the norm
A female horse is a mare
But the word 'Ass' has no feminine form.
(*Indian Potpourri*: 30)

The many different kinds of word play in this light and humorous verse betray, as much as anything else does, Emken's lifelong study of language and literature. His keen ability to see the many different aspects and connotations of a word is what allows him to twist it or even contort it to his purposes, and still to escape.

IV

Anyone who attempts a serious analysis of Emken's verse of necessity verges upon, and perhaps wallows in pedantry. Much of what one can write about his work is stating the obvious and runs the risk of beating it to death. Nonetheless Emken's claim that he is producing "*serious* trivia" (emphasis supplied) seems to invite at least a modicum of serious examination, out of sheer respect for what he has done and achieved, if for no other reasons. Trivia alone seems to invite the reader's attention only in a time of complete relaxation. But if Emken's work is read only in such moments, its total significance may prove elusive. That significance is by no means entirely a positive one. There are times when his work is embarrassing, and in some few cases perhaps repulsive, depending on the sensitivities of the reader.

But these are things that could be said of most satire. And in one case--his revival of the clerihew--he awakens many of us to the merits and possibilities of a form that can be one of satire's most effective vehicles. Emken at his best demonstrates once again that brief pithy verse is one of the best means for showing that our heroes and heroines are, all of them, human, and that even in the finest of them lurk follies and weaknesses capable of exploitation for the sake of relatively innocent fun.

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SUBMISSIONS

Kavya Bharati invites contributions of poetry in English, essays on poetry, translations of poetry from Indian languages into English, and review articles.

Submissions are welcomed from resident and non-resident Indians, and from citizens of other countries who are currently residents or who have at some time in the past developed a first-hand interest in India.

Authors should submit two typewritten copies of each contribution, or preferably, an IBM-compatible floppy disk along with one hard copy. Please designate the word-processing programme used on the disk.

Manuscripts of essays and review articles should conform to the latest edition of the *MLA Handbook.*

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