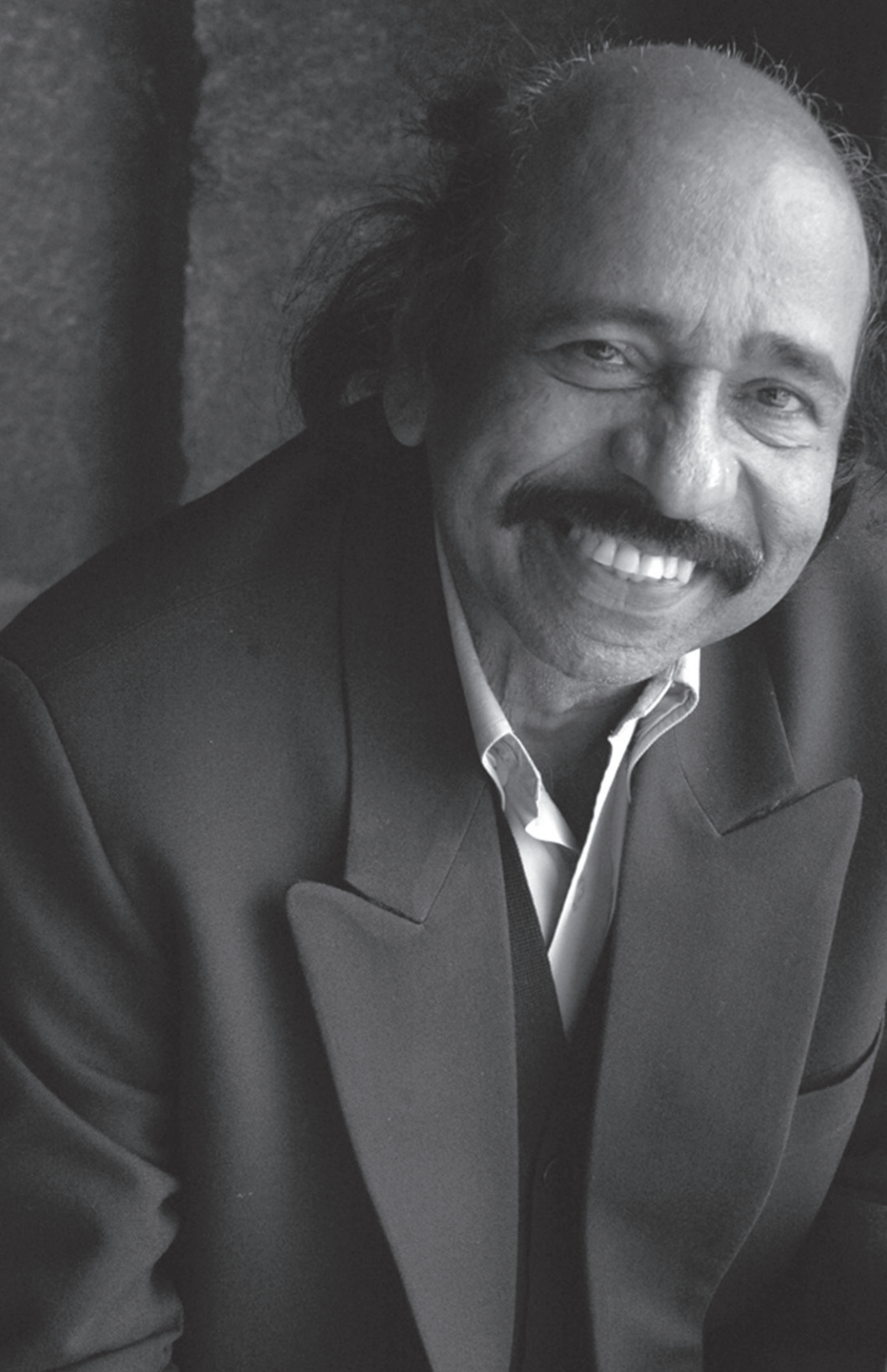


NO BORDERS  
FOR ME  
Travel Poems



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[Translated from Malayalam by the poet]

K. SATCHIDANANDAN





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*The First thing God made is the long journey.*

George Seferis, *Logbook II*



## CONTENTS

Alternative Geographies	i-xiii
From Indian Sketches	23
Traveller's Journals	28
The Western Canto 1	33
The Western Canto 2	44
Two Russian Sequences	55
The Painters' Valley	70
Dilli-Dali	72
The Northern Canto	86
Varanasi Poems	100
Go to Tripura	106
Evenings in Hampi	108
Imperfect	114
The American Diary	134
Sins: The Roman Sequence	154
O, Venice	162
Utkal: The Odisha Poems	166
Ujjayini-Srinagar, 2000	172
On the Way to Shillong	174
The Arabian Nights	175

In Memory of a Swedish Evening	192
The Wall	194
The Prophet	196
Far, Near, 2011	199
Van Gogh's 'Shoes'	206
Heaven	208
The Southern Canto 1	210
The Southern Canto 2	222
Still	234
I am a Language	240
Sri Lankan Sketches	242
I Walk Inside a Cloud	249
Meditations: Shimla	251
How Spain Was	260
Three Coorg Poems	271
The Cave	274



## ALTERNATIVE GEOGRAPHIES Some Thoughts on Travel Poetry

*The world is a book and those who do not travel read only one page. – St Augustine*

1

*I am, like he who, returning from a long voyage, out of everything, the earth, the world, men and their languages, tries to keep after the event a logbook, with the forgotten, fragmentary, rudimentary elements of a prehistoric language and writing, tries to understand what happened, to explain it with pebbles bits of wood deaf and dumb gestures from before the institution of the deaf and dumb, a blind man groping before Braille and they are going to try to reconstitute all that, but if they knew they would be scared and wouldn't even try.*

Jacques Derrida and Catherine Malabou

The question whether there is a specific poetics pertaining to travel poetry has often intrigued me as a critic. One way of approaching it is to distinguish

it from the travelogue. Travelogue itself is of course a hybrid genre that in the words of Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan, 'straddles categories and disciplines.' Travel narratives, they add, 'run from picaresque adventure to philosophical treatise, political commentary, ecological parable and spiritual quest. They borrow freely from history, geography, anthropology and social science, often demonstrating great erudition.' (*Tourists and Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing*, Michigan, 2000, pp8-9) They point out how travelogue at its worst is a crude expression of economic advantage and at its best a subtle instrument of cultural self-perception. The traveller 'seizes with his language the land he crosses' ('Travel Writing', Michel Butor, *Mosaic* 8-I, 1974 pp 1-16). This is also true of travel poetry in a different way.

Travel poems are older than travelogues in prose. There are many descriptions of travel in *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Bhagavata*, like Rama's and Sita's travel into the forest and back to the court in Ayodhya, Lava's and Kusha's travel from the forest to Ayodhya to witness their father's coronation and sing the tale of their abandoned mother in *Ramayana*, the Pandava's travel from the forest of exile to the land of Virata for their *ajnatavasa* (living incognito) in the *Virataparva* of *Mahabharata*, or Krishna's travel from his home Gokul to Kamsa's court in Mathura in *Bhagavata*. Kalidasa's *Meghadootam* can well be considered a travel poem though it is the cloud-messenger that is imagined to be travelling above many parts of Bharat as imagined at that time- above mountains and forests and villages and cities all the way from Ramagiri where the *Yaksha* is in exile to his beloved in his home town,

Alakapuri. Every place the cloud passes over- Amarkuta Mountains ( today's Amarkantaka), Vidisha, Ujjaini, Devagiri, Charmanvati ( Chambal), Dasapura ( Mandasor) , Kurukshetra and Manasa – before he arrives at Alaka is described in detail with their rivers and lakes, flora, and fauna, festivities and customs , so that the cloud could identify the way. Many Bhakti poets were mendicants who travelled from place to place and easily crossed over from one language to another while changing places.

Li-Po's 'Hard is the Journey' is an example from ancient Chinese poetry as are the poems of Mao-tse Dong based on his experiences in the Long March from modern Chinese poetry. Chinese philosophers too often used journey as a metaphor as in Lao-tzu's saying, 'A good traveller has no fixed plans and is not intent on arriving', whose central idea later found an echo in T S Eliot: 'The journey, not the arrival, matters.' 'Homer's *Odyssey* is as much about travel as about war: that 10 year-long travel of Odysseus from Troy to Ithaca is in a sense the archetype of all travels, a kind of allegory of the journey of life itself , the Lotus eaters with their fruit-induced lethargy, the monstrous Cyclops Polyphemus, the cannibalistic Laestrygonians , Circe with her magical powers to transform men into beasts, the Sirens distracting the seafarers with their song , six-headed Scylla and the fatal whirlpool Charybdis representing forces that try to seduce, distract, dehumanise, drown, dull or devour the traveller and thus stop him from attaining his goal . The middle-English poem 'Wanderer' (translated by Ezra Pound as 'Sea-farer') had attempted to capture the spirit of wanderlust much before Shakespeare. William Shakespeare

who had travelled in search of fortune from Stratford-upon-Avon to London set his plays in many parts of the world that he had known from the books he had read and the travellers and merchants he had met in London. That was his way of travelling from London to Scotland, Denmark, Rome, Milan and Venice. In a sense the island in *Tempest* shorn of its politics, is a metaphor, a site of imagination where everybody wishes to travel, much like Gulliver's Lilliput, Brobdingnag, Laputa, Luggnagg and the lands of Houyhnhnms, the talking horses and Yahoos, the base and deformed human beings, or Alice's Wonderland. Milton was a cosmic traveller who could conjure up a Paradise with rebels, like Dante whose fertile epic imagination had earlier travelled to Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. The British Romantics too loved travel, real or imagined. Wordsworth's travels within the Lake District -that is transformed by his imagination into a land of beauty and mystery- and also to London, as in his poem 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge' besides his imagined Orient are well known. S T Coleridge's 'Kublakhan' and 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' too are poems of travel that mix dream and reality. Keats could sink 'Lethewards' stimulated by opium. Can we not consider Shelley's 'Ozymandias' a travel poem that meditates over the impermanence of power? Byron's 'Childe Harold's Pilgrimage' is another example. Tennyson's 'Ulysses', John Masefield's 'Cargoes', Walt Whitman's 'Songs of the Open Road', Ben Jonson's 'Gypsy Songs', R L Stevenson's 'Travel', Carl Sandburg's 'Window', Edna St Vincent Millay's 'The Unexplorer', Paul Lawrence Barbar's 'A Sailor's Song', Rupert Brooke's 'Road Warriors', Sherwood Anderson's 'Evening Song', Ger-

ald Sterne's 'Kissing Stieglitz Good-Bye', Sylvia Plath's 'Amnesiac', Aime Cesaire's 'Return to My Native land' : one can site any number of examples to the diversity of travel poetry from ancient times to the present. George Seferis builds his poetry upon the Homeric tradition and the sailor becomes a central metaphor in many of his poems. Seamus Heaney's 'Peninsula' sums up one of the purposes of travel poetry: 'Unicode all landscapes' by 'things founded clean on their own shapes, water and ground in their extremity'. And Rupert Brooke does it too when he speaks of 'the imperious mystery of the way' in his 'Night Journey'. There are hundreds of poets writing travel poems today when travel has become much easier and more common than ever before.

2

Travel poems, unlike most travelogues in prose, prove that we are reservoirs of non-linear, non-temporal, non-spatial memories. We have a tendency to approximate what we see to places we already know as Ayyappa Paniker. demonstrates well in his poem 'Manhattan in Mattancherry' where he sees Manhattan in the little port-town of Mattancherry in Kerala . Benjamin Disraeli once summed up the paradox of travel thus: 'I have seen more than I remember and remember more than I have seen'. If Xuanzang, Faxian, Al-Biruni or Al-Idrisi had written poetry instead of prose inspired by their travels to India, they might have produced similar poems where the strange and mysterious are tamed by memory that turns them into the familiar and the graspable.

Whereas the writer of the travelogue emphasises

the monumental and the magnificent, poets of travel often discover the unseen and find significance in certain moments and contexts of personal life and of subjective encounters. Travel here is touched and transformed by imagination; the travel poem is not a catalogue of things seen or a historical description of the places visited. History certainly may come in, but obliquely, unobtrusively, to light up a present moment. For them it is as much a travel into themselves as into the outside world. They focus on the affective aspect of travel: impressions, insights, the politics and aesthetics of the small and the neglected. At times travel becomes just an excuse for a meditation on life, love, fortune, fall, joy, grief, mutability.

It is not necessary that a travel poem is about travel to the Moon or Mars or a remote country; it can be a short walk, aimless or otherwise; a bicycle ride, a journey to the interiors of your own village or the backyards of your town, a visit to some place within your state or province. Yet it is safer for purposes of definition to distinguish between an imagined travel- that always poets do- or an abstract contemplation based on travel ( like Robert Frost's 'The Road Not Taken') and a real travel , even if very short, intentional or otherwise, actually performed by the poet or, if you want to extend it a bit, by a character created by the poet. Otherwise every poem can be interpreted as a 'travel poem' of some sort and the genre will cease to have a distinct identity. But its forms can be different: it could be a sonnet or a lyric, a sequence or cycle of poems, an ode or a satire or even an elegy for a ruined monument or landscape, , a poem in blank verse or prose, an imagistic one or a descriptive one, a half-real and half-surreal one, one

with people or without.

The travelling poet is not just a tourist fascinated by places and monuments already celebrated and well-known, the substance of travel guides and tourist information pamphlets, and even when he writes of such things, his gaze is very different from that of a tourist and the poem is not a piece of publicity for the place. He creates his poetry from the incoherence of innumerable sights and sounds, persons and objects, signs and symbols, foregrounding some and backgrounding others, realising some as concrete and treating others in the abstract just as a painter, say, like Turner, Titian or Rousseau in the past or like Cezanne or Dali or Ramkumar closer to our times, may do with a landscape.

3

In a sense writing a poem about travel is a kind of second travel. The poet ruminates over what she had encountered, chooses some things and events, leaves out others, adds the colour and texture of her imagination and transforms the experience, raising it to the realm of the aesthetic. She may bring disparate memories together, travel in time to the past or future, philosophise, turn what she sees or experiences into a metaphor with a more lasting significance or into an occasion for semantic or semiotic play, rewind the travel in slow motion or fast motion, change the meaning given to a place or a monument by earlier travellers by bringing to it a new angle of vision and language, map the map-less, construct or deconstruct notions and beliefs, de-cliché a scene or an event by re-locating it in her imagination and viewing it afresh. She often moves

away from the picturesque and the carnivalesque and invests scenes with symbolic potential. The termination of the travel thus becomes the beginning of another, the set space becomes contingent and the real time assumes casualness. The traveller is a pilgrim without a god and travelling means changing the co-ordinates, leading to the realisation of identity as flux rather than fixed. She is caught by the pitiless rapidity of things, their incessant movements across time and space. She detracts from the prescriptions and holy scriptures of travel, its do's and don'ts, the whole ideology built around travel by tourist departments, agents and travel columnists in journals.

Sigmund Freud had seen the act of travelling as 'a disturbance of memory on the Acropolis'. It is to him a form of patricide as it comes from a desire to break the boundaries drawn by the father, a derealisation of the originally conceived reality. Travel can be power as it was with the colonisers and the conquistadors, but it can also mean disempowerment when you are in the land of the more powerful and the more knowledgeable. I believe the British in India must have experienced this schism; they had to convince themselves and their subjects of their superiority while the wiser among them actually knew that India was a much greater and older civilization than theirs. There is no better allegory than Gulliver's travels that highlights these twin aspects though in the islands of the small people as well as the big, Gulliver finds himself opposed and challenged as the spirit of freedom and identity transcends the dimensions of the physical. The traveller-poet is not entirely free from this schism. Though her intention is not to conquer or colonise but is only to tem-



porarily inhabit an unknown space, she cannot be free from her cultural burden that estranges or endears, scares or seduces. And it is likely that something of that response qualifies the architecture of her work or creates a tonal or textural linguistic penumbra around it. Exterior things become a manifestation of the interior, self reflects it. It is preceded by a de-territorialisation as well as a re-territorialization.

If the Platonic Sophists had found travel indispensable to the gathering of wisdom, Indian aestheticians had seen it as essential to the growth of a poet's creativity. For example, Kshemendra, the 12<sup>th</sup> century theoretician of poetry says in his treatise *Kavikantabharanam* : ' A poet should learn with his eyes the forms of leaves/ he should know how to make the people laugh when they are together/ he should get to see what they are really like / he should know about oceans and mountains in themselves/ and the sun and the moon and the stars/ his mind should enter into the seasons/ *he should go among many people, in many places/ and learn their languages.*' (Verses 10-11, Tr. A. K. Ramanujan; italics mine). This in fact was part of the poets' practice, especially during the Bhakti –Sufi period. Going by traditional belief , Tirumular the Tamil Siddha came from Kashmir and some other Siddhas came from Arabia, China and other distant lands; two Sufis, Pir Muhamed and Mastan Sahib are also listed among them. Kabir, Mirabai, Akka Mahadevi, Tukaram, Chakradhar, Chaitanya as well as most of the Sufis and Bauls are also well known for their itinerant disposition. There have been some wandering poets in our time too besides poets who leave no chance to travel inside or outside the country. They have seen

travel differently, just as Badiou or Bachelard, Deleuze or Derrida, Heidegger or Foucault have done, ‘as rites of passage, symbolic and religious journey of life, displacement from the oneiric home, a beginning of consciousness towards something, the entry into or departure from the shore and a being towards death’ ( Arup K. Chatterjee, ‘Travel and Sophism’, Editorial, *Cold Noon*, Issue 6, 2.3, July 2013, p iii) There is a whole science of travel that could well be termed ‘nomadology’ as Guilles Deleuze and Felix Guttari do in their book, *Nomadology, the War Machine* ( Seattle, 2010) What the nomadic poet does often is to either juxtapose or to integrate conflicting spatial identities and practises through the aesthetic ordering of language. Wandering as Anatole France once said ‘re-establishes the original harmony which once existed between man and the universe.’ Even while travelling abroad or admiring other landscapes and cultures, most poets experience an umbilical pull that finally leads them back to their location as a source and stimulus for writing as is evident in the case of most of our diasporic writers, even though some of them revel in exoticising their country and culture through an estranged gaze. Travelling is a way of getting out of oneself. D H Lawrence points to this when he says it is ‘getting out of the glass-bottle of our ego, escape like the squirrels in the cage of our personality’. The travelling poet is often not aware of the secret destinations that he may arrive at when she tries to articulate her experience illumined by memory and imagination.

Henri Lefebvre looked at travel as a moment of self-fashioning. He quotes Octavio Paz for his epigraph for the book, *The Production of Space* ( Basil Blackwell, 1981)

‘Imprisoned by four walls  
to the North, the crystal of non-knowledge  
a landscape to be invented  
to the South, reflective memory  
to the East, the mirror  
to the West, stone and the song of silence

I wrote messages, but received no reply.’ (‘Envoy’) and later goes on to say ‘The power of the landscape does not derive from the fact that it offers itself as a spectacle, but rather from the fact that as mirror or mirage, it presents any susceptible viewer with an image at once true and false of a creative capacity which the subject (or ego) is able, during a moment of marvellous self-deception, to claim as his own’ ( p. 189) The poet makes this claim in those beautiful creative moments of composition, turning what may have been self-deception into an everlasting monument in language. She creates new unorthodox spaces whose geography is half-real and half-unreal. Technology has done two things to this production of semi-real landscapes: one is the speed it has brought to life, what Milan Kundera calls the ecstasy of technology that has led to the loss of that leisure people had to contemplate the vastness of the world, to lie down in the wilderness, may be with a book and a cup of wine and a beloved to turn it into Omar Khayyam’s paradise and watch stars rising like ‘God’s windows opening in the sky’. The second

is the ease of access, not only of places because of the new ways of travel, but of information about the places too opened up by the world-wide-web. This has taken the adventure away from most kinds of travel as also one of the purposes of travel. But this has lent a new importance to travel poetry which seldom deals with adventure or information, unlike a lot of travelogues, but creates spaces of imagination instead. The poet is able to imagine the whole from the fragment. To recall Stephen Greenblatt speaking in another context ‘The discoverer sees only a fragment and then imagines the rest in the art of appropriation. The supplement that imagination brings to vision expands the perceptual field, encompassing the distant hills and valleys or the whole of an island or an entire continent, and the bit that has actually been seen becomes by metonymy a representation of the whole.’ ( *Marvellous Possessions*, Chicago, 1991, p. 122) While Greenblatt argues that Columbus and other discoverers had cunningly yoked the experience of the marvellous, central to art and philosophy to the service of colonial appropriation, he also shows that the experience of the marvellous is not necessarily an agent of empire: in writers as different as Herodotus, Jean de Léry, and Montaigne—and notably in *Mandeville’s Travels*, the most popular travel book of the Middle Ages—wonder is a sign of a remarkably tolerant recognition of cultural difference. I believe this holds all the more true for travel poetry that appreciates difference and also goes beyond it to the universal springs of human creativity across cultures. The poet rewrites space in order to make it home-worthy. Guy Debord, the French Situationist and the author of the much-discussed work, *The So-*

*ciety of the Spectacle* (1967) has introduced the term 'psychogeography' that means imagining an alternative geography to urban landscape that un-conceals the 'mystery' behind its monotonous symbolism of advertisements, apparent cosmopolitanism, and capitalist architecture. It is the study of the specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of the individuals. This presupposes a re-visioning of space that creates a world that is internal, challenging the fixity of spaces and the reification it engenders. What the poet of travel does is precisely creating this alternative space that deals more with affects than with the material world she encounters. This involves also a reorganisation of language that is adequate to capture that other world where the past and the present is in conversation and reality meets its dream-counterpart.

This I know is a retrospective reflection on what I, like many of my contemporaries across the world, have been trying to do when we write a poem inspired by travel. The mystery of poetry is hard to domesticate and any attempt to explain, categorise and demystify it is certain to remain incomplete. I hope the poems collected in this book will have partly validated and partly interrogated this feeble attempt to build a theory of poetics around those complex creatures of imagination stimulated by my wanderings away from home which simultaneously define and extend the idea of home.

K. Satchidanandan  
Shimla, 2016



## FROM INDIAN SKETCHES

### THE STREET ARTIST OF THRISSUR

Yes, the same fellow:  
that queer little tramp  
in a corner of the city -square.  
The figures he scrawls these days  
with charcoal and red sandstone  
have begun to scare me.

He had begun with lovely sketches:  
tender like the summer evenings  
that descend over the meadows:  
the graceful Lakshmi on her lotus,  
the blue lover-God with his flute,  
a happy Rama newly coronated.  
How nimble must be those fingers  
that could never draw a Rudra,  
a Narasimha, a Kalki, I used to wonder.

It was then that red and black , ominous,  
began to dominate his pictures.  
White, green, blue, yellow,  
he gave them all up one after the other.  
The figure he now draws has  
a bleeding scimitar and the severed head  
of Darika, the monster, in her hands.  
She wears a garland of skulls.  
His colours, once soothing, electrify now.  
Durga, Durga, Durga.: he draws her picture,  
erases it and draws again all day.  
He does not speak a word;  
just writes in red below the painting:

*It Is Durgapooja Today*

As in a drowning man's memory, again and again,  
images rise up whirling within me:  
that artist's dumb frown, emaciated body,  
tangled hairs, fiery eyes, his Durga's terrible face,  
the monster's dangling head,  
her scimitar dripping with blood,  
her eight swirling arms...

If it had been just his self that he expressed  
I could have ignored it, like poetry;  
but I know, he is giving expression today  
to history: her irrepressible rage,  
her inevitable revenge.



## THE MINER OF DHANBAD

A dawn rises in your dream, but  
you return to the coal's dark longings.  
Shovelling centuries back you return  
To the fiery springs and  
the merry beats of yore, through  
the pre-historic dreams of a sunlit village  
and the screaming skulls of  
its unhappy ancestors.  
Earth lies unaware of the acid and dust  
that slowly assume the shape of death  
in your toil-torn lungs  
You shovel the coal, but  
your naked children howl in surprise  
when the train speeds by.

My brother nameless and unknown,  
Even you do not know but for you  
the heart of your Bihar,  
its head raised like a sea-horse's,  
ceases to beat.  
Your mind is dry, sterile,  
like River Damodar in summer.  
Even the Buddha of Gaya  
ignores your prayers.

But tomorrow a sun will rise  
from the flickering flame  
of your half-charred heart.  
You will find your ancestors' dreams  
In the single staring eye  
of the train, burning.

## THE BEGGAR OF KONARK

On this sea shore  
between the singing stones  
and love-lit eyes  
a fingerless hand.

Between the elephant and the lion,  
between the peacock and the damsel,  
a tottering step.

Between the war-horse in harness  
And the warrior, headless,  
A petrified look.

Between *dharma* and *artha*,  
between *kama* and *moksha*,  
a fluttering, falling rag.

Between the visitors' laughter  
and the couples' whisper,  
a hopeless, disturbing cry.  
These stones burn with ancient lust.  
Only death's dark footsteps  
In his charred nerves.

The nymphs of the dancing hall  
turn bats at night and swoop down  
to drain his blood.

The ghosts of the soldiers  
the great war had killed

give him nightmares.

This huge granite chariot-wheel  
rolls along , crushing  
his feeble flesh.

The wind that trumpets  
drawing circles with his trunk  
on the sand-dunes,  
and the sea that roars  
shaking her mane  
say the same thing:

When the present is dark,  
day does not visit  
even the temple of the sun.  
There is no dungeon  
worse than the past.

1974

## TRAVELLER'S JOURNALS

### MYSORE PALACE

Which way to Mysore palace?  
Take this gate or that,  
but there is no way out.

### SREERANGAPATTAM

(at Tipu Sultan's tomb)

Everyone wins three battles;  
it is the fourth that kills them.  
This is how all sieges end:  
Camphor, coins, tourists.  
Chivalry does not suit our times.

## OOTY

Chill is a beast one can easily tame,  
and greenness, the most familiar bird.  
The flowers that fled poetry  
have found refuge in this valley.  
The last boat-song  
sways in the lake.

## MUTHUMALA

Poets mourn the death of forests,  
and forests, of poetry.  
Scared of all mourning,  
spring keeps away from both.

## MAHANADI

How wide is Mahanadi?  
Those who had measured it at  
different spots had different views.  
They were sure only of its length.  
But the fishermen could tell ;  
they are the centuries.

## GOA

I did not see Goa. I saw only  
the sea's taut bow; the sand's  
shrugging shoulders,  
the coconut trees' sun,  
the crosses' wine.  
Where, tell me, is Goa?

## TAJ: DAY

The final, fatal dance of the Sun  
on the subdued Kalindi,  
a pale, thin symphony  
blowing over the tourists and merchants.  
The symphony's name:  
Marguerita Denegris.<sup>1</sup>

## TAJ: NIGHT

Moonlight's *jaijivanti*<sup>2</sup>  
over the Kalindi of darkness.  
In the mist of the Arabian Nights  
music, wine, love, solitude.  
The solitude's name:  
Kazuko Shiraishi<sup>3</sup>

## FATEHPUR SIKRI

The religion of the little bird  
flitting about in Akbar's palace is green.

The suppressed desire of the harems  
turned these stones hot and red.

Those who came to complain to the king  
froze to become these pillars  
and the palace guards turned into  
the warm winds over this dried-up lake.

The Emperor left for Indraprastha.

## QUTUB MINAR

A deer trapped in this *minar*  
stretched its neck to become a giraffe:  
this was not how evolution began.

A Persian *ghazal* married an Indian fairy:  
this was not how the human race came to be.

The last emperor and the last slave  
have not yet jumped down from  
the top of this *minar*.  
Still I read in these ruins  
evolution, creation, the end to power.

Here I am a Sufi.

## SUMMER IN DELHI

Summer in Delhi is a mother  
rushing to the hospital  
with her half-charred infant.

The emperors  
already sweating in the tombs  
cannot afford to welcome  
another corpse.

The cuckoo's song turns  
into the train's smoke.

1985

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Marguerita Denegris: Greek painter, companion in the trip to  
Agra

<sup>2</sup> Jaijaivanti: A Hindusthani raga

<sup>3</sup> Kazuko Shiraishi: Japanese poet, another companion in the trip  
to Agra



## THE WESTERN CANTO 1

### ROME, RAIN

*To Tasos Denegris, Greek poet*

The rain in Rome springs  
from the eyes of the Mother,  
her slain son in her lap.  
The rain dissolves  
the footprints of the Exodus.  
The guiding star  
is drowned in a deluge.  
A crow from the Colosseum  
announces the last century of Man.  
A bomber screeches above St.Peters.

*St. Peters, Rome, 8 May*

## HYMN TO WINE

*To Izet Sarajlic, Croatian poet*

Wine was in the heart of God.  
He poured it down  
to create vineyards.

Raise the cup to your lips,  
and you are kissing the Earth.  
Each droplet sings in the blood,  
a lark, as we turn into  
the cherry trees of spring.  
Our arms flower, breeze whispers  
love into our leaves,  
our roots press on, past summers,  
past hells, past the battle's bones  
and the buried dreams,  
until they discover that magic spring  
whose sacred water unites  
all humans on Earth.

Every cup you raise for a neighbour  
is a hymn in glass  
for him who had turned  
water into wine.

*Hotel Central, Sarajevo, 10 May*

## THE POET'S STATUE

*To Husein Tahmiscic, Serbian poet*

Which is the substance  
solid enough to make the poet's statue?  
One's own flesh.  
Won't flesh decay?  
Posterity awaits at the edge of decrepitude;  
it will rebuild it in its own image.

Who is the sculptor  
skilled enough to make the poet's statue?  
One's own time.  
Won't time change?  
Each coming age will mould it anew  
in the fire of its awakening.

What is the form of the poet's statue?  
The form of water.  
Isn't water formless?  
Water takes the form it is given:  
pitcher, puddle, cloud,  
rain, river, sea.

What is the colour of the poet's statue?  
The colour of nothingness.  
Isn't nothingness colourless?  
It's bright in daylight, black at night,  
blue in heights and depths.  
It's sexless, so it knows  
the joys of man and woman.  
Its taste keeps changing:

*No Borders For Me* Travel Poems

salty in sweat, bitter in wine,  
sweet in fruit, sight in the eye.  
It has no feelings: so its own,  
all pleasures and pains.  
It is ignorant, so it can hold all wisdom  
It has no meaning,  
so it can receive all meaning.  
Its name is just a sign,  
and so is its country.  
We may call it whatever we choose.

Aleksa Santic?  
Why not?

*In front of the statue of poet Aleksa Santic,  
Mostar, 11 May*

## WE LIVE ON ISLANDS

*To Dorota Chroscielewska, Polish poet*

“What use are these flowers? Will their touch  
rouse the dead children?  
Will the birds’ song break open prisons?”

Dorota, our life is a grey wind  
blowing over ruins.  
We landed on different islands,  
living on our dead brothers, clinging still  
to the memories of a ship-wreck.  
Our brief day is a bird’s tail on fire.  
It is death that weaves dawn’s silk here,  
fattening itself on the night’s leaves.

We live on islands.

Hear the oceans of blood  
heaving inside the graveyards.  
Hear the kids from the birds’ throats:  
Moso, David, Esther, Jakov:  
childhoods choked to death in the gas chambers.  
O, how we smuggled in battle-songs  
inside lullabies! How we gifted one another  
bombers for toys!

We live on islands.  
Our kisses explode one another.  
The god of the dance sequence  
plays the killer in the war scene.  
Here blossoms bust out of knee-stumps.

*No Borders For Me* Travel Poems

Fear rules all the seasons of our tale.  
Tanks roll along the same lane  
spring comes along.

We live on islands.

Dorota, our words are ants  
that drag in only headless corpses.  
Our language is a house on fire.  
Music jumped out of it long ago,  
burns all over.  
Our spring is the sigh of survivors  
on the mountain tops,  
their prophecies all dried up.  
Don't ask me to forget  
the blood on our hands.  
These carnations are no excuse:  
they were all once the victims' eyes.

Dorota, these flowers are for  
our own hearts, long ago dead.

*At the War Memorial, Mostar, 12 May*

## ON THE MOUNTAINS

*To Helen Knopper, Dutch poet*

Life becomes endurable  
on top of the mountains.  
A levity never met below  
turns us into clouds.  
You forget the grief  
Of not having children,  
and I , of having.  
A mountain track reaches down  
like a Gypsy's tattooed arm,  
and returns, its hands full  
of the valley's scents.  
Along the right is the route  
to the lost Paradise, and to the left  
to the Valley of the Dead.  
We are here trapped inside a legend.  
The heroes who chased justice and  
the princes who went to free their beloveds  
surround us turned into rocks.

We tether the poem we rode  
Onto a poplar, and look for the giant.  
He surprises us from behind: a chill wind.  
One touch, and we grow old, shivering.  
The golden flute of the setting sun  
sings of the distant Himalayas.  
The great peace beyond birth and death  
envelopes us, a sea of green.

We are now two hermits  
in the caves of Mount Meru.

*On Trebevic Mountains, 13 May*

## THE BIRTH OF RIVERS

*To David Harsent, British poet*

This is how rivers are born:  
One day the hill's body aches and splits,  
a spring leaps out like a meteor.  
With him the buried cities come back:  
the gigantic loves of dinosaurs, felled trees of old,  
tribal goddesses, Adam and Eve,  
the lost Paradise, the denied light,  
God's remembrance of the earlier universe.

The children dancing around him  
have discovered the secret of creation  
between a rock and a beech tree.

And the Wise, they filter the water for gold:  
a new solar system in the mould,  
a new spring, new Christ, once again  
for us to crucify.

*At the Bosnian Spring, 14 May*



## FRANKFURT

*To John Kendrick , American poet*

Mephisto is now a machine  
that grants any wish.  
Press a button, and Helen arrives  
for Faust, straight from B C E.  
Policemen with shotguns  
hum the Ninth symphony.

*Frankfurt, 16 May*

1987

## THE BELL AND THE MATCH BOX

In a riverside shop in Mostar  
I saw a bell made of glass,  
love's fingerprints that sculpted it  
with sunlight still fresh on its skin.  
A whole people sentenced to silence  
seemed to speak through its tongue.  
The shopkeeper, a Turk, brushed it  
with care, as if it were a heart.

When he rang it to tempt me,  
its mandolin voice  
carried me to my village:  
the dance of the setting sun  
on coconut leaves,  
the fragile laughter of kids  
afraid of the end of their play.  
Then chirping like a sparrow  
The bell fell silent. I feared  
It would break on my way  
to India. No, I would not be able  
to stand its blood. "Sorry,"  
I told the eager Turk.  
Instead I just bought a match box,  
Turkish embroidery on it:  
I knew though it would get soaked  
in the incessant rains of my land.

Now whenever I look at its  
wet sticks, I recall those brave  
young men I had seen plunging  
into the river from that  
ancient bridge in Mostar

*No Borders For Me* Travel Poems

to turn into bubbles of blood  
I recall too the anklets of that glass-bell  
whenever I see the footprints  
of the dried up stream in my village.

Outside, our time, like a clock,  
its tongue pulled out.

1987

## THE WESTERN CANTO 2

*(North Macedonia, August 21-25, 2019)*

### ISTANBUL

*(For Azita Ghahreman, Iranian poet)*

Tattooing a flying pigeon  
is not like painting a horn  
on a still horse.

Six hours left.

Stitching back to shape  
a heart torn by words  
without shedding blood  
is not like gluing together  
the pieces of a flower -vase  
flung down in rage.

Five hours left.

Keeping awake in a midnight shelter  
in an alien land is not  
like sleeping soundly in your village home  
certain the rooster's call

will wake you up at dawn  
Four hours left  
Screaming through poetry  
through an entire lifetime  
is not like a mother's  
celebration of her labour pain.  
Three hours left

The heartbeat of a thesaurus  
while looking for the apt word  
is not like the twinkling of the lexicon  
turned by Midas into a dead object.  
Two hours left.

The whimpering of even a mosquito's blood  
on your murderous palms  
is not like staining your hand by  
erasing the writing on the wall  
One hour left.

The hawks that circle around  
in the new battlefields' sky  
are not like the butterflies  
fluttering in classical gardens.

No more hours are left now.  
Stars break into pieces  
in the silence of stilled dreams.  
I bow my head before  
the mystery of the universe.

*(Istanbul airport, waiting at night for the flight to Skopje)*

## DINNER

*(For Nikolai Mazdarov, poet from Macedonia)*

Many languages fly up  
from the poets' dinner table:  
as if that table were still the tree  
where birds used to roost.  
They swoop down on each plate,  
taste diverse worlds.

Struga's wine turns all languages  
into one: that of love's intoxication.  
Nikola speaks Macedonian in Malayalam  
I speak Malayalam in Albanian  
Asmaa's Arabic and Hava's Hebrew  
Hug each other free from all enmity.  
Farook's Bosnian offers  
an ardent kiss to Anja's German.  
Rafael's Spanish has a romantic chat  
with Anton's Bulgarian  
Gantsetseg's Mongolian moves  
hand in hand with Istvan's Hungarian.  
in an exciting East-West dance.

Chritopher's English observes  
everything from a distance,  
striving hard to make himself believe  
that its Empire has not yet set.

*(Hotel Drim, Struga)*

## THE CHURCH

*(For Ana Blandiana, Romanian poet)*

Standing inside the dark cave  
in the ancient church  
on the lake's shore I recall  
the monks who sat here in meditation.  
The humble prayers of those naïve monks  
for the world's well-being  
must have dissolved in the  
chill breeze from the lake.  
Their naked knees must have  
got calloused by their repeated kneeling  
on these sharp rocks.

Did the apparition of a black Jesus  
in a crown of thorns  
divide the lake or split the rocks apart  
to illumine in the semidarkness  
of their sacred hymns?

Getting out I find on my aching feet  
A drop pf orphaned blood.  
*(St Michael Cave-Church, Struga)*

## THE DANCE

*(For Monika Herceg, poet from Croatia)*

She dances in the bar,  
a black curtain for background  
After each step she makes  
a little cut with a razor-blade  
on the vein on her wrist.

She sings on the flood-lit stage  
After every refrain she pulls out  
one of her teeth with tweezers

She dances in the blue darkness  
After each turn of the head  
she lights a matchstick  
to set fire to a handful of her hairs

In yellow neon-light  
she picks up a guitar.  
After each movement she pulls out  
a fingernail with pincers.

In red light she raises a cup of wine  
for all the men in the crowd  
She takes a sip and then  
plucks out a nipple  
and throws it at them.

The dancehall is all wet now  
The bar is on fire  
I see only blood

Blood  
stares  
at me,  
me alone.

*(Tikves Winery, on way to Skopje from Struga)*



## THE LAKE

*(For Rafael Soller, Spanish poet)*

Ohrid Ohrid Ohrid  
I recite your name  
like a magic chant

I dip my hand in  
your tranquil blue, like  
dipping the steel pen  
in the inkwell in my childhood  
It comes up like a kingfisher  
with a handful of words,  
a handful : water. depth.  
eyes. speech. stillness.  
finitude. infinity.  
turquoise. emerald. azure.  
Some words slide and slip  
through the fingers like fish  
and twist and turn in the water.

Mazdarov is singing a song  
The boat oscillates on its waves  
I remember our boat-songs.  
Only we five go to the lake's springs  
in a valley in a canoe  
Springs burst out laughing from  
the sand beneath the emerald green,  
chattering incessantly about the secrets  
under the earth, about the dead babies  
and their eyes turning into pearls.

Water reflects  
ancient churches.

*No Borders For Me* Travel Poems

people from many lands.  
Bells. Scripts. Millennial histories:  
all lake-blue, inside and outside  
leaving us to wonder  
whether it is sky or sea.

*(A 4-hour boat-trip on Lake Ohrid)*

## DISTANCES

*(To Asamaa Azaizeh, poet from Palestine)*

Landless one, I know the secret  
of this hair, curly like the Arab script:  
you hide in this your  
severed Palestinian roots.

Homeless one, I know the secret  
Of your legs, lean like sugarcane:  
They are full of the aching memories  
of your walks in search of your house.

Your eyes grew so dark and moist  
watching kids draw gallows  
instead of olive trees.  
Your limbs grope and reach up to  
Jerusalem, Ramallah, Kibbutz and Tulkarm  
And come back stained with the blind  
blood of children from their streets.

You write a script for a film  
unlikely to be played in an  
abandoned theatre in Beirut;  
it is full of the heart beats of ghosts.

On your body they draw red lines  
as on a cadaver on a surgeon's table  
to be cut into pieces.  
Blood flow from every line;  
they draw the map of a country  
that does not yet exist.

You have stopped talking

about freedom so that the children  
have no illusions; instead you  
show them the sunflowers  
blooming on your belly.

And then you sit alone and  
mark the distance between  
the body and the bomb.

*(Walking around the St Naum Church with Asmaa)*

## FOUR LANGUAGES

*(For Arian Leka, poet from Albania)*

Albanian, Macedonian, English:  
By the time three poets finish reading  
three translations in three accents,  
I forget the language in which I write.  
Only a rhythm remains, a movement, a silence.

I look at the faces of the listeners.  
I retrieve my poem from their eyes  
and lips, from the wrinkles on their brow  
and the curves on their cheeks.

On all the faces I see Malayalam,  
the birds of Malayalam flying,  
twisting and turning, like its consonants,  
'ka', 'kha', 'ga', 'gha'.

*(Reading my poem 'When the Birds Come after Me' followed  
by three translations at the Modern Art Gallery, Skopje)*

## THE BRIDGE

*(For Ren Powell, American-Norwegian Poet)*

This is the bridge in Struga—  
Of poets and of languages.  
Many who read their poems from here  
Are no more: neither Auden nor Trastromer  
But their reflections still fall  
In the Drim river below  
They laugh through its bubbles  
Rise up as waves and greet their successors  
Reading poetry from the bridge.

When I read my poems,  
What the listeners below saw  
Was the reflection of AyyappaPaniker.

I am no more than an echo;  
All poets are. They together build  
A bridge of echoes.  
It encompasses the whole earth.  
Leaves, flowers, snow and moonlight  
Fall on it one after another'  
All the living and the non-living  
Pass through that bridge,  
With their reflections  
Falling on the river.

*(Poetry Reading on the Struga Bridge)*

## TWO RUSSIAN SEQUENCES

### 1

#### SNOW

*Moscow, Riga, January, 1988*

#### SNOW: ONE

*To Natalia*

Snow follows me wherever I go.  
Snowflakes dance like  
white-winged angels  
above the spires of St John's church.  
They hang Christmas stars from  
the bare fir trees, flutter like  
bright butterflies on our black coats  
to announce the spring, crown  
the Pushkin statue, rock and roll  
like white bears with polar memories  
on the Stepan street, ride the roofs of  
the trains of Kazan like  
the peasants of Bihar, swoop down

*No Borders For Me* Travel Poems

like white cranes in the harvested wheat fields,  
hoist the flags of doom in cities  
like the wings of the bleeding Jatayu,  
fly over the Volga like the mythical swans  
carrying secret love-messages.

Who dismounts the snow-horse this time:  
the tyrant or the saviour?  
See there, the sun's *kathakali* crown  
behind the mist's curtain.  
What is in the story,  
marriage, or murder?

*St Peter's Square, Moscow*



## THE FROZEN RIVER

*To Maria*

I cannot recall. Which hill  
of my life is this, eightieth  
or ninetieth? Here the sun  
does not rise nor set. Time's wheel  
has stopped, like a child's top  
stuck in sand. Kids fly on skates  
like wizards in search of the  
golden locks sticking out  
of the frozen river. The 'rainbow flower'  
that grants any wish is  
somewhere here.<sup>1</sup> Has the little chick  
that went to the co-co-co-land too  
gone under the snow?<sup>2</sup>  
That river below is my frozen past.  
The paper-boats of my gliding childhood  
and the gold-fish of my leaping adolescence  
sleep in the depths of that whiteness.  
As the river melts, the first child  
who arrives to pluck a lily  
will marvel at them.  
Will he then pick them up gently,  
like a stranger in an alien land  
discovering himself in my lines?

*Above River Maskwa*

## TOLSTOY IS NOT HERE

*For Rasool Gamzatov*

Tolstoy's shoes are here  
But not the distances they covered  
Tolstoy's glasses are here  
But not the depths they gauged  
Tolstoy's lantern is here  
But not the tender light it shed  
Tolstoy's dining table is here  
But not the griefs he ate.  
Tolstoy's pen is here  
But not its ink of solitude  
Tolstoy's manuscripts are here  
But not the anguish of Pierre and Anna  
Tolstoy's bust is here  
But not the readers who shaped it.

I am here  
I am not here.

*At the Tolstoy Museum*

## INDIAN LENIN

*To Anil Janamejay*

I offered him flowers and  
turned to leave. 'Stop', a whisper.  
Lenin's lips were moving.  
'Poet? From India? Bend down.  
I want to share a secret.  
I am Indian too. I was born there  
many times, as dancing peacock,  
golden eagle, deer, dog, rabbit  
offering its own flesh  
to the begging God, elephant  
gifting his bleeding tusks  
to melt the callous heart  
of his jealous wife from  
an earlier birth, monkey making a bridge  
of his own body to save his kin  
from a hunter-king and dying  
under their feet, the untouchable,  
blacksmith, mendicant, judge,  
scholar, prince. Through many births  
I wandered along the valleys of tears,  
to be born here, on Volga's banks  
one April, to recover this sleeping land  
from the floods of death and to  
illumine these dark lives like a lightning.'<sup>3</sup>

Lenin stopped. I read in those eyes:  
compassion, joy, brotherhood, sacrifice.

Come to India again, Bodhisattwa,  
we are reeling under tyrants, unable  
to recognise our own power.

*No Borders For Me* Travel Poems

We fight among ourselves instead of  
fighting the common foe. We have forgotten  
the tongue's mission, the backbone's function,  
drunk with his opiate treat. Come  
once again as compassionate wisdom,  
honest word and dauntless action.

This time it is the outcaste mother  
that dreams the white elephant  
holding aloft the lotus of freedom.<sup>4</sup>

*At the Lenin Mausoleum*

## HELL

*To painter Mara*

Which Shiva are you after  
In this white chaos of an urban Kailash,  
this orchard of dead trees?  
Where, in which half of  
the blue cosmos on your sad canvas  
is our dying earth? Where are the  
graveyards of the guiding stars?

Everyone is there among your  
dispassionate feminine forms  
but you. Where are you then?

You show me a dusty canvas, 'Hell'  
I can see your soul there, like  
a blue flame of scalding pain.

*At the house of Mara, an underground painter*

## THE LANGUAGE OF POETS

*To Andre who read my poems in Russian*

'Dear Andre, you are reading  
my poem in your language:  
are you sure it is mine?  
The memories it brings you  
are not mine, nor is its music.  
We live in two worlds.  
The audience applauds:  
You, or me?'

'Dear poet, all over the earth  
poets speak in the same tongue,  
the mother tongue of leaves, lizards  
and parrots. They ride the same horse  
made of fire, share the bread of  
a common dream, drink from  
the same bitter cup.

'They love all people,  
for they love their own. Their roots  
go deep into the earth so that  
they flower under every sky. They  
reach the truth of all things,  
for they shun the traps of systems.

'Dear poet, our Baltic's water fills  
your Indian Ocean too. The same snow  
roosts in our Ural and your Himalayas.  
Our pines and your palms hold  
the same moon in their locks. My lark  
sings on your shoulders, my star shines  
in your eyes.'

Dear Andre, you are reading  
your poem in my language:  
are you sure it is yours?

*Poetry Reading, Riga, now in Latvia*

## THE SEAGULL

*For poet Maurice Chaklais*

I am the seagull,  
The king of the blue.  
I fly like a missile,  
from West to east, from the past  
to the present to the future.  
My house is infinity,  
my wing and my sea.  
I go mad with the mad sky.  
I dance upon the waves with  
the sun during the day and  
At night sit in still joy,  
stars upon my shoulders.

Not for me the crowded feasts  
of Heaven; these lone rides I prefer.  
Riding the sea-storm between  
white whales and shooting stars  
I hear the hooves of that horse with  
seven reins and thousand eyes that  
draws the chariot of the sun,<sup>5</sup>  
hear too the ceaseless songs of  
the poets who mount him, songs  
of the earth, hymns to the sun.

For me the oceans are all one: water.  
My logic is the white logic of salt.

Cover the wounds of war, man, with  
this salt and wear my feather on  
your heart: eternity's snow-dust  
it carries will chasten your heart.

*No Borders For Me* Travel Poems

The ego that hides your greatness  
is but as sea-foam is to the coral:  
sweep it off and get dissolved  
in everything that moves and is still.

Touch, touch the sea of tears  
Of those who dream another sky,  
Another rainbow : freedom.



## SNOW: TWO

*(To Tanya, our interpreter)*

Dear Tanya, what is it  
That lies under this snow?  
The seeds of the next harvest?  
The blossoms of the bygone spring?  
The unsure steps of the King of the East?  
The raging rains of that October deluge?  
The thunderous cheers of the workers  
Swarming into the Winter Palace  
On that night of fleeting triumph?  
The dauntless steps of Lenin as he  
Walked into Smolny unarmed  
Amidst the enemy lines?

Or is it Yesenin's shy lyre that  
Got stuck in a frozen lake of tears and insults?  
The bleeding drum of Mayakovsky's  
Heart torn by love?? The chilling cry of  
Tsvetayeva that comes sailing in a coffin?  
Mandelstam's hot blood dreaming of rebirth?  
The growing toys of the Jewish kids  
Massacred in Babiyar? Piles of bombs  
eager to explode into clouds of widowhood?  
The blood of freedom that stained the  
Arrogant tanks rolling into the lands  
of Petofi and Fucik?

A lone lark sings from the showers of  
silvery snow in the Red Square:

*No Borders For Me* Travel Poems

‘ Patience, poet, patience! Trust  
the erring man. The thaw is not far.  
We will retrieve our rainbow  
sunk in this snow.’

*Red Square, Moscow*

1988

Notes:

<sup>1,2</sup> References to Russian tales for children.

<sup>3</sup>In the Jataka tales, Bodhisattva takes birth again and again in different forms until all beings attain salvation

<sup>4</sup>Yashodhara, Buddha’s mother, dreamt a white elephant, as a sign of Buddha’s imminent birth.

<sup>5</sup>Atharva Veda speaks of the Sun’s chariot in this fashion.

2

FRAGMENTS

*Hotel Akademi Cheskaya, Donskaya, Moscow, May 14-23*

EVERYDAY

Everyday a cup breaks;  
the sun flows out of it,  
bubbling.

Everyday an egg breaks;  
the spring rises from it  
on its five-coloured wings,  
singing.

Everyday earth breaks;  
a fountain bursts forth  
and babies rush out of it,  
laughing.

Everyday a heart breaks  
Poetry gushes out  
and clots.

KAMSA

Roaming along Kremlin  
once again I realize  
the transience of power.  
Empire after empire,  
finger after pointing finger  
gallows hanging on gallows:  
history rises here and falls  
like a tide that blots out  
the footprints of the emperor,  
the revolutionary and the  
counter-revolutionary  
one after another.

Christ is a refugee in this church  
the Buddha never arrived here,  
Lenin in his graveyard  
still awaits deliverance.

Yet at night, an apparition  
With a huge moustache  
marches shadow-less  
to and fro in my room.

He is awake everywhere  
ordering each subject  
to gift her new born  
to the palace.

## TEN O'CLOCK

Ten o' clock at night.  
The sun is yet to set.  
Don't ever, sun,  
solitude scares me.

Russia, wrinkled and grey  
sits huddled in the chill outside,  
a cross in her hand.  
Saints come back to life  
in the moonlight.  
Men and ghosts jostle against  
one another in the church.  
A bleeding forehead rises  
above the Moskwa river  
Children go on watching it  
until Lenin's contours  
slowly turn into Christ's.

1999

## THE PAINTERS' VALLEY

*(Coaker's Walk, Kodaikanal, April, 1990)*

I can see in the valley  
the orange of Turner's flaming sky  
Chagall's red oozing poetry  
The glistening brown of Gauguin's Tahiti women  
The burning yellow of Matisse's goldfish  
The pale violet of Degas' intense dancers  
The tender leaf hue of Duchamp's  
'Nude Descending the Staircase'

Here is Cezanne's pine  
and here Mondrian's apple tree  
The wind is playing Braque's broken violin  
Picasso's horse-head neighs from the hilltop  
Munch's skull screams from the bridge  
Dali's clocks are drying on the trees  
Birds beat their wings caught in  
Pollock's web of colours  
The smoke from Leger's pipe fills the valley

Still I like to be the lovable weight  
Of the baby Millet's mother holds,

*No Borders For Me* Travel Poems

to be the olive branch that fans and dries  
the sweat of Courbet's stone-crushers  
to drop down on the ploughed field  
as a golden grain of wheat from  
the fingers of Van Gogh's peasant,  
to multiply hundred-fold.

1990

## DILLI-DALI

### THE BIRDS OF DELHI

We are the birds of Delhi.  
We don't know who brought  
us here, from where.  
Our ancestors landed here  
with the *ghazal* and the *kathak*  
and nestled on the *minars*.  
Our grandmothers choking  
inside the harems wept over  
the lost woods, sang in grief  
and layed green eggs.

Then the British came.  
We knew only pure Persian.  
They did not understand us,  
so they snapped our wings.

We heard that freedom had risen  
over the Red Fort, but by then  
we had lost our sky.



All those who passed this way  
turned into roads. We now ride the ghosts  
of horses on the Humayun Road or  
of cars in the Dalhousie Square.  
We feed on the bookworms  
in Connaught Place and chatter from  
the corridors of the parliament house  
in the newly learnt Punjabi and Hindustani.  
We punctually return to our numbered nests.  
We are fine here, get our rations in time.  
We have no fear of extinction.  
Just one small problem: we have  
forgotten singing, for, we know  
Delhi is a trap; no one caught in  
this web of lanes has ever sung again.

1991

## HOME

E-104, Amar Colony, where you reach  
crossing the school for the blind,  
Raghuram temple, the long winding cries of  
vegetable vendors and the inviting odours  
of *bhelpuri* and *rajanigandha* flowers, is not my house.

Whoever occupies the second floor  
of B- 13, Kalkaji behind the Bahai temple,  
the paras cinema, the December mist  
and the freezing wind,  
it is not me.

I don't reside in Mayurvihar or Saritavihar.  
I have no houses in Janakpuri or Vikaspuri.  
I have hung around the seventeenth apartment  
in Alaknanda: but how can I know whether  
it is me who is living there unless  
someone comes out?

I have never been to Yusuf Sarai,  
I have no kin in Sheikh Sarai.  
Moolchand, the ration-dealer is not me,  
not even remotely related to me.  
Shyamsingh, the taxi –driver, does not  
Recognize me, nor do I, him.  
Even a sparrow will not listen to me  
if I say that nest on the neem tree is mine.  
Then there is the crow named Ashtavakra,  
That leaps from antenna to antenna  
And that black cat, Gajmukh,

That flies from balcony to balcony:  
They go on changing houses.

I asked the tortoise carrying its home  
On its back: Where is my home?  
He ( she) just withdrew his (her) head.  
I asked the silk-worm in her leaf-house,  
The snakes in their hollows in Sarojini Nagar,  
The apes in their iron cages in the zoo,  
the parrot in the fortune teller's wire- nest,  
all in vain. Then I asked the black dog Kali  
royally barking away in front of his bungalow.  
He just wagged his black tail and groaned.

I roamed the labyrinths of many a street,  
Got into buses with different numbers.  
But all the houses looked alike  
and bore the same number as in  
an Arabian Nights tale.

I felt like knocking on the doors  
Hoping my daughters would open one  
And come running to me with  
outstretched arms.  
I pressed my ears to every door:  
no, it was some strange language,  
not of love anyway.

Wandering I crossed the bridge .  
There it was: a green courtyard  
brimming with yellow flowers,  
green walls, green curtains.

*No Borders For Me* Travel Poems

I opened the gate painted green  
and rushed in.

On the front wall  
In inviting green it was written:  
CREMATORIUM.

## THE THIRD TREE

Trees, yes.  
I recognize the neem  
and the peepal..  
But that third tree with  
small leaves: what is that?  
Not tamarind: it has no red ants  
Not gooseberry: no black ants.  
Mango tree would have squirrels  
and jack fruit tree, crows.  
Its leaves are not as close together  
As those of the pomegranate,  
Nor as deep green as of lime.

That third tree even parrots avoid,  
Its trunk so strange and twisted,  
Its odour so unfamiliar and repulsive:  
Which is that tree?

Coconut trees are far away.  
Even the breeze smells of mustard oil.

I don't like *kathak*..

## LANGUAGES

Languages do not have homes here.  
Kashmiri, a sleepless refugee  
sits in a street corner in Green Park,  
the green dreams of the valley in her knapsack.

Punjabi, guru-faced yet illiterate,  
blood flooding his memory,  
sits weary and pale,  
his head on the steering of a taxi.

Tamil sweats in her rags,  
sweeping courtyards and  
washing the kitchenware.

Malayalam, his hopes of a  
new world crushed, walks shoeless  
in the unwelcome winter,  
clothed in the factory's soot.

Telugu decked in cheap satin  
and marigolds, waits under the flyover  
for a single night's partner.

Languages have no houses.

Haryanvi screams from the maize field,  
her head in bleeding palms,  
scared of her master.

Maithili is still in the woods.\*  
Chattisgarhi and Braj cling to each other

like two frightened kids  
in the shadow of the roc-bird  
rising from the television screen.

Vaishnavi, stark naked,  
Her hairs let loose, laughs madly  
From her rock-throne.  
Urdu sings the last *ghazal*  
Standing under the huge thighs  
Of a Bollywood heroine.

I long to build a palace for  
these refugees among the tombs:  
I, who has not yet found a home.  
I stutter in broken words,  
in twisted sounds from some other body.  
Which of the three tongues I use  
during the day is truly mine?  
or is it the pure language of mystery  
I speak in my dreams at night?

My language rises from the street:  
the obstinate cry of the new-born orphan.  
O, Lords of men on earth,  
here comes my language,  
his feet dirty with the gutter's slime.  
It climbs up the steps,  
steps it climbs up, to lead, to rule,  
steps of the country's parliament,  
climbs, climbs the gallows,  
climbs the Mount Calvary.

## LOVE IN THE CITY

Love in the city is  
a drop of cold water  
thrown over red-hot iron.  
It leaves only smoke  
that burns the heart.

Love in the city is  
a rose flung from  
one speeding vehicle to another.  
It gets squeezed between the two velocities  
leaving only a bloodstain on the street.

Love in the city is  
a pair of wandering shoes  
in search of a room,  
punctured by sharp stones.  
The beloved, her fire-test over,  
vanishes through its hole leaving  
only dry memories of green woods.

Love in the city is  
like the sky in the city.  
We know it is there;  
but wherever we turn,  
we see only walls.

Love in the city is  
The one smuggled-in cyanide pill  
The prisoner manages to take at last.  
He would never know  
whether it tastes sweet or bitter.



## THIS BEAST IS A MAN

This beast is a man.  
These eyes peering out of the torn sack  
once played flute.  
Now a village floats in them, dead.

This is half lamb, half wolf.  
Which sun will weave its wool  
into a blanket for its freezing winter?  
Which orchard will feed it  
When choked by hunger?  
Which tree shall be  
its roof in scorching summer?

The village drove it away.  
The city will not admit it.  
Sitting huddled in this alien fog  
The truth is revealed to  
this Buddha of the street :  
Bread is remoter than the moon.  
Earth derailed from its orbit  
is slowly moving away from the sun.

## SUMMER IN DELHI

Summer in Delhi is a mother in panic  
running to the doctor  
with her half-charred infant.

The emperors already sweating in  
the tombs cannot afford to  
welcome one more corpse.

The song of the cuckoo  
instantly turns into the smoke of trains.

TAJ, AGAIN

Ask the whip that fell on the worker's back  
how beautiful Taj Mahal is.

Let the mad elephant in chains  
tell us how strong iron is.

The camel dying in the desert  
knows best how deep water is.

Find out from the frog in the well  
the ocean's magnitude.

He who must grow into a shepherd  
must be born in the manger.

He who should find the peepal's wisdom  
must renounce the palace.

## QUTUB MINAR

A deer trapped in this *minar*  
stretched its neck and  
turned into a giraffe:  
this was not how evolution began.

A Persian *ghazal*  
married an Indian fairy:  
this was not how  
the human race came to be.

The last king and the last slave  
have not yet jumped down  
from the top of this *minar*.

Yet I read in these ruins: evolution,  
creation, the end to evil power.  
Here I am a *Sufi*.

## HASTINAPUR

Pointing to a huge mound of earth  
Covered with grass the guide said:  
This was Hastinapur.  
That moment I became Vedavyasa.

## TOMORROW, HERE

The lullaby of the New World  
rises from the Stock Exchange.  
Come invest in this revolution:  
tomorrow Sonal Mansingh dances here.

1992

\*Maithili is the name of a language as well as a name of Sita, Rama's abandoned wife.

## THE NORTHERN CANTO

### HOW TO GO TO THE TAO TEMPLE

Don't lock the door.  
Go lightly like the leaf in the breeze  
along the dawn's valley.  
If you are too fair,  
cover yourself with ash.  
If too clever, go half-asleep.  
That which is fast  
will tire fast :  
be slow, slow as stillness.

Be formless like water.  
Lie low, don't even try to go up.  
Don't go round the deity:  
nothingness has no directions,  
no front nor back.  
Don't call it by name,  
its name has no name.  
No offerings: empty pots  
are easier to carry than full ones.  
No prayers too: desires

have no place here.

Speak silently, if speak you must:  
like the rock speaking to the trees  
and leaves to flowers.

Silence is the sweetest of voices  
and Nothingness has  
the fairest of colours.

Let none see you coming  
and none, going.  
Cross the threshold shrunken  
like one crossing a river in winter.  
You have only a moment here  
like the melting snow.

No pride: you are not even formed.  
No anger: not even dust  
is at your command.  
No sorrow: it doesn't alter anything.  
Renounce greatness:  
there is no other way to be great.  
Don't ever use your hands:  
They are contemplating  
not love, but violence.

Let the fish lie in its water  
and the fruit, on its bough.  
The soft one shall survive the hard,  
like the tongue that survives teeth.  
Only the one who does nothing  
can do everything.

Go, the unmade idol  
awaits you.

*(Tao Temple, Chu- Fu)*

## THE LAST EMPEROR

The last emperor is dumb.  
His voice comes  
from behind the curtain.  
His gestures mean little; grown-ups  
read meanings into them.  
When he puts a doll to sleep  
they declare curfew in capital.  
His dream is peopled with  
white little rabbits, but  
they say he is dreaming of attacks.  
If he quarrels with a black kitten  
they declare war against  
the neighbouring state.

Nothing would've happened  
to the country had he not been there.  
But how can we people  
do without an emperor,  
even if a child,  
to tell us how to live?

*(Forbidden City, Beijing)*



## ON THE GREAT WALL

I don't believe in walls. I believe  
in water. In water, roots, love,  
for they work against walls.  
All walls are founded in blood,  
Of men, beasts, plants.

Nor do I cherish borders.  
Those who jealously guard them  
are the very ones who created them.  
From the mirage that divides  
one century from another,  
we watched the fragility  
of the borders we had made.  
From the world's redrawn map  
we see the vain glory of  
this wall that can protect nothing.

The emperors might never have  
thought this would one day become  
the tourists' curiosity and  
the children's camel.

On return we carry  
vulnerable clay replicas  
of the great wall for our neighbours:  
a memorial for Lao-tse.

*(On the Great Wall of China)*

## WATCHING THE CHINESE SCRIPT

This must be the  
language of God.  
*Earth* one letter; *Tree* another.  
*Bird, Crow, Man*, each, one.  
Thus the world came to be:  
turning each letter  
into its object.  
Then letters coupled:  
*Earth* and *Tree*  
gave rise to *Spring*,  
*Spring* and *Bird*, to *Music*,  
To *Music* and *Water*  
was born *Moonlight*.  
And *Sun* to *Moonlight* and *Fire*.

*Hell* came later,  
In Satan's anti-language.

*(Watching the sign boards at the International Hotel, Beijing)*

TIANANMEN, 1994

Couples relax over the  
dried up blood, and chat.  
Gun-totting soldiers wash  
the tanks clean of flesh and blood  
and stand guard to the  
passing spring. A tempest  
snorts from under the earth.  
The full moon rises like the  
burning eye of the one  
who rose from the dead.

Ordinariness  
has been restored.

*(Tiananmen Square, Beijing)*

## THE RED LANTERN

The last scream of the  
strangled one follows us  
with raised hood from the  
inner courtyard of the  
landlord's manor. It  
devours Kuang-tze, poisons  
Confucius, and, winding  
round the baby girls  
flung down from the Great Wall,  
slithers along in search of  
female infants waiting to be born.  
Our visions grow dim  
in the smoke from Sita's kitchen.

No, it is not kitchen, but a pyre.

This red light does not  
betoken Desire. It is Death  
who is coming to sleep  
with you today.

*(Watching the Film, 'Red Lantern')*

## BOOKS

“Learned men in the Ming days  
kept rare books hidden in tis niche to  
save them from the Emperor’s ire and  
from fire”, said our guide as we stood  
in front of a hollow in a wall.

“ Who is using it now?”, I asked her.  
She parried: “ We have stopped  
producing such books.”

*(Winter Palace, Beijing)*

## ELEVENTH CONTRADICTION

The thesis on the ten contradictions  
was fine all right, but dear Chairman,  
you were silent on the eleventh: that  
between the State and the people.  
That was what spoiled the game.

As for Brecht's solution,  
Of the State dissolving the people  
To elect another,  
...there are no more barbarians,  
you know.

*(Tiananmen Square, Beijing)*

## VAIN JOY

No, Laxman, yours is  
vain joy. Nothing remains  
pure any longer, nothing.

Even leaves whisper like  
conspirators. The wind slays  
the witnesses of its lovemaking.  
The stench of blood climbs up from  
the valley where a hundred flowers  
were supposed to bloom.

Our own soul splits us apart  
like a sword. There's a lot to go  
to reach the earth our mothers lost.  
These rustic peasants  
Arriving in the city with the dirty  
knap-sacks and bleeding roots  
are far from the heroes the ballads sing.  
These soldiers are standing guard to  
a world yet to be born.

No Laxman, the star we saw  
Is not the prophesied one.

*(Railway Station, Beijing)*

## LANGUAGES

We divide the night  
between poetry and wine.  
One recites in Marathi, one  
in Gujarati, one in Hindi,  
one in Kannada, one in Oriya  
and I , in Malayalam.

Separation has its language too:  
one whispers, another weeps,  
one hums a folksong,  
another sings a hymn.  
Faxian and Xuanzang  
walk into our midst to share  
their travelers' tales.  
A Sung emperor occupies the centre  
smoking a golden hookah.  
An ape-man from the bottom of  
the Yellow River joins the band.

Time is an illusion.  
We are statues of eternity.  
Thank this moment.  
And this wine.

*(Shung-Geng Hill-view Hotel, Jinan)*



## THE NORTHERN RAIN

Rain in China moves like a dragon.  
It smells of ancient moss-wrapped rocks,  
tastes rose and salt-petre.  
It speaks like the little bells  
in a Buddha temple.

It has this to tell the traveler: 'I flow  
from a bottomless well. I straighten  
zig-zag passages. I give the silk of dreams  
to the silkworm, wings to victims' souls.  
I turn palaces into museums.

The trumpets of unborn dawns are  
in me, in me too the bells sunk  
in the sea and the leaves of departed trees.  
I offer my voice to the dumb.  
Beasts and rocks speak through me.

I walk the hills, my footfalls echo  
over the planes. Wind follows me:  
wind, bells and children.  
No city is forbidden to me. At my touch  
hills and heavens sparkle alike.

Get on my back and I shall show you  
The house of lightning, the sleep  
of nightingales, the dreams of the dead.

Be happy you are not alone on earth.  
An invisible light links you  
to water, rocks, birds and beasts.  
Follow it with your body moist  
with the raining heaven.

Go, the history of emperors lies  
rotting in the Thirteen Tombs.

*(Thirteen Tombs, Beijing)*

## AI QING, A RIVER

Ai Qing, you are an eastern river,  
the wind on the mountains,  
flower with muscles,  
honey with teeth.

I dive into your poetry  
as into a pool of pain.  
Memories rattle like  
Prisoners' chains.  
Real sorrow never sleeps:  
It watches the present  
like one breathing from his prison  
the spring he had dreamt of.  
The mouth opened to sing  
fills with blood. The pall  
of silence covers words  
like ink that buries a page.

Yet you rise up again  
And again from the sea of ashes  
Like a flower born  
in the ruins of war.  
They lay you on ice one day  
and on fire the next.  
They try the hero's mask on you  
and then the villain's.

No ruler ever understands  
poets, Ai Qing, they fear  
poetry's ever-open eyes,  
its thousand rebirths.  
Honesty and loyalty  
no more go together.

The cup still has  
some poison.

*(Reading Ai Qing's Poems, Bangkok)*

## THE TRUE BUDDHA

Buddhas were many:  
The new-born babe, lotuses blooming  
from his footprints, the tender child  
pleading with the little prince  
for a bird's right to life,  
the prince himself in a prison of gold,  
the sad one pondering over mutability,  
the sage reduced to skin and bones,  
the wise teacher, the physician,  
the laughing Buddha,  
the dying Buddha.

I am no Neruda: am perfectly at home  
among these thousand Buddhas  
as among my own kin.

We too, men and women, pass  
through these states : only  
the Buddhahood eludes us.

We too can be Buddhas:  
We only need to sculpt the Buddha  
In our won flesh,  
with the will's sharp chisel.

Then we should proceed,  
to Truth,  
without offspring.

*(The Temple of Reclining Buddha, Bangkok)*

## VARANASI POEMS

### THE FIRE-TENDER AT MANIKARNIKA EVALUATES BEAUTY

No more flirting, see the death  
That dwells in your bones  
Nothing in flesh  
Tempts me any more.  
I don't see your hair  
Eyes, cheeks or lips;  
Your skull is all I see,  
The dark sockets of its eyes.  
And that gumless smile  
Free of all feeling.

With my eyes filling  
With the smoke from the pyre  
I just take measurements:  
Five feet and a half;  
May be a good fifty five kilos.  
Two should be enough to lift it,

Though it may need tons of wood.  
The belly will be quick to burst,  
The head is another matter.  
If the wood is good  
And there is wind,  
Three hours should suffice.

Whatever incense you use,  
The truth is the smell of the burning corpse.  
Why this love of silks and gold,  
Death is naked, and so is birth.  
Death in the flowers,  
Death on the leaves,  
In snow, in sun,  
In the river and sea and cloud,  
Death, beyond the reach of our gaze  
Only evanescence is eternal.

Stop this chatting,  
Ganga's banks are meant for burning.  
Nothing with flesh  
Tempt me any more.

1995

## THE LEG

Whose is this leg  
lying half-charred in the ashes  
of the Harischandra Ghat in Kashi?

Which temples and ashrams  
did it roam in search of inner peace?  
How many whore-houses did it visit  
to get rid of its desire?

Did it run behind the yoked bulls  
in the village fields, dreaming of harvests?  
Did it wander in the city's railway stations  
looking for a piece of stale bread?

Its muscles may have ached and cursed  
mixing clay to make pots and pitchers.  
Its bones might have broken running  
from court to court seeking elusive justice.  
It might have swooned waiting  
before the labour-room and the mortuary.

Or else, this leg might have trampled several lives.  
Or may be this is one that adoring eyes  
had followed in the sports ground  
or the dance hall.

Each mark and scar on this leg  
has a story to tell.

Shivering in the Himalayas  
and scorching in the city's heat,  
at last it arrived where everyone arrives.

*No Borders For Me* Travel Poems

The head and the body  
have attained salvation.  
Only this leg, straight under the sun,  
right between fire and water,  
perplexed by the distance  
between this birth and the next,  
confused, scared, panting...

1995

## GANGA

I dip deep into you shoving away  
the floating corpses  
I emerge from you drenched in  
the waters of your depths, with  
the unendurable intoxication  
of several births.

I draw in the different scents of  
each of your limbs.  
This whole city lies inside you.  
I am a wind strolling along its streets.  
I slow down in some gardens, passes  
shrunk between rocks.  
In you there are temples and whore-houses  
solitary towers and royal castles,  
prisons and gallows and flowers of yore.  
I emerge wounded and lie exhausted  
on your dispassionate sand.  
Your liquid lips rise up and kiss me all over.  
Deliverance to my uneasy head  
Deliverance to my broken bones,  
to every limb that you strummed.

If I still have another birth  
let me be born as a fish in you,  
I shall then devour  
all the wedding-rings.

2001



## VARANASI

Varanasi has only dead people.

The dead pray for the dead  
Offering dead flowers.  
The dead swim in the Ganga,  
Catch fish, throw coins,  
Dive down to collect them

The dead carry the dead on their shoulders  
Chanting the name of Ram  
The dead perform rites for the dead  
The dead await the dead, cremate the dead,  
Burn in the pyres as wood.

The dead float as boats near the ghats,  
Become pillars to support the bridge

The dead run shops for the dead,  
The dead learn and teach dead lessons  
In dead languages in the dead classrooms  
The dead play football with the dead.

The city travels everyday from the dawn  
of the dead to the dusk of the dead.  
Trains and planes disembark the old dead  
And return with the newly dead

The earth of the dead,  
The sky of the dead,  
The rainbow of the dead,  
The ceaseless birth  
Of the dead, the dead.

## GO TO TRIPURA

*(Agartala, 5 January, 1997)*

Go to Tripura!

Not to the Anga land nor the Vanga land,  
not to Kanauj, Vaishali, Kosala or Magadha,  
no, not to Kashi either.

Go to Tripura where the ancients  
turned into trees spread their shade,  
where peoples' green will flutters high!  
Sip the smoking noon from the earthen cup!  
To Tripura, where the soliciting `wind  
roams the plains with seductive scents.  
Remember to go on the *Ardra* night when  
the moon's *palai* tree drops  
white flowers and laughs and the hasty blood  
of nightingales rushes up the rose bud's veins.

To which drum's rhythm do these  
boughs and clouds and stars in unison dance?\*

In whose semicircle do the earth and the moon

*No Borders For Me* Travel Poems

and the jupiter and the sun in harmony swing?  
Whose matted hair do the streams of the valley wash?  
Which third eye does this sunlight spread?  
Which leg, which arm, which arm, which leg  
dancing in ecstasy moves in the woods, on the hill?  
Which tribal man's awakening to watch  
do we open our eyes on every morn?

Go to Tripura, drown your foreign gods  
in that sea of primal tongues!  
Retrieve the forest, the country and home,  
retrieve the sun with its seven, no, seven hundred  
hues, as various as we are, as dear!  
Let us retrieve our own diverse selves!

Go to Tripura.  
Meet your Father.

1997

\*The image of Lord Shiva

## EVENINGS IN HAMPI

*(Hampi, September, 1997)*

Like a dead man's lips  
under the earth striving to invoke  
the strains and refrains of  
an ancient *kirtan*  
I strain to recall the shapes  
of my evenings in Hampi.

I

These rocks that ruminate  
on heaven's memories  
in sunset's gold like some  
*gandharva* under a curse  
remind me of my previous lives.  
This tower of the Virupaksha temple  
rising sharp like a hymn to blue  
line by line, piling up dreams and images,  
this elephant stable that now

has only this dark emptiness chains,  
this stable for horses, the graveyard of speed,  
as if one evening all the horses  
had sprouted wings and  
chose to fly away, these granite steps  
of the palace imprinted with camels,  
the thirsts of distances,  
this pool where the *tillanas*  
of the lotuses lie frozen into stillness,  
these aqueducts with memories for water,  
these sisters leaning against each other  
to overcome their weariness,  
cooled into stones,  
this self-born Shivalinga  
rising up like the primal word  
at the centre of the lake ,  
of dumb women's tears,  
this gigantic Narasimha,  
its roar trapped between two worlds,  
this Rama temple that arrests  
all the epic acts in a single moment  
as if held by a rein:  
I recall everything.  
Everything.

2

These rocks must be remembering  
me too: this peasant from Vijayanagar,  
this king of the cornfields of  
Tungabhadra clad in mud's silk,  
sweat's coral armour and dust's crown.

I used to sit, along with my daughter  
and the waves of the river learning  
to dance, in front of this pavilion  
keen to hear the earth  
sing through Purandaradasa.  
Her dead mother too would  
be with us: I recognized her  
by her fragrance of fresh paddy.  
The sunlight on the rocks  
was no different then, like  
the radiance of another world.

3

I was mistaken.  
I was the son of that famished peasant  
who fell and died in the parched field:  
a sculptor who awakened to fertility  
the gods sleeping within stones  
with the chisel's sharp love.  
One morning my tool bag was  
thrown out : Goddess Annapoorna  
had the princess's eyes.  
Disheartened, I crossed the river  
and went to where Telugu danced on a platter:  
But those eyes pursued me.  
The river Tungabhadra who  
received me into her liquid womb  
knows the tale of that love  
that had blossomed like a sunflower  
among those rocks.

4

No, I was a flowering tree  
that stood amidst these rocks  
with the tender weight of inflorescence  
on her abundant boughs.  
That sculptor was lying in my shade  
watching a pair of eyes blossom  
on the window sill of the  
palace's ladies' quarters.  
I stood witness to his  
final entry into the water.  
Jain monks whose only cloth  
was detachment, artists from abroad  
in search of gold and fame,  
royal soldiers bathed in blood,  
mad men talking to another world:  
my shade was a flowery shelter  
to all of them. Some flowers  
reached the feet of Virupaksha,  
some the hair of beloveds,  
some, the tombs of heroes,  
some were crushed by children's  
cruel-soft hands, or by the sad weight  
of the laid out dead bodies  
of men and of horses.  
Birds tickled my boughs; I put  
berries into their bills, and at night,  
when no one was looking,  
I bent down to kiss the girl under my shade,  
and, with her, went beyond the hills.  
At dawn I came back

and stood still in my place  
feigning innocence, my trunk and roots  
marked with kisses.

5

No, no, I was a parrot who used to  
visit that tree for berries.  
I gave it in return a piece of sky  
at times, at times a speck of rainbow  
and at others, a bell from an *apsara*'s anklet  
come loose and fallen into a cloud.

I remember the death of that tree.  
The electric embrace  
of a passionate lightning burnt him down.  
I had never seen such a blazing love.  
That white-hot love burnt  
my green wings too.

6

All this I just imagined. In fact  
I was a seed within a berry in  
that parrot's bill. That was  
twelve generations ago.  
Hampi's history got written  
on the leaf-veins of the  
trees born out of me.  
I will hand it down to posterity.  
See my offspring, dense with memories,



*No Borders For Me* Travel Poems

burst forth from me,  
fallen to the ground!

7

When, outside the soil,  
the lips of the living  
thirst for a new morning raga.

1997

## IMPERFECT

*'Imperfect is the summit'*

Yves Bonnefoy

## PRESENCE

*(Stockholm, October 3-21, 1997)*

From where did you come  
from where did I come  
from where did we come, my love,  
in this garden of yellow maple leaves  
in this evening that sticks to our feet  
in this rain bursting forth  
from a bygone age  
in this chill that preceded the stars?  
From the roots of tangled lanes  
or the dumb night before creation  
from the sea still dreaming of shells  
or the word-like throb of life  
first heard from a glacier?  
Was it lightning that carried you here or  
the white stone's longing for heaven?

You caress my tired limbs like a wave;

Salt sticks to my cheeks.  
Are you a woman or an inland sea?  
You turn into water between my fingers  
A dance beyond life and death  
leads us out of Time.  
We leave earth for another moonlight  
Our language is no more human;  
it is of the birds bathed in sunlight,  
of the collyrium and the spring shower,  
of elves, perhaps.

*(August Strindberg Park)*

2

You are a waterfall  
descending the stairs.  
I am a grey rock below  
eager for your arrival.  
Dance over me, tickle me into life,  
cover me with green.  
Gush forth, let fish swim  
on my head faster than eyes  
Let the weightless shadow  
of a rainbow fall  
on my ancient back, and  
a lily-like heart grow within.

You had descended the stairs of Time  
Now we are in earth's childhood.

*(Hotel Strindbeg)*

3

Infinity's longing we name sea,  
then translate it into cloud and rain,  
islands and seconds.

Waves twitter like endless birds  
waking up the sun as we float  
amidst a thousand islets.  
October wind turns us into  
a pair of trembling bluebells.  
Shorn of our crown of thorns  
We swing weightless on a creeper,  
Petal to petal.  
We have given the sea  
everything we had:  
our memory, our faith,  
our shame, our high tide,  
as if to the graveyard.

No more do we fear life.  
Wave, carry us to the beginning  
of sunbeams and longings,  
to the fiesta of flags and lights.  
*(In a ship on the Archipelago)*

4

White wine foams up like Spring,  
but the wings it gave us could not  
lift us even up to pain.  
No one becomes a sunflower by  
meditating on it.  
We shun everything that is  
harsh and intense, like truth.  
We are no sky; we are humans, finite.  
The more we try to forget it  
the more real we become.  
Your insensitivity makes you sob  
until all stars turn black.

These shoulders scarred by

fifty years on earth could  
hardly be a refuge to their own head.  
Yet, rest your fragrant head on them  
as on the wall of a prison-cell  
and feel as secure as a wingless bird  
in a tree's hollow in a forest on fire.

*(Rydborg Restaurant)*

5

You draw me into you  
Like the sun the lake  
Until I turn inside out  
And reveal my floor.  
Then I fall  
My body is rain,  
through which you glisten.  
Green things are born  
wherever I fall until  
the woods grow dense.  
You shine through them too  
till I become a river  
and your lips drink me again.

*(At writer Louisa's home on the banks of a lake)*

6

The train takes us along country-sides  
autumn has painted yellow.  
You listen to my poems  
as we sit huddled together  
like twins in the train's warm womb,  
distances dangling from its claws.  
I fill you like wind sneaking in  
through the keyhole.  
Fullness is not for us; our words

lost their wings long ago.  
They limp, stammer, as they  
try to sing: not a letter comes out.  
I run my fingers over your ears  
as if they were words,  
as if this were you.  
No, this is not you; you are elsewhere:  
this unreal image will do for me.  
Reality is not in my grip;  
illusions I can access  
through my stammer,  
touch with my trembling lips.

Poetry is a river with  
no more bridges, but only their images.  
*(Going to Uppsala by train)*

7

Theatre is not illusion's bubble..  
The destiny of an insane patriarch  
rants and raves on the stage.  
We too are climbing  
with our unseen crosses  
and burning bodies  
towards a death that is  
neither sacrifice nor suicide.

The thirsty dead drink our thirst  
to grow blood and muscles.  
It is they that besiege us,  
they who cry, 'love me, love me.'  
not me nor you.  
Love me still, snap the noose  
in which I twist and turn,  
lay me in life's tender lap

with my bleeding stigmata  
as in the Mother's lap.

*(Watching Strindberg's play, 'Father')*

8

Your gaze is stone, it  
breaks me like glass.  
What are you yearning for: wine,  
or love that pollinates the vineyards?  
I can touch your intoxication with mine.  
Only a thin veil divides joy and us-  
Is it the forgetting of our last life  
or the fear of the next?  
Now we are in a world where  
sin is mixed with joy  
like poison with nectar.  
The ecstasy of the unwise  
leads us to the wisdom of the separated.  
Fire is not only in the wine,  
it is in silence and in flower,  
in words and in water,  
on the tongue and the navel.  
Hold me tight, like death,  
Bite me, Goddess of Venom,  
turn me blue  
like this blue-black sky.

*(At cocktails at the Writers' Union)*

9

This Noah brought seeds  
from the far corners of the earth  
to cultivate this garden of signs.  
He didn't know plants have another hell.  
In the painful effort to fly

they grow branches, their bodies  
bend and twist as they strain to speak.  
Shoots burst forth at last instead of words.  
Flowers are wounds.  
Leaves shake off their green  
and, tired of their leaf's life, fall.  
He never understood plants:  
their hearts brim with love.  
Love cannot stand  
definitions and categories.  
It simply grows where there is  
some water, some light.  
I won't count your leaves  
nor do I need to know  
the shapes and shades of your petals.  
Just wind round me,  
Fill me with your scents  
so that this driftwood that  
fought every stone for a handful of flowers  
may dream new shoots.  
And time may turn into a sweet seed  
traveling through it  
to the joys of the fruit.  
*(In the Garden of Linnaeus, Uppsala)*

10

These emerald hills are  
the graveyards of ancient seamen.  
Oceans were puddles to their vessels,  
at times their graves.  
Swaying in waves and winds,  
they touched new lands  
like words landing in poems,  
suddenly, unforeseen.

120



We too are a pair of words  
in search of our poem.  
Someone uttered us,  
someone sculpted us into form.  
Some consecrate us in lines.  
We weep with other words at times,  
at times laugh or pray.  
Some befriend us, some own.  
Contexts lend us meaning.  
We roll on tongues, salty, sour, hot,  
like another tongue in kiss.  
We break the bars, the lines,  
and stealthily leave the pages,  
to be caught once again,  
again to scale the wall.  
We are the realisation  
deferred eternally, expression  
ever incomplete,  
unattainable climax.

*(Viking Mounts, Uppsala)*

11

I write your name  
on the morning snow,  
on every object where once  
the poet wrote liberty's name.\*  
I need not wipe off that name  
To write yours; there is  
space enough for love  
on earth and sky.  
I sleep on the bed of your names,  
I wake up into the twittering of your names.  
Your name appears wherever I touch:  
on the brown of the fallen leaves,  
on the dark walls of primal caves,

on the butcher's door,  
on wet paint, wet blood,  
on the ploughed field,  
on the butterfly wings of moonlight,  
in coffee, in salt,  
on the horse's hooves, the dancer's gestures,  
on the shoulders of stars,  
in honey, in venom, on waves, sand, roots,  
on the axe, on bullets,  
on the hangman's rope,  
on the cold floor of the mortuary,  
on the soft back of the tombstone.

*(Cold morning, walking)*

\*Paul Eluard's poem, 'Liberty'

12

We, two kids, play mother and father.  
We do not know the meaning  
of embrace, the electricity of kiss.  
Yet we touch some leaves,  
some flowers, fruits even.  
Nature watches us with affection:  
this brief flaming up of the longing  
to perpetuate, this basic instinct

he filled beings with,  
this vain survival gesture.  
Listen to the night  
scampering along the corridor.

13

That we should part before  
our names on the snow vanish !

122

Let me play you like a tambourine  
until you melt into strains.  
Let us keep flying all night.  
We are riding a cloud all our own;  
at the end of the joy-ride,  
a sharp day awaits us.  
How I loathe the sun,  
that reminder of evanescence!

What was illusion, what is real,  
I do not wish to know.  
That which is beyond words  
is without grammar.  
That which has not begun  
does not end too.

*( On the flight back )*

## ABSENCE

(Delhi, Oct.22-Nov.10; Paris, Nov.11-23)

14

Each presence has a shade  
sheltering me from the rain of memories.

You are formless now,  
a voice carried by waves  
from beyond the mountains,  
a laugh, a sigh, a kiss with silver wings.

Waterfalls cannot laugh like you,  
peepals cannot chatter, drizzles cajole  
nor dawns kiss, like you.

Poets can embrace mere voice,  
possess, to love, to enter.  
Thus I enter you, all awake,  
my senses at one point,  
like a ghost making itself  
visible to the living  
until I barter my winter  
for your spring.

15

The voice too has ceased.  
Your translucent absence  
fills this tent of glass.  
This lifeless Venus,  
her arm lost in history,  
hides you from me.

124

This marble Sappho,  
these Roman pillars,  
Sumerian tablets, Assyrian icons,  
the curves of hieroglyphs,  
every wave from the past  
stands between us,  
a sea of forgetting.  
I read you absence  
in civilization's ruins;  
I wander among angels  
turning into devils  
in the corridors of betrayal.  
You are not among these gods  
who died long ago,  
nor these lutes and lyres  
silenced in a bygone age.  
Louvre is a huge graveyard of stillness  
where Mona Lisa wryly smiles.  
The Buddha too would have  
smiled like this,  
and you too, my intense one,  
your hands raised  
in the gesture of refuge,\*  
perhaps.

*(At Louvre Museum, Paris)*

\*Buddha's *abhayamudra*, a gesture offering refuge to the suffering.

16

I inhale your non-being  
standing like the yaksha+  
awaiting the cloud-messenger  
on the top of this tower made of

steel, sweat, space and height.

The moist winds of young winter  
Carry you, insubstantial, along with  
the scent of lilies and hyacinths.

I stretch myself on your feathery absence  
as on your breasts turgid with love.

Treading this emptiness I suddenly realise  
you were the flesh of this skeletal tower

I scoop it up in my hands  
like a throbbing heart.

My palm grows warm.

As I reach the square below  
guarded by statues, your absence

melts into a winter shower

leaving its small footprints on the fallen leaves.

*(At the Eiffel Tower)*

+ In Kalidasa's *Meghadootam*, the hero, an ethereal *yaksha* in exile awaits  
a cloud to carry his message to his beloved far away.

17

After long years I again breathe  
the prison's sighs to make sure  
the world is still the same.

I know them: Liza, Farida, Bouvasse.

I see your face on everyone.

My poems will not brighten their nights;

Still I stammer about birth,

madness, prisons, revolutions..

Liza grips my hands tight:

'It's cruel, my brother, this prison.

I can't escape, so I too write,

for no one in particular.’

I too , sister. Writing is  
a scream against walls.  
It just bounces back;  
yet we await the sun.  
We are in the same half-dark solitude.  
Solitude is the same everywhere,  
the pale face of the winter-sun  
behind the fog’s curtain,  
of the stonewall that doesn’t permit  
flowers and birthdays.  
Solitude is a dumb hag,  
wrinkled orphan.

Come, my sister,  
I shall teach you to dance on embers  
Like my father used to.  
I too am on fire, dancing with  
the skull in my hand, love-lorn.  
*(Poetry reading at the Central Jail, Paris)*

18

Each country is a season.  
Morning clings to my limbs.  
I recall your curves like  
autumn’s yellow leaf recounting  
the green veins of the spring leaf,  
or a deer, shot, recalling  
the thirsty spots of its mate  
under another sky, in another forest.  
I whistle towards you,  
like a bird of passage in winter,  
off on trembling wings

to a warm distant lake  
through the icy tunnel of its songs.  
Or like a dreaming snake,  
or a bear,  
or me.

*(In Fontanableau forests)*

19

This river is yamuna.\*  
These willows bent towards yellow  
Were *kadamba* trees in their previous birth.  
A painter sketching the ancient bridge  
is surprised by a pair of eyes  
walking on the sea.

It is you, looking for  
a shepherd, of words  
I don't know magic,  
yet I long to roll down from you,  
a drop of tear that cannot play the flute.  
I want to be cooled by these waters  
until an artist scoops me up  
to mix his paint and I am reborn  
as colours on his canvas.  
Then you will watch me with love  
from this river in a ballet of eyelids.

*(On the banks of river Loing, Moret)*

\*Yamuna is a river associated with Krishna, the flute-playing divine lover.  
Kadamba trees are sacred to him.

20

Here they broke a prison open.  
Was it freedom that leapt out, or solitude?  
Now a theatre stands there.



Liberation is entertainment  
when history is play.  
Not even the pale recollections of 1968  
in the sky of the Latin quarter.  
Everything is quiet, desolate.  
Do you remember, that summer  
had warmed our adolescent Indian blood too.  
How those purple songs grew dark  
In the procession of the dead that followed!

I can imagine you as future's statue.  
Who am I talking to?  
Are you my past, my present's absence?  
Future is present's absence too.

Perfect love is a spent coin,  
Emptiness brimming with milk,  
Veiled height of love-bites, sky.  
*(At Bastille)*

21

Time for mass in the church of Notre Dame.  
These bells laugh like you.  
And the choir wails like your absence.  
Are you life, or death?  
Don't know, nor do I wish to.  
I know my cross, its weight.  
I shall arrive there to  
release me from myself,  
to hand me over to love, entirely  
*(Notre Dame)*

22

I am looking for the dear ones  
in this cemetery of the labyrinths.  
Here is Baudelaire, Here Maupassant,  
Simone de Beauvoir, here Beckett,  
Here Ionesco, here dear Cesar Vallejo...  
Inspiration chokes the dead  
trapped under stones.  
I press my ears close to these decomposed dreams.  
I can still hear their heart beats.  
I know this tribe's dialect written  
in every tongue since it has no alphabet.  
Life without body can possess all flesh.  
A gravestone with your name  
suddenly rises to my eye.  
'Where are you,' I scream.  
Is this earth forgetting, is memory  
the sky that buries birds?

Earth has no flowers  
left for your tomb.

*(At Montparnasse Cemeteries)*

23

Picasso. Braque. Van Gogh. Degas.  
Renoir. Dufy. Loutrec. Seurat.  
Zola. Stendhal. Turgenev.  
Truffaut. Tristan Tzara....:  
I chant these names in a chain  
as if they still lived here, as if  
my words have a rendezvous  
with the rainbows and the dead.  
The martyrs of the valley  
with the lost memories of the Commune

rub shoulders with me:  
moist winds with coffee smell.  
On the steps of Sacre Cour, the wounded  
Christ of Paris sobs like mist.  
I look for you under each petal  
of the pile of flowers on the street  
that await the holy birth.  
I look beneath every colour.  
What is the colour of absence, white or black?  
Tell me, the queen of jasmines,  
tell me, rose's lyre, angel's bride,  
tell.

*(At Montmartre)*

24

I don't want to see the arched triumph  
of Napoleon, nor the dust the Nazis left.  
I don't want to talk to the guillotines  
O, Truffaut, Truffaut.  
Who said, change is a wrath-driven beast?  
Knowledge has a thousand apartments,  
a thousand courtyards.

We cannot forget history, yet we have to  
So that we open our eyes into light,  
like newborns cleaned of blood and muck,  
so that we fly with the angels,  
so that we love.

History is a place that does not exist.  
And death, an epoch yet to excavate.  
*(At Champs Elysee)*

25

Candles are plants with golden leaves.  
They sprout and grow only  
for those that bleed.  
As they grow humility dwarfs them;  
they shed their leaves and  
drown in their own blood.  
Candles are the prayers of the parted.  
I too burn one as if you would  
grow wings and suddenly land  
among these saints and angels,  
swooping down from the magic light  
of thee stained- glass windows,  
as if your non-being will slowly curdle  
into being, in this cold, in this dark.

Love is prayer.  
It burns in empty space.  
This night I am drunk mad,  
dancing in an abyss of live embers.  
Several hands hold me.  
I seek your face in everyone,  
I kiss them as I would kiss you,  
as our Black friend summons the strength  
of all the forests into his drums.  
Pain too climaxes with the drums.  
I go on dancing with outstretched hands  
and burning legs, hoping you would  
emerge into light from this rhythm,  
you would rise from flowers, from lamps,  
from the screaming dust of abused streets,  
from shadows, from laughter,  
from wind or rain, from the scent of fruits,  
from the other world of glass,  
from crosses or graveyards,

from the incessant humming  
of underground trains,  
from the sudden blindness of tunnels,  
from piano's billows,  
from the vigil of dances,  
from the myriad hues of paintings,  
from the drooping eyes of wine,  
from poetry, from poetry, and  
come into my hold from this  
shivering 3O'clock of the winter dawn.  
I leap up in the joy of anticipation.

Wind round my neck,\*  
fall on my tangled hairs,  
shine on my head,  
O, word uttered by the mountains.  
I sit in meditation for you, naked, ignorant  
in the silence of the beginning,  
in fire,  
in fire.

*(The farewell dance on the last day in Paris)*

1997

\*There is an implied image of Lord Shiva here: he wears a serpent for garland, has tangled hairs with the crescent moon in them where he hides the river Ganga, his secret beloved. He dances on cremation grounds with a skull in his hand. His consort Parvati is the daughter of the Mount Himavant (Himalayas). She meditates and undergoes penance in order to get Shiva for her husband. Note the reversal here.

## THE AMERICAN DIARY

### THE STAIRCASE

*(At Walt Whitman's House, 26 April)*

Climb up gently, ever so gently:  
in this house dwells a memory  
that no thunderbolt could burn down,  
a star, an entire spring season.

Poets were prophets then.  
It was compassion  
that flowed in the rivers,  
and youth, in words.  
Apples, breasts and mothers-of-pearl  
glowed with joy and affection.  
Pens had sugarcane juice in them and  
papers stored wheat.  
Snow descended this hill  
like a flock of white sheep.

That was before the world ended.

This carpenter's kitchen baked  
enough bread for both the Americas.  
This workshop made a table  
for the Black, the White and the Red,  
the rabbit and the cedar tree  
to dine together.

This cattle-shed resounded with  
a chisel that chipped and smoothed  
every lament and hymn,  
every memory and event,  
until they turned into  
the rafters and reapers,  
eaves and beams of the future world.  
Words smelt of fresh earth,  
of sawdust and house paint.

How many seasons and dances  
and processions passed through  
this pen, now gone dry-  
tall ambitions that would  
bend to let sparrows through,  
the sky of feathers and fresh rains,  
the moonlight of the dead,  
passages with the footprints  
of posterity, indignations that  
rub against the face like certain  
rough-edged leaves, the grief  
for the Captain who turned  
into wind as soon as the  
shore had been reached..

Sitting in front of this dead oven  
watching the letters in this manuscript  
slant eastward to Ponnani's sun,<sup>1</sup>

I long to touch this old table just once  
before all wines turn sour,  
to sit on this dusty chair for a moment  
before the light of the cranes dims and dies,  
awaiting the return of that lost charge  
that lends a heavenly glow  
to the leaves of grass.

There, a will-o-the-wisp,  
Its eyes wet with tears,  
descends the stairs.



## RAIN IN NEW YORK

*(On the streets of New York, 29 April)*

New York is all wet as if in  
love's climax. Her heart that had  
beaten to a crescendo now slows down.  
her cathedral of colours is wet,  
wet are the host and the wine  
the Mother and the Babe,  
bells and bells. The violins drip music;  
birds rise from the piano  
in a medley of melodies

as rain falls on its keys  
dances turn into moist winds  
The cherry blossoms melt into silver  
and tulips into gold.  
Bookshops display wet Kunderas;  
Amos Oz, Kenseboro Oe, Celan's sighs,  
Cavafy's guffaws, all dripping wet  
Those who had come from different lands  
become the alphabets of the same rain.

Wet is the museum too:  
Tintoretto's yellow sky breaks into  
an autumn and falls on Cezanne's poplars.  
Turner's crimson flames light the cigars  
for Leger's soldiers. Matisse's goldfish  
steal into Van Gogh's golden wheat fields.  
Gauguin's beauties bathe Picasso's  
women of Avignon in brown.  
Hudson gets flooded in the tears  
of Munch's screaming skull.  
The same water caresses

the sharp forms of Egyptian goddesses  
and the soft curves of the  
Henry Moore sculptures.

Every monument is wet:  
The blood from the sacrificed Indians  
waters the orchards raised  
in the sweat of the Black slaves.  
The grim memories of the Civil War  
Get soaked, crumble and fall into  
the graveyards of the Vietnam soldiers.

The Statue of Liberty, that taut nipple,  
is all wet too. The dark smoke from its  
blown out torch envelopes nations.

New York gets is all wet as if in  
love's climax. The maple trees bleed  
like the lover's nail marks. Pines  
stand erect like hairs risen in excitement.  
The wet New York dreams of an offspring  
who could slay the demon; the evening sky  
lowers its face full of red lip-marks and,  
careful the crescent moon in its matted locks  
does not slip down, gives it  
a tired farewell kiss.

## WHITE

*(The posthumous exhibition of Wilhelm de Kooning's last paintings, all white, with colours muted, Metropolitan Museum, New York, 2 April)*

In the spring season  
his paintings brimmed with  
the yellow of sunflowers,  
the red of parrot-beaks,  
the green of olives  
and the blue of the pupils.

As youth gave way to winter,  
the dawn stole the yellow,  
the dusk sucked up the red,  
the green flew away into the forest,  
the blue got dissolved in the sea.

Only snow's white survived.

A white cross was readied  
in the altar of white  
where white bells chimed.  
When the God of White summoned,  
he, with his world of colours,  
became part of that Infinite Snow.  
Colours lay submerged  
somewhere at the bottom  
like an ancient city sunk in the sea.

It was then summer arrived,  
the infancy of retrievals.

## BLACK AMERICA

*(Harlem, New York, 30 April)*

Here sits America  
on a green-painted bench on the lawn:  
the Lord of waste heaps,  
the emperor of whip-marks,  
breath in chains  
the first dark rock  
formed from the seething earth  
the tired fragment of night  
after the dance has ended  
a sad cloud in tatters,  
shorn of lightning  
the love bird's forgetfulness  
about the poet  
who had saved her mate.<sup>2</sup>

The other America  
burnt out and unwanted  
like a cigar-butt someone has flung,  
his vague gaze moving  
from the dried up tree hung with the  
dolls and memories of the grandchild  
shot dead by the police to the  
wire-mesh tent adorned with the paintings  
and the entrails of his rebel son.  
Once the fire raging round had  
burnt even him to awakening;  
but now only the silent ash  
roams like a cat the theatre of Renaissance .

Nothing remains anymore;  
the black panthers were tamed;

those who refused were preyed upon.  
Paul Robeson, no more.  
Mahalia Jackson, Arita Franklin,  
no more, no more.  
Malcolm X: just a leather-cut out  
In a wine shop. All those  
who had quickened the pulse,  
passed away, one after another.

What an accursed time when even  
Michael is ashamed of his colour!  
Nothing remains: only  
the fear of the landlord coming  
to collect the rent;  
only the indifferent sunshine  
made indolent by opium,  
only the dark rails of rusty dreams  
hanging from the heart.  
We too wander with this man's  
unlaid ancestors roaming the forests  
of another continent,  
looking for the last heart-throbs  
of protest in the fast beats of Rap,  
keen to hear the echoes of  
a spring-thunder that sank in the sea,  
like exorcised ghosts  
hurled on to knife-points  
by the guardians of illusions.

BROADWAY DANCERS

*(Broadway, New York, 30 April)*

What do these half-drunk men seek  
in this glass-tower of illusion?  
A short-lived release from  
the tensions of a taut ego?  
A brief visual relief  
for the provocations of  
the blind male flesh?  
An aimless escape from all attachment?  
These girls are not  
the spring of colours  
in Degas's dancing figures,  
nor the anklet-wearing flames of moonlight  
in the endless nights  
of royal revelry.  
Don't look here for Akka<sup>3</sup>  
who had conquered shame  
and stood naked facing her Guru.  
nor for Vasavadatta, fasting and aching  
to meet the young Buddhist monk <sup>4</sup>  
No Radha here, no Meera.

I see in them Jewesses  
paraded naked before the towers of death,  
and the young brides of India  
stripping themselves to escape  
the fire lit by the in-laws' greed.

Deliverance to these nimble feet  
Deliverance, deliverance to these  
sad bellies, these dispassionate breasts,  
these innocent necks, these vacant faces,

to each strand of this hair meditating  
in copper and gold and black coal.

This too is funeral pyre:  
but, Upagupta, what they need is  
not your tears of pity.

Immortality is not permitted here,  
Cameras too.

BROOKLYN BRIDGE

*(Crossing the Bridge, 1 May)*

This ancient dark dinosaur of  
Desire turned immobile  
and trapped between the past  
and the present  
while trying to jump across the river  
now survives  
devouring vehicles.



## HOW GEMS ARE BORN

*(Natural History Museum, Houston, 6 May)*

The blue legs of a cowherd boy<sup>5</sup>  
dance in a frenzy  
over the black hood  
of the seething earth.  
Earth cools slowly in the  
music from his reed pipe.  
Its breath becomes coral,  
its blood freezes into ruby  
and its poison, emerald.  
Its eyes turn into topaz,  
scales into pearls,  
its soul becomes turquoise.  
Blue sapphire takes shape where  
the cowherd's peacock feather  
had fallen; his sweat thickens  
into diamonds. The reed-pipe's song  
melts in the sun, turns solid  
to become yellow sapphire.  
Those unyielding, unbelieving  
parts of the earth go on fuming  
and seething as volcanoes.  
Only Kalki's giant drums<sup>6</sup>  
can cool and tame them.  
Then will be born  
the tenth gem:  
the Human being.

CIVILIZATION

*(Natural History Museum, the Red Indian section)*

We hunted them down  
along with beasts  
wherever we spotted them.  
Look, how cute are  
their feather-crowns!

SPACE

*(NASA, Houston, 7 May)*

Emptiness

is

an endless holiday.

THOSE WHO DON'T  
BECOME MOTHERS

*(Holocaust Museum, Houston, 7 May)*

'I want to be a mother!'  
yells a naked four-year-old  
from a dim photograph.  
She had to give up her doll  
at the entrance of the gas chamber.  
That doll was not alone.

Nor was she. A soulless god  
blew his pipe and led  
fifteen hundred thousand children  
to this cavern of ash and silence.

We are in a night  
before the dawn of Man.

One day the children of earth  
will hear tempest howling  
in a sparrow's twitter.  
They will hear the roar  
of angry seas in each trampled word.  
Then their dead little friends  
will be called back to life  
with their golden hair,  
their un-lived lives  
and the death they had died.  
Until another pipe-playing god  
leads them into another funeral pyre.  
Until their tiny wombs scream:  
'No, I don't want to be a mother.'

## MASKS

(*Washington Museum, section on African Art, 8 May*)

I have seen these masks,  
in my childhood dreams.

I traced their shapes  
with charcoal and knife  
on the thick covers of  
used notebooks, on gourd -shells,  
on the spathe of areca palm leaves  
My eyes, half-asleep,  
recognized them in the face-painting of  
the *kathakali* actors in the dim light  
of the brass lamps on the stage.  
Our faces were never like this  
In broad daylight. Only  
God in his creative frenzy  
might have imagined us like this.  
Having run out of paint, he might  
just have planted those shapes  
on our memory.  
What do they express:  
valour or compassion?  
May be they are our exciting past  
or our painful future.  
We no more need them today;  
the faces we have are more than enough.  
We lost our selves long ago.

I long to go to the woods,  
to wash my face in the wild stream.  
I want to dance with the deer,  
beside the fire,  
beside the fire.

## ANTHROPOLOGY

*(Washington Museum, Anthropology Section)*

We just don't need anthropology.  
Everyone of its chapters  
is stained by the blood of the innocent.  
I don't want to know  
to which race I belong:  
I am Aryan, Dravidian too.  
I am Negroid and Mongolian.  
I have Kaveri and Nile in my arteries,  
Ganga, Volga and Euphrates as well.  
We perspire under  
the burning eye of the same sun,  
eat from the same plate, earth.  
Our trees have the same green crown,  
dreams, the same rainbow curve,  
hunger, the same sharpness,  
love, the same climx.  
The same language rises from  
all the labour rooms and mortuaries.  
Those who deify difference,  
look at your bones.  
Even a camel recognizes another camel.  
Brazil's sugarcane does not fight  
Bihar's sugarcane.  
Even clocks that show different times  
measure with their needles the same life,  
touch the same death.  
The tongues of bells  
quarrel with the same God.  
Dust rides to heaven on the shoulders  
of the same wind.  
Let's forget the tales of the clan

*No Borders For Me* Travel Poems

and the travels of the tribe.  
Let us begin from here:  
From the sun beating on our back,  
from this cry that deafens us,  
from these muscles of love  
that beat 'lub-dub' under our throats,  
from these bones  
that dream of the ocean.

## THE MEMORIAL

*(Washington Sights)*

Maple has only one heart;  
apple has two.  
When spring arrives, they beat faster  
Like Radha and Krishna  
Then the waves of Potomac rise and dance  
Behind the Lincoln Memorial.  
Cherry trees are freshly clad in  
white flowers like brides.  
Gun-toting soldiers march in front of  
the demonstrators at Capitol Hill.  
Inside the senate discusses the fares  
of the next world war.  
A dark Rodin statue in the sculpture garden  
suddenly gets excited and runs his fingers  
along the soft curves of a Henri Moore.  
Plump women from Renoir's canvases  
give a slip to the museum guards, get out  
and lie down on the grass under the  
Freedom Pillar, under the cover  
of the evening sun. A suppressed scream  
rises from the last underground station.  
A dogwood plant, its leaves moist with tears,  
drops a white flower into the vacant tin  
an old man holds out at the restaurant door:  
a frail ice-cold memorial to this capital city  
built with frozen tears.

1997

Notes: <sup>1</sup>The reference is to the great Malayalam poet, Edassery Govindan Nair, a poet of the village who lived in Ponnani in South Malabar. <sup>2</sup>Val-



## *No Borders For Me* Travel Poems

miki, the poet of Ramayana had saved a bird from the hunter's arrow and his utterance beginning 'Don't , savage' is supposed to have been the first poem, ever. <sup>3</sup>Akka Mahadevi and Mirabai, saint poets of the South and North India respectively. Akka, 12th century AD, worshipped Shiva and walked naked to show she had conquered shame. <sup>4</sup>Vasavadatta , a legendary courtesan, who fell in love with Upagupta, a young and handsome Buddhist monk, who finally delivers her from her sins. <sup>5</sup>The cow herd boy is Krishna who was in love with Radha and killed the venomous serpent-demon Kaliya , dancing over his hoods in the river Kalindi (Yamuna)

SINS:  
THE ROMAN SEQUENCE

THE FALL OF POETRY

Once upon a time  
poetry lived on Mount Parnassus.  
Apollo sat in the shade of his  
olive tree playing his lyre.  
The Muse of Poetry  
with her full breasts  
and golden magic wand  
sat by, flirting and teasing.  
Homer, Virgil and Dante sat  
next to them, discussing the sublime.  
The sky was so close  
poetry could touch the rainbow.  
The sacred larks of heaven  
sang among the silver- clouds.  
Gods peeped out of poetry  
brushing aside the boughs of  
written trees under

the written moon.  
Immortality lay cuddled  
in each letter.  
Every object  
that reached those heights  
became still, permanent.  
Apollo pushed down to Hell those  
who broke the golden rules of poetry.  
Everything was rich, refined,  
decent and civilized:  
lambs for dinner,  
six hours of quiet sleep,  
wine in a goblet of jade on waking,  
heavenly honey to dip  
the golden plume to pen the notes.

It was much later that  
Satan pulled poetry down to earth.  
Now she wandered among  
the beggars in India in  
unkempt hair and soiled rags,  
worked the loom with Kabir,  
turned the potter's wheel with Gora,  
took poison with Mira,  
starved with Ezhuthacchan<sup>1</sup>  
Now she peeps out from pages  
written in common ink  
to see earth, just our transient earth.

*(On watching Raphael's 'Parmassus' at St. Peter's)*

## ENCOUNTER

While walking among the catacombs<sup>2</sup>  
a frail form suddenly materialised  
before me in that twilit cave.  
I stared at that bleeding face  
and asked, 'Who are you?'

He silently stroked his long hair  
and showed me the marks  
of the crown of thorns.  
'You! So many years!' I said.

'Was travelling,' he said in a voice  
I alone could hear, moving  
his lips in great pain, 'Was  
in your country last'.  
'Then?'

He gently lifted his robe.  
The whole body was burnt black.<sup>3</sup>  
'I have nowhere to go', he said.  
I bowed my head in shame.  
'Welcome to my poetry', I said.  
'Refuge in words is  
sheer delusion', he replied.

A dim light remained  
where he vanished.  
It lead me out of the catacombs.  
Now I was in St Peter's Cathedral.  
A workers' procession  
was moving along the street.  
I saw him lead it.

Above, the rumble of  
fighter-jets.<sup>4</sup>

*(Catacombs, Rome)*

## THE RED BEARD

Two thousand years  
lie imprisoned inside this  
circle of stones.  
The blood of slaves  
and of slain beasts  
screams from the floor.  
I hear people's cheers  
From all the eighty entrances.  
The claps of seventy thousand  
blood-thirsty spectators  
still echo here  
Bear and bull,  
deer and lion,  
rush out of iron cages  
only to be received by  
the eager arrows and spears.  
Hands freed for a brief while  
try their forgotten might.

I find it hard to believe  
that time is past.  
Hunters still sharpen their arrows;  
the sound pierces my ears.  
Musclemen battle on every frontier.  
Earth trembles in the sound of a gong.  
The silver nails of history  
fumble on the curtain.  
Behind it the red-beard  
looms roaring, a garland  
of intestines around his neck.<sup>5</sup>

*(Colosseum, Rome)*

## THE LAST JUDGEMENT

One day the dead will wake up  
to the pipes of angels,  
ascend to the sky to await  
the Last Judgement.

The confessor and the confessed,  
the persecutor and the persecuted,  
the woodcutter and the wood  
will all stand in the same queue.  
Every muscle will recount its sins;  
the eye, the ear and the tongue  
will stand witness.

There will be none to stop the sinners  
from throwing stones, for  
he who had been judged  
also will have become judge.

The sinners will be branded  
and driven to Hell; but  
Hell will not have an inch of space.

They will go on waiting.

That is Eternity.

The holy will be led to Heaven; but  
Heaven will have lost its keys.

That is Immortality.

*(On watching Michelangelo's 'Last Judgement', St. Peter's)*

## NERO'S SOLILOQUY

You fault me with playing the lyre  
while Rome was burning;  
but it was you who had set fire to Rome.  
The fire wouldn't have gone out  
even if I hadn't played and it spread  
not because I played.  
I'm a sensitive artist.  
I can't stand the scream  
of men and women on fire,  
can't see the genius  
of the sculptors and architects  
reduced to rubble.  
I don't want to hear  
the howls of Romulus,  
the heads of plebeian heroes  
grind their teeth from the points of spears.  
Nor the cry of the bones  
of Jesus' disciples eaten away by  
crosses and lions,  
the gurgle of blood from  
Pompey's headless corpse,  
the groan of the commoners  
crushed under Caesar's throne,  
the last sigh from Mark Antony's body  
that had once turned on Cleopatra,  
Octavian's war-drums,  
The ceaseless clanging  
Of the chains of the slave armies  
that had fought and fallen  
from Greece and Gaul  
to the Isles of the Mediterranean  
and Macedonia

for somebody's imperial ambitions.  
I fear my own shadow.  
I can't stand cruelty except my own.  
I am the lyric poet,  
my lyre my only refuge.  
Please don't wrest this from me.  
This city is burning like any other,  
in the fire of its own sins.  
Let it burn and let me play.

*(At the Imperial Forums)*



## THE MOUTH OF TRUTH

This is the mouth of truth,  
between the grown hair  
and the long beard,  
under the eyes without pupils  
and the split nose.

They say this mouth  
bites off the hands of liars.  
No man born of woman  
has dared test its truth.  
My wonder is how  
the owner of this mouth  
lost his hand.

*(Watching the sculpture, 'Mouth of Truth' at San Maria Church)*

1999

<sup>1</sup>All saint-poets of India: Kabir, the weaver; Gora, the potter ; Mira- the princess given poison for having left her prince and palace, Ezhuthacchan- the low-caste Malayalam poet of Adhyatma Ramayana. <sup>2</sup>The underground tombs of slain Christian martyrs in Rome <sup>3</sup>Remembering the atrocities against Christians in India, especially the incident of Steins, a priest being burnt alive in Orissa by Hindu extremists <sup>4</sup>Italy took part in the war in Cosovo. <sup>5</sup>This is an image from *kathakali* , the unique classical theatrical form of Kerala where the villainous characters appear with a red beard; in many last scenes they wear the entrails of the slain foe. *Kathakali* characters wear silver nails and before the scene opens, play with the screen , tantalizing the spectators offering occasional glimpses of the crown and the face – this is called *tiranottam*-peeping from behind the screen.

## O, VENICE

*(Venice, 20-27, April)*

O, Venice!

The grand festival of water

Water's flag

Water's drums

Water's pipe and horn

Water's elephants, water's idol,

Water's procession, shifting colours,

Water's flowerpots and sparklers

Water's weary sleep after the festival

Water's waking up.

O, Venice!

You are water-born, mud-born,

Water-ward, water-fathered

Water-treasure, water-fire

Water-labour, water-delivery,

Water infancy, water-adolescence,

Water's eternal youth

In the shade of the father-sky.

O, Venice!

You are a water-tree  
With roots in the ocean  
Canals for branches  
These buildings on the yellow banks  
For fruits  
Boats like fluttering tiny birds  
Water-tree leaping and swaying  
in the wind.

O Venice!  
You are above, you, below,  
You are within you,  
Eye in the eye  
You are  
object and image  
Voice and echo,  
You are your own beloved  
You multiply within you  
Mobile by day, immobile by night,  
You doze off with a rainbow inside  
Like a rain-dream.

O Venice!  
Grove of legs,  
Festival of legs!  
Horse of walking  
Waves of speed  
The ever-flowing stream  
Of feet on the roads  
The endless dance of shoes  
Laughter's offering  
Chats' low music at night  
The heaven of wine-cups  
Offered by water and light.

O, Venice!

Water's memory  
Water's history  
Legends of sea-battles  
Turning water into tears  
Canals of blood, shed in the Crusades<sup>1</sup>

Sneaking under the ancient bridges  
Realto Concordia Lida  
Padua Aquilia Ultino Chioggia  
Ca' D' Oro: O, your place-names  
full of the music of ripples  
like listening to Vivaldi  
Your islands are glass horses:  
Murano: a water-goddess  
Moulding glass-bubbles into  
Lovely shapes<sup>2</sup>  
Burano: the fairy lace-maker  
Your threads blossoming into  
Leaf and flower, men and women<sup>3</sup>  
Torcello: the green wizard  
On the canal bank with his crown of creepers  
Bearing the church on his stout shoulders.<sup>4</sup>

Your churches are waves  
A procession of a hundred and fifty domes<sup>5</sup>  
The great tower of St Mark  
Mark's pigeons, his leaping horses,  
Flying lions, time changing fast  
Trembling in the hammer-strokes of the Black.<sup>6</sup>

They consecrate everything  
With myrrh, wine and bread,  
With the tales that Messina, Titian,  
Bellini, Tintoretto and Veronese weave with paints  
Mixed on the palette of their heart,<sup>7</sup>  
With the golden wingbeats of the angels

With Jesu's wounds and Mother's tears.  
Your fragrant air!  
Your tender water!  
Your beautiful women  
And handsome men!  
Your gondolas crossing the  
Expanse of water like camels!  
Your dark kids selling trinkets  
On the busy streets!  
The black coffee that distils their valour!  
Your pizza, spaghetti and macaroni,  
Your rain, sun and snow!  
The moonlight specially made for you  
From pure molten gold!  
Your glass palace and murals  
Gilded by moonlight!  
Your rainbow dust!  
Your marble waves!  
Your squares' gardens of Paradise!  
-Everything has become pure today  
As they know we, five men,  
Not three, have arrived  
From the East, from India,  
Following the star,  
To worship you  
In your manger.

1999

Notes: <sup>1</sup>The 'ocean republics' including Realto took part in the fourth Crusade <sup>2</sup>Venetian island famous for glass , with a glass museum <sup>3</sup>Another island famous for lace, with lace museum <sup>4</sup>A green island famous for the mosaics in its churches built in 12-13 centuries <sup>5</sup>Venice has 150 churches, most of whose domes can be seen while sailing through the Grand Canal <sup>6</sup>St Marks Church has a huge clock-tower with a bell rung with a hammer by two black Moors in metal. The three Wise Men appear and pass through this clock on special days. <sup>7</sup>Some of the scores of painters who beautified the churches in Venice.

UTKAL:  
THE ODISHA POEMS

THE FLY AND THE TOWER

*(Jagannath Temple, Puri, 12 June)*

A fly that flew about on the offering  
for Lord Jagannath addressed the mighty  
temple tower: “ Lord, you are  
Jagannath’s tower and I, Jagannath’s fly.  
Yours is the height, and mine the flight.  
You have been waiting to have a vision  
of Jagannath for centuries. This posture of yours  
on aching legs unable even to bend a little  
arouses in me a nervous laughter.  
Is immobility the price of immortality?

“My life is but a fleeting moment.  
I attain my salvation with no sacred thread  
nor holy book, just by humming  
Jagannath’s hymns and pushing  
Jagannath’s chariot among Jagannath’s  
cows and Jagannath’s beggars

under Jagannath's great round eyes.  
But for one who is timeless  
there is no death  
and for one who is deathless  
there is no salvation either."

## THE EPHEMERAL

*(Konark, the Sun Temple, 13 June)*

It is centuries since this sun's chariot  
got bogged down in in the loose sand.

Creation came to a standstill  
as Vishnu took Brahma's place  
and as Shiva replaced Vishnu  
death came to reign.

All the one hundred and twenty eight  
gestures of dance suggest only death  
and in all the love-making postures

I see only death, turgid, erect.

Death's kiss, death's embrace,

Death's penetration into bodies

Death's bestial erotica.

Soorya and Chhaya,  
the Sun and The Shade<sup>1</sup>

were exiled into museums,  
the corpse of the child-architect  
retrieved from the sea peers down  
from the broken dome.<sup>2</sup>

The music of degeneration  
dissolves in the sunset hues.

Nothing survives  
except evanescence.



## THE REMORSELESS

*(Dhauligiri, 13 June)*

Between the broken chariots and  
the scattered dead bodies of men  
and the cadavers of enslaved beasts  
on this hillslope sat Ashoka,<sup>3</sup>  
his head bent, his brow furrowed.  
The gentle breeze from the river Daya  
kept licking the emperor like the cow  
its new-born calf.

The cry of a new-born babe  
wafted towards the Emperor  
dissolved in the scents  
of fresh-blown flowers.

A white cloud appeared above him  
like the Buddha's compassionate face.  
The cloud said: "That river now is  
full of your blood and mine."

Ashoka felt he was being crushed under  
a mighty tower that had just collapsed.  
And he felt besieged by an ocean  
of accusing fingers eager to drown him.  
"I regret."

Now the river was no more red,  
It turned blue, crystalline.  
An Ashoka tree sprang up  
from the future, with Gandhi's  
unbent head, his bleeding chest.

## BHUBANESWAR-CUTTACK

*(Cuttack, 14 June)*

There are people in Bhubaneshwar,  
in Cuttack too.

Those with arms, legs and tongues,  
with their own different tongues.  
But Mahanadi, the Great River,  
keeps them divided.

Bhubaneshwar is full of memories,  
and Cuttack, of dreams.

Bhubaneshwar is full of prayers  
and Cuttack, of laments.

Love in Bhubaneswar is a cave;  
in Cuttack it is a fort<sup>4</sup>

Only the cows on the street  
can make out each house, from the shape  
the smoke from them takes.

Even the demons are different:  
tall and fair appearing at noon  
in Bhubaneshwar; short and dark  
playing the lyre at dusk in Cuttack.

Radha still awaits her waiting.  
The cattle no more hear the flute,  
they hear only the train's whistle.

The time of the *kadamba* trees  
is long since past.<sup>5</sup>

O, Chandrabhaga,  
Chandrabhaga.<sup>6</sup>

## *No Borders For Me* Travel Poems

Notes: <sup>1</sup>Chhaya (Shade) is Surya(Sun)'s consort. The idol of Surya of Konark is in the London museum; that of Chhaya in Delhi's national Museum. <sup>2</sup>Legend has it that the Sun temple at Konark was built over 12 years, by 1,200 workmen. But no one was able to fix the dome forcing the King to issue an order that he would put all the architects to death if the dome was not fixed before the date for the consecration of the temple. The 12-year-old son of the master Builder who had come in search of his father heard this and tried to fix the dome. But the architects thought even now they would be put to death as they could not do what a 12-year-old could. They blamed the Master being selfish. The altercation disappointed the boy who drowned himself in the sea. The astrologer banned worship and rituals in the temple because of this ominous suicide. The temple gradually fell into disuse and dilapidation. <sup>3</sup>The Kalinga war that led to Emperor Ashoka's remorse and conversion to non-violence and Buddhism, took place below the hill, Dhauligiri, on the banks of river Daya (the word means 'compassion') where now a Stupa stands with carvings of scenes from the Buddha's life. The first edict of Ashoka can still be seen below the hill. Gandhi too had sat here in meditation. <sup>4</sup>Bhubaneswar has two Jain caves, Ratnagiri and Udayagiri while Cuttack has a fort called Baramati. <sup>5</sup>Kadamaba tree is sacred to Krishna <sup>6</sup>Chandrabhaga is a river in Odisha. Utkal is the old name of Odisha.

## UJJAYINI-SRINAGAR, 2000

### UJJAYINI

A dry wind blows from the River Kshipra  
reduced to a drain.

A white cloud crosses the sky  
like the pale smile of a lover in exile.

Lord Siva does not appear  
before the neem trees lean with penance.

Urvashi disappears, entangled  
in the valley's prickly pears.

Sakuntala, failing to convince the King  
with her tale, returns to the ashram.

Her jasmine creeper and the fawn  
do not recognize her.

Kanva abandons her.

An orphan born on the street  
gives his name to the country.

Kalidasa, his hair all awry has jumped  
the palace-prison and stops me

in front of the Mahakal temple:

“A poet? Have a *varahan* for me?”

No doubt; this is Ujjayini.

## SRINAGAR

The chill growls outside like  
a porcupine releasing its spines.  
Death inhabits all the houseboats  
in different names.  
Your eyes peep from behind  
the chinar trees about to burst into flames.  
My lonely room is filled  
with your wine-smell.  
I run my coarse fingers  
across your silken skin.  
Then you break into music  
like a *santoor*.

Every one of my hair follicles  
gets ready for a new birth.

Suddenly my face is splattered  
with warm blood.  
Blinded, I scream:  
How could you ever kill?  
And how could I ever love you?

2000

## ON THE WAY TO SHILLONG

On the way to Shillong  
on the sepia banks of Umiyam lake  
under a jacaranda tree in bloom  
I saw her: Banalata Sen.\*

Today after a decade  
I again pass by the lake.  
She is still there:  
A jacaranda tree in full bloom  
under a violet cloud  
scurrying along the sky.

2003

\* the protagonist of Jibanananda Das's Bengali poem, 'Banalata Sen'

## THE ARABIAN NIGHTS

### SACRIFICE

*(The Bel Temple, Palmyra, May 8)*

Lord of all lords,  
Here stands an alien,  
brown, on what once  
was your altar.

I have for witness  
these crumbling columns,  
this gothic roof falling apart,  
this engraved olive leaf,  
this pine cone, this fig  
and egg on the granite floor.  
And these stone canals that once carried  
the screaming blood  
of sacrificial lambs  
and Yahabool and Ajlibool,  
the gods of Sun and Moon  
and the virile Malkabel,  
who fertilizes our earth.

And the grammar-free English  
of this Egyptian guide.  
And Keki, Nazira, Miriam, Kasim,  
this screeching car, this lame camel,  
this desert, this thirst,  
this, this 2004.

God above all gods,  
gods are not dear in India:  
they queue up at the gates  
of public hospitals to repair  
a broken horn, to get an  
aching head or two scanned,  
to test sugar levels that shot up  
by sweet offerings or to  
check the BP when the devotees'  
demands turn impossible.  
At times they try to cast  
faggot votes in vain without  
proper ID cards and return frustrated  
mounting their rats, peacocks and tigers.

Father of every father,  
we could easily quench  
your thirst for blood.  
We have readily turned  
every street into a grove  
of human sacrifice.

Lord of drums and date palms,  
of causes and effects,  
here I stand on your altar  
my head ready for the priest's scimitar.  
I have brought for you



a beautiful bride from India:  
the one who wears  
a garland of skulls, the one  
with the blood-dripping tongue,  
our own beloved Kali  
dancing on the monster's chest  
baring her fangs and her sword  
to her anklets' jingle.

I long to see you man and wife  
so that I sever my own useless head,  
an offering to your first night's thirsts.  
In front of the open eyes  
of that fortunate head, o,  
the mighty lord of blood and semen,  
taste my delicate flesh,  
arouse and appease our Kali  
so that she leaves alone  
our innocent poor.

## HOOKAH

(*To Miriam, Palmyra May 8*)

Girl smoking away  
with a vengeance,  
the hookah fresh-filled  
with honey and tobacco  
in this *bedouin* tent  
made of jute and memory,  
which secret grief of your soul  
are you trying to burn up?  
Which of your pasts  
are you trying to flee  
with these your lips  
dipped the bitter coffee?  
For who do you murmur  
These prayers reddened by  
Lebanon's wine, kneeling  
in front of the *makbaras*?  
for your lost love?  
For the bridegroom on his way?  
Or for your wounded race  
Orphaned in their own home  
Courting death after death?

Your warm sigh falls on my  
hapless shoulders  
like the breeze of Alepo  
sneaking in through the tombs.

I can read the dark message  
This sweet smoke carves  
On your lung's vine leaves:  
'Death is the boundary

of every spring.. Grow on my  
graveyard an orange orchard.'

Mirian, Mirian,  
leave that pipe.  
God's dove has descended  
with the olive branch.  
The deluge is  
about to recede.

## THE ALPHABET

*(Seeing the first alphabet created by man at Ugaritte, May 9)*

The zebra offered its stripes,  
the spotted deer, its spots.  
The peacock lent its call,  
the polar bear, its growl.  
Water gave its curves,  
flint, its fire and wind, its speed.

The alphabet rose from the earth,  
its mane ablaze in the sky,  
to begin its ceaseless journey  
into poetry.

## THE CAMEL

*(For Nasira Sharma)*

I am the ship of the desert,  
the tallest offspring  
of sand-dunes and dust-storms,  
the vessel of dates,  
the solar sea,  
the endless kiss of  
the cactus's dream,  
the moist prophecy  
of the mirage, the brown  
beauty spot of the oasis,  
the tenderness of silk,  
the perfume-tree of Paradise,  
the minaret of prayer.

The mark the prophet left  
is still on my back;  
all those who rode me  
are here still: traders,  
emperors, slaves, aggressors,  
poets: at night they steal  
out of the sarcophagi and  
red sand-stone palaces  
buried in the desert.  
Swords and armours clash;  
moonlight blossoms  
in the heavy torrent of screams.

I breathe history  
in this sandstorm  
as I await with the exiles  
the distant rain and

*No Borders For Me* Travel Poems

peer into the pathways  
of the caravan to see  
what the new century has to offer:  
in saintly detachment  
like my ascetic friends  
of Rajasthan.

## WE SING FROM THE RUINS

(*To Mahmoud Darwish*)

'You were a nation,  
now you are of smoke'

—Mahmoud Darwish

We sing from the ruins  
the song of life;  
we sing from the desert  
the song of rain.

We held out our hands for bread;  
they gave us bullets.  
We held out our hands for flowers;  
they gave us knives.  
We held out our hands for land;  
they hurled us into blood.

We are ever on vigil;  
we see the invisible.

Alibaba has forgotten his magic words;  
the cave remains closed to him.  
No *djin* is left in Aladdin's lamp.  
Sheharazade submits her  
heavenly head, now empty of tales,  
to the Sultan's lusty sword.

We measure the earth and sky  
with the fetters of the slave.  
We plough the fields  
with the cross.

Olive trees tell us only  
gory battle tales.  
Wheat fields grow mines.  
Cedars stare at us as if  
we were the foes.  
Press the grapes,  
they yield blood.

The silence of the legends and  
folklore of yore multiplies  
in our lungs until we choke.  
The sand and slime of  
dried up rivers pile up in our veins.  
The walls and courtyards  
of our vanished home  
float on and fill our marrow.

Ask the kids where their home is.  
They point to the sky as if  
their home were up in the cloud  
that never bursts into rain,  
as if it were lightning, mute,  
with the thunder stolen.

We asked the cacti about the sun.  
They only whispered: 'Assyria,  
Babylonia, Sumeria.'  
We asked the maize plant  
about heaven; it only spoke of  
the skylark's song buried in snow.  
Trees drive us mad;  
we take one branch for  
the drawing room, another for bed.  
We tried to read the wind's prophecy



on the desert sand.

Tell us, Tamuz the Sun-god,  
when shall we build your temple?  
When will our children  
shape your image with  
their own clay, their own water?

When will our womenfolk who  
daily endure labor pangs  
finally deliver children free from  
the marks of whips and chains?

DISCUSSING LOVE

*(Writers' Meet at Holmes, May 9)*

Friends, you ask me, why  
are love-poems  
being written no more?

I say: because we discuss love.  
Look within: every man  
is waiting to be the breeze  
over the flowers, every woman,  
to be the moonlight over the lake.

Thought generates nothing,  
And certainly, not life.

I love, therefore  
I exist.

## THE OUTCASTE

*(For Yasser Arafat)*

No horns and pipes for me;  
I just want to hoot  
From the tallest hill  
As our shepherds do so that  
my stray sheep may return.

No rivers and seas for me;  
I just want to scoop up  
a handful of water  
from this sacred spring  
conjured up by God  
as our farmers do so that  
my world's thirst is quenched.

No bombs and fighters for me;  
I just want to sing  
holding my kin's hands  
when the enemy laughs,  
and dance in a whirl  
as our tribal people do so that  
the aggressor at the border  
flees in scare.

ST JOHN TO JESUS

*(On seeing the head of St John ,the Baptist at the Omayyad Mosque, Damascus, May 19 )*

How terrible Jesus, I had  
baptized you like bathing the beast  
before sacrifice! Your  
mother's tears fall  
on my naked head  
like stones. Tell the Creator  
that abandoned you,  
you want no more  
Fridays. Tell him,  
his rainbow only showered  
crosses allover earth.

Jesus, my Jesus, on that  
forehead of clotted blood  
let me place this flower  
of remorse: this white lily  
that neither sows nor reaps.

QUINETRA

(At Quinetra, the town bombed by Israel, May 14)

This was a quiet little town.  
Children ran about on the streets,  
Like water. Women with cheeks  
red like Idleb's cherries  
sat on the verandahs,  
growing flowers on bed covers.  
Wine-jars were full of mirth  
like Omar Sermini's music.  
Every home had a room  
And a pen for Khalil Gibran.  
The dining tables, rich with *kubbs*  
and *fatush* dreamt of *hoories'* fingers.

One day everything exploded:  
The beautiful roofs of  
mosques and churches,  
weeping hospital wards, houses  
painted green, hearts, loves.  
Liquid metal, broken mosaics  
and dark blood alone remained  
on the courtyards. Only  
the red-faced poppies peeping  
from the hollows of rocks  
and the green bird on  
the pine tree remained.  
Remained only the memory of Karbala  
and the flight from Medina.  
Only the wind on the palm trees  
and the sobs of wine presses.  
Only the lost child's cry and the  
crackling echoes of the funeral pyres.

*No Borders For Me* Travel Poems

He, race of refugees  
fed on acid and arsenic,  
did the gas chambers  
teach you nothing?  
You who have arrived, how  
can you rob those who have  
only started, of their land and dreams?

I hear the blood-stained laughter  
of the dollar teeth from behind  
the children's tombs in Palestine.  
Yet from these foundations of  
unbuilt homes rise up,  
a flower, a pledge, an eye, a hand.

FAREWELL

*(For Saleh, Syrian poet, May 15)*

Our poetry is  
the last dreamy song  
sung in haste by  
a head on the rails  
listening to the rumble  
of the approaching train  
before the steel  
crushes its throat.

2004

IN MEMORY OF  
A SWEDISH EVENING  
*(To Lars Lundqvist, Swedish Poet, at his home)*

With steady hands  
you went on pouring the  
ruddy autumn in my goblet.

You read your poems  
bright like the maple leaves,  
filling the air like a Brahms symphony,  
-sipping one mouthful for each line.

I translated your birds and trees into  
my birds and trees.

Nouns revealed their core.  
Verbs were inert.

There was a meadow  
in your coat pocket.  
I called out to the Western Ghats,  
as if it were a hungry sheep.



The wind was turning  
the pages of an apple tree.  
I inhaled my childhood.

As I looked on  
you turned into a green train.  
I boarded it and whistled like the rain.  
We left behind the church of the chill.  
Words rubbed against words.

When beasts get into language  
The dead burst into laughter.

2005

## THE WALL

*(In front of the remains of the Berlin Wall, 9 September, 2005)*

There is little distance from  
the Berlin Wall to the new  
Holocaust memorial.

I too had once built  
a fragile sand-wall  
between toy-houses  
under the tamarind tree .

By the time I learnt to walk,  
all the passages were  
lined with walls. Every birthday  
was a festival of egos  
parading walls for elephants.

We always needed the other  
to be ourselves.  
An Auschwitz for each naming.  
Rivers and roots silently screamed  
choked by the ramparts made of bodies.

Only rains, birds and dreams  
flew away mocking foolish men.

I press my ears to this  
painted fragment of the old wall  
and hear the cries of children shot dead  
for trying to jump across.  
Poisoned suspicions  
linger around as ghosts.  
Those who looked back at the sins  
turned into pillars of salt.

Only the Rhine flowed on,  
receiving blood and ashes  
like an elegy for the abuse of power.  
River, show us that ceaseless spring  
of love you were born from,  
the dream-world at your bottom  
where identities don't turn into walls  
and beliefs into gas chambers,  
the bellows of the beginning,  
the sacred future that turns red-hot  
in that smithy like pure rose.

2005

## THE PROPHET

*(At Dostoevsky's home in St Petersburg)*

Fyodor, this was your last hell.  
I can see you sit in this dim-lit room  
meditating on man's destiny on earth.  
A lean and handsome Jesus  
stands behind your chair  
listening to the lively music  
your pen plays on paper.  
He watches Ivan Karamazov dancing  
in the fire between faith and doubt  
on your fingertips life has burnt.  
The immortal blood of his sacrifice  
mingles with your untamable mortal blood.

Fyodor,  
You kept flying between coffin-like rooms  
and cemetery-like corridors  
as if haunted by a ghost.  
You saw the poor crushed everywhere by walls:  
walls, fences, alleys, narrow courtyards, low roofs..  
You feared even the sky would descend

and trees would close you in like prison-bars.  
Unpaid debts and headless phantoms  
never left you in peace.

Fyodor,  
I saw the prison-cell at Semyanov square  
where for four years you awaited death.  
I could see you pulling carts loaded with stones  
and waiting blind-folded for the bullets.  
You recognized your life's mission  
the moment you were called back to life.  
Those rays from beyond the sun that fell on you then:  
were they from God or from Satan?

What drowned you in the end  
were not bullets, Fyodor, but  
the whirlwinds of your own nerves,  
the high tides of your own veins,  
the infernal proliferation of voices and images.  
Or, weren't you yourself Alyosha, Mithya,  
Ivan and Raskolnikov? Weren't you  
Arcady, Verkhovensky, Petrovich,  
Stavrogin, Devushkin...<sup>1</sup>  
the sinner and the saint,  
the drunkard and the prophet,  
the lover and the rebel?

You always walked along the razor's edge.  
In sleepless nights, seated between  
the departing friend and the dying beloved,  
between the last cry of your darling daughter  
and the farewell poem of your dearest friend,<sup>2</sup>  
you heard the sacred words of the prophets  
break like collar bones under the train's steel

and the dying screams of the human souls  
caught on the teeth of machines, bleeding.  
You groped for a way to save love as if it were  
a baby to be retrieved from the hound's sharp teeth.  
And you resigned like a recluse finding  
it was not love but hatred that united men.

It was death who gambled with you,  
death, who sat staring at you,  
grinding his teeth.

Your dream was blue.  
Blue was the death that choked you,  
blue, the water that drowned you,  
blue, the fire that burnt you,  
blue heaven, blue Jesus,  
here, between us,  
unable to cross, to reach each other.

2010

<sup>1</sup>Dostoevsky's fictional characters <sup>2</sup>Maria, his wife; Mikhail, brother,  
Sofia, daughter and Apollon Gregoriev, friend.

## FAR, NEAR, 2011

[Dedicated to all the fellow-poets and friends who took part with me in the Welsh-Indian Poetry Translation Workshops in Wales and Kerala : Menna, Karen, Hywel, Eurig, Twm, Sian, Robert, Sioned, Alexandra, Nia, Robin , Sampurna, Anita, Anamika and Aksahy]

### EVENING

*(Tynewydd, 25 June 1)*

The sun turned into eighteen horses.  
The chill was grazing on the meadow  
chewing the cud.  
We seven poets  
from four languages  
peered from the bridge  
into the water below.  
A folksong was flowing there .  
The images of seven swans  
fell on the stream.  
Seven nameless trees peeped  
into it and whistled.  
Seven winds carried us  
to a far-away beach

Sunlight dressed in mist  
flew as sea-gulls there  
and taught us Welsh.  
A hare was flitting about in Manipuri.  
A fish spoke Malayalam it had learnt  
in its previous birth in the Arabian sea.  
The mother-cat on the hillside  
sang a song in Bengali.

Rain translated everything.  
We got drenched in poetry.

And we remained drenched ever after.



## STONES

*(Aberystwyth, 28 June)*

We picked up stones  
shaped perfectly round by water  
from the shore of the Irish sea :  
violet, indigo, blue, green,  
yellow, orange, red.

Each stone had a tale in it.  
Each tale had a captain.  
Each captain had a ship  
Each ship had a sea  
Each sea had an island  
Each island had a  
lone ship-wrecked man  
Each man had a solitude  
of a different colour :  
red, orange, yellow, green,  
blue, indigo, violet.

While telling the tales  
the stones throbbed in our hands.  
They laughed and turned white,  
wept and turned black.  
Lying in our pockets  
they wept over the lost seas.  
Atlantic flowed into our pockets  
looking for her stones.

Those stones yet wet with the sea,  
now adorn my drawing room.  
They feel out of place here  
and grow softer day by day

trying to become flowers.  
From the pollen that covered them  
I gathered they had begun  
to dream of butterflies.  
No sooner had  
my neighbour's child said  
if only they were sea-horses,  
they gave up becoming flowers  
and decided to be a rainbow  
that prophesies the day when  
all oceans will have the same name.

I lifted that rainbow  
and gently placed it in the sky,  
like Jehovah.

## WE BATHED IN LANGUAGES

A sea. An orchestra.  
We eight poets with our own griefs  
played hide-and-seek behind maps.  
We bathed in languages,  
swam, naked, from one shore  
to the other across the waves.  
The sea lulled us, warned us,  
scared us with her depths.  
Poems too did the same.  
To overcome fear  
we chanted the names  
of Asan, Kabir, Tagore.  
I gave Welsh the music of Malayalam,  
you, the blood of Bangla,  
and you, the flesh of Hindi.  
Our words too were reborn;  
they leapt up in Welsh skirts.

The real celebration came later:  
In the heart-throbs  
exchanged on the stage,  
in the demonic memory  
of the worlds we had to leave  
gleaming on the meteor-tails  
of the uttered lines,  
in some secret tides within.

## GUITAR

*(To Twm Morrys)*

In your guitar, Twm,  
There are more stars than sounds.  
In their twinkle I can see  
your little daughter .  
And the moons that entered the room  
riding the song you sang for her.

She sleeps, your daughter,  
her dreams peopled by  
old fairies telling stories,  
angels whose wings  
are the source of daylight,  
trees on which bloom  
many-coloured birds,  
rains with so many fingers  
on so many strings,  
fish that walk upright and  
serpents that play flutes  
and crystal-like language  
that men, beasts  
and plants share alike.

Twm, will you let me become  
a weightless folksong on your guitar?  
Or the rabbit in your daughter's eyes?  
A chestnut covered with white flowers  
in the street where she runs about?  
A snow-white goat  
chewing the cud of poetry  
on her green, green hill?

Lend the lungs of birds  
to our poetry  
so burdened with concerns  
that it cannot fly nor even walk.  
Charm with your song  
the children of our poisoned city,

turn them into lambs  
and lead them to your  
life-giving meadows where  
the grasses we have lost  
are all in flower.,  
lead them to the sacred land of  
your daughter's fragrant innocence.

2011

## VAN GOGH'S 'SHOES'

*(Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam)*

The owner of these shoes died long ago,  
only his memories remain.

Watch this pair closely:  
they carry his sweat and dirt,  
the slush he worked in ,  
the grass he lay on,  
the brownish stains of the burnt bread  
and the rotten potatoes he ate  
and of the disgrace he ever lived in,  
the tears that wet his knees  
as he wept, his sad head between them  
when a drought wrecked his crops,  
the landlord called him an idler ,  
the woman he had loved  
ran away with a merchant,  
his son died of cholera,  
his daughter was raped,  
or his wife took her own life.

Then memories: of the village lanes  
he crossed many times,  
the doors at which  
he endlessly waited for some job,  
of the churches that promptly  
sent back all his prayers,  
of the parents who died of plague,  
of the flowers in the valley  
whose names he had forgotten,  
of the stolen wine a friend offered  
on a Christmas night,  
of the pale yet smiling face  
of his beloved glowing  
in the first night's candle lights .

Those shoes went on sobbing,  
until they were reborn as legs on  
a Rene Magritte canvas.

2012

Note: Van Gogh , the Dutch artist ( 1853-90) did a series of still paintings of shoes whose originals I saw in the van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. Rene Magritte, the Belgian surrealist ( 1898-1967) has an interesting painting where a pair of shoes metamorphoses into human feet.

## HEAVEN

*(While travelling from Euston to Liverpool)*

Have you ever  
traveled by train from  
Euston to Liverpool?  
An elf\* would board it  
from nowhere: the same  
ticketless traveler who  
boards the train between  
Alleppey and Kochi.

The train suddenly fills  
with yellow butterflies,  
fish too start flying on  
tiny wings like grandpa,  
the breeze carries  
a Johnny Walker smell,  
daffodils blossom on our lips.

Don't start when you discover  
the passengers are dead, for,  
you are dead too. They hijack



the Liverpool-bound train  
to Heaven instead. No use  
pulling the chain: the train  
is already in empty space.  
You are well-past the  
world of reason. Only  
flying cats can now board it :  
they are live though  
made of gold. They too  
mew like real cats or like  
God when He is alone,  
a divine, golden mew.

Now you have arrived  
along with the other dead.  
Heaven, you soon find,  
is packed with White men.  
God too is a White man.  
The Colony is thriving still  
and Heaven is no better  
than Liverpool.

2013

\*'Elf' is not a proper substitute for the original word, 'Yakshi', a beautiful yet scary ethereal being in popular belief in Kerala. Other substitute words are 'yellow butterflies' for 'Onathumbikal'- yellow butterflies indeed, but appearing in the Onam festival season- and 'daffodils' for 'muk-kutti' , a small bright yellow flower, again associated with Onam festival.

## THE SOUTHERN CANTO 1

(Medellin-Bogota, Colombia, 5-15 July, 2013)

### CONGO-CONGO

*(For Gabriel Okoundji, poet from Congo)*

From the forest of metaphors,  
crossing the river of images,  
turning his body into a sky  
with his starry spots,  
with the tempest's long strides,  
his gaze trained on his prey,  
his clan's striped memories on his tail,  
the roar of the wild fire inside his entrails  
and the vow of steel in his heart  
comes  
Congo's poetry.

THE WALK

*(For Tenure Ojaide, poet from Nigeria)*

Walking together we take the turn,  
and there he comes on horseback,  
Simon Bolivar.  
Not different from his pictures:  
a warrior by birth.  
'No motherland is final', he said,  
'Borders keep getting redrawn.  
Guevara knew this too.  
But human beings have  
a common motherland:  
Liberty.'

Turning back he again became  
a statue and stood, his eyes on the far horizon,  
at the centre of the park:  
when someone was filing  
at the prison-bars in darkness.

## MIMESIS

*(For Julio, my Spanish reader)*

All the way from Malayalam to English,  
from English to Spanish,  
translated by one,  
read by another:  
now I get you, Mr. Plato.  
Still, dear Julio,  
is this going to work?

Reading over, come  
the cheers and applause.  
But for who? For Malayalam  
English, or Spanish?  
For the word or the voice?  
For the meaning or the feeling?  
Is poetry a long-distance-runner?

Forget your questions, poet,  
raise the cup to this evening,  
And to these people who love poetry.  
Drink for this language of Paz and Vallejo.  
Drink, then read:  
all languages will then merge into one.  
You will begin to understand  
the language of birds and leaves,  
as much as the language  
of the wind and the rain.

## THE TREE

*(For Thiago de Mello)*

While winding up the mountain path  
to Tittiribi, a tree with a long grey beard:  
like the archetype of all trees.

Its seed was carried from Heaven  
in a meteor. Earth's first bird  
flew it from the peak to this valley.  
It put up shoots and grew, drenched  
In the primal rains, along with the  
planet's saga,

witness to the first mammal,  
the first human being.

This prophet is not yet deaf.  
It can already hear the sound  
of the earth born of water  
burn down in fire, like the  
crackling and the sizzle we hear  
from a funeral pyre.

THE MALAYALI MASS FOR GABO\*  
(*For Fernando Rendon*)

O, Lord of open veins,  
The one who lifts up the woman  
doing the laundry straight to Heaven,  
and lets the rainstorm drop  
the aged angel with enormous wings  
to earth in a rainstorm,  
guardian of dead women with growing hair,  
flying Martha's god,  
the anti-Shiva with the Tarantula  
with a woman's head for his vehicle,  
we Malayalees, your devotees  
drenched and blossomed  
in Macondo's monsoon,  
forget for a while our caste, our religion  
and our political parties so dear to us  
to pray en masse: Let the magic of  
all your tales together cure your fatal illness  
and redeem you of amnesia!

We who are certain Kerala  
is derived from Comala,  
who instead of just salt add  
Neruda's Ode to Salt to our curry,  
who chant in one breath  
BorgesLlosaAmadoCortazarBolano  
when thunder and lightning scare us,  
who sell our carpets to buy a Carpentier,  
we who have come  
from the rivers we have sucked dry of sand,  
from the forests we have felled  
to the last tree, from the sliding lands

and eroding soil, from the stark nakedness  
of mirrors and of the Facebook,  
from the Spanish evenings of the bars  
that we throng in one mind  
setting aside our greed for gold and woman,  
from the dawns of the blogs  
that turn crow's quills into peacock feathers,  
to pray as a single body  
with many heads and limbs:  
for your safe return from your refuge  
in the land of Sunstone and Inca gods,  
for your new novel that they say ,  
you have written, not yet written  
and may never write.  
Till then, dear Gabo, our flags  
will be flowers, our polemics prayers  
and our slogans magic chants.  
This is our vow, our vow, our vow.

\* Gabriel Garcia Marquez: The references are to his works and to his contemporaries in Latin America

## THE OBESE

*(To Fernando Botero, Sculptor and painter)*

There is space for one question to pass  
between your obese men and angels.  
And space for one answer to sit  
Between your woman under the banana tree  
and your soldier on the roof top.

I can hear Modigliani pleading  
with you for the lean.  
and you reply: The reason  
for some being obese and some, lean  
needs not necessarily be class;  
it can well be the eyes of the beholder.

His fluidity questions your solidity,  
Still your rotund bodies  
love his lean hands.

There is space for the obese too  
on earth, for a little while more



THE BRUSH AND THE PIPE

*(Looking at the Painting, 'Symphony' in the Museum of  
Modern Art, Medellin)*

The seven colours  
that flow from the brush  
turn the seven notes from the pipe  
into a rainbow.

ALONE

*(To Luis Elena)*

'I am free', said Luis,  
'because I am alone.'  
'I loved everyone as I was not  
forced to love anyone,  
I roamed the world as I was  
not tied to a house,  
I rose to the clouds as I was not  
dust under anyone's feet  
All homes became mine  
as I had no home.  
A woman is a complete human being  
without being a mother.'

'You are nature', the valley  
shouted back, 'wild, eternal.'

You laughed aloud like a waterfall,  
rose up as breeze  
and embraced the sky.

I gave that laughter  
to both my daughters:  
they became Ashoka trees  
brimming with white flowers.

## GRANDMA

*(To Nguyen Phan Ke Ma, poet from Vietnam)*

You read a poem on your grandma  
the big famine of 1945 killed.  
In your lines I hear the lullaby  
sung by the paddy in the field  
where she lies buried.  
When your father returned from war  
and from that field called 'Ma',  
the whole of Vietnam trembled  
and the cornstalks filled with kernel,  
in the lean and pale memory of  
that woman who had fertilized the soil  
with her own body so that the posterity  
may not die of starvation.

Now you discover your grandma  
in the fragrance of the rice  
that seduces your little nose,  
in the delicate taste of each grain  
of the cooked rice that turns  
the tongue into a brain,  
in the golden soul of your land  
that vanquished an empire,  
in your own soul.

## DANCING IN ODESSA

*(To Ilya Kaminsky, Russian poet in Exile in the US)*

Meet Ilya Kaminsky:  
the one who dances in sleep,  
travels through language without  
overturning any memory like  
the blind man running along rooms  
without disturbing the furniture,  
one who, being deaf, can see voices,  
who counted the doves on his courtyard,  
dialed the number on the telephone  
and declared his love to the ear  
on the other side.

His aunt wrote odes to barbershops.  
His grandpa who used to take  
the clouds' census with tomatoes  
in his coat pockets was shot dead  
by the army as he danced  
naked on the table.

His grandma was raped by  
the public prosecutor who inserted  
a pen in her vagina and sentenced  
a whole land to life-imprisonment.

.  
This man has seen a school  
crying in 347 voices, seen a house burn  
in every laugh of the dictator,  
seen the blood of innocents  
spread on the whole of Russian language.

No wonder he loves Paul Celan  
And Osip Mandelstam

Now he is inventing a new language  
for refugees, a new kind of silence,  
as he is no Mayakovsky.

## THE SCREAM

*(To Sainkho Namtchylak, sound-poet from Siberia)*

Long ago you broke  
the trap of words.  
Voice survives language,  
so you turned poetry into a scream.  
You scream, therefore you exist.

You know how to cry in  
many tongues, many idioms:  
of the vagabond who delivers  
her baby on the street, of the little daughter  
the father has branded all over,  
of the young woman raped by her neighbour,  
of the sister sold to flesh trade by her brother,  
of the old mother locked up by her children  
in her own home, of the tribal woman  
evicted even from her forest-home,  
of the woman in love forced to flee her home  
pursued and honour-killed,  
of the one in jail for stealing food,  
and the one burnt alive for dowry  
of Gandhari, Draupadi, Sita, Damayanti,  
of their whole melancholy clan.  
You grunt like the chestnut being felled,  
bleat like the goat under the knife,  
mew like the pussy cat in labour.  
Choked, you groan from the mines  
you howl like the dead,  
like the living,  
like those yet to be born.

You are the earth being slaughtered,  
and I the sun being blown out.

## THE SOUTHERN CANTO 2

(Peru-Cuba, 24-31 October, 2013)

### GOLD

*(Museo Oro del Peru, Lima)*

I am gold, cold yellow dust  
less than pollen, infertile.  
Earth gave me glitter,  
and men, ego.  
One day I ascended earth's stairs,  
and I conquered.  
I launched warships and set fire to cities  
I stole men's freedom,  
burnt women alive.  
My witchcraft painted black white  
And my scalpel turned  
old women young.

Caesar knelt before me,  
Midas begged me to bless his touch.  
Poets praised me:  
the magnolia of the mines,

the marigold around necks  
the daffodil on the ears,  
the smuggled Cleopatra,  
the soulless mistress,  
seductress and slayer.

Those who wed me became emperors,  
those who renounced me, Buddhas.

When the human race grows wise  
they will make dog-chains and chamber pots  
out of me; till then let me act  
the enchantress trampling generals  
under her dainty feet,  
the blood-sucking stone-goddess  
on the prow outside the sanctum.

## LOVE-STATUE

*(Parque del Amor, Miraflores, Peru)*

On the beach beneath the hill,  
a garden of primroses,  
poems and butterflies.  
On a stone pedestal right under the sun  
the endless kiss  
of a lover and his beloved  
that cools the blazing day.

Even Time fears to enter this garden  
without a body, and God dares appear  
only as a pair of lips, with a hiss.  
Rain here has a thousand fingers.

On every step, a Romeo and a Juliet,  
holding aloft the flag  
of a country yet unborn.



## STEPS

*(Pachacamac, Ancient Lima)*

Stone above stone,  
altar above altar,  
red above yellow,  
blood above blood,  
sun above the sea.

For fifteen centuries  
wind kept afloat this scream:  
the deafening cry  
of the Maranca virgins  
sacrificed on these steps of clay:  
O, the Sun-god of Incas,  
lead us, with your rainbow-flag,  
from death's dark night  
to water's translucent day.

Tell me, o, priests and wizards,  
why only our sad and dreaming blood,  
that makes men brave  
children naughty  
and earth sacred?  
Civilization upon civilization,  
culture upon culture: all built  
on our singing flesh  
brimming with desire,  
On our vaginas,  
seductive chalices to men,  
and slides to gliding babes  
we supported earth and sun,  
oceans and stars.

O, Spain, olive tree's cross,  
art's herald, even you failed us.

Here we come,  
from the croaks of  
ancient Lima's sacrificed frogs  
from the bleeding heights  
of Machu-Picchu,  
from the cranial ashes of Pachacamac.

We come, and our right foot  
is already at the sun's door.

CREATION

*(Huaco Erotic Pottery Gallery, Museo Larco, Lima)*

Body is a miracle,  
love, an art of postures.  
The tribes knew it  
before Vatsyayana and Khajuraho.

Clay perspires here,  
bodies quietly fly.  
They unjoin and re-join  
their parts, change their places  
like Picasso figures.

Sex is a silent festive space here,  
and stillness, time's orgasm.

Creation is an accident  
and God, an invention.

## VALLEJO, AGAIN

*(Cesar Vallejo, poet of Peru 1892-1938)*

Vallejo rises from Andes's sepia stone,  
from the blood of Spain  
in green uniform riding a horse  
from the chill, without circumference,  
of Montparnasse cemetery,  
from the parentless pain of  
Santiago's serfs and slaves,  
from the copper mine's  
staircase of sweat to hell.  
Aristotle's many-winged bird  
spoke through his words like an oracle  
and so did a Marx  
with Hercules's muscles  
and St. James's heart.

We poets are just grass, Vallejo,  
growing on adjectives and adverbs,  
a piece of sky reflected in the  
turbid waters on the coal mine's floor.

There is a well in my village home  
that never goes dry, full of  
ferns, frogs and words.  
In my childhood I lifted its water up  
in a bucket made of leaves,  
carried it in a bottle wherever I went  
as if it were the nectar of life.  
That Ganga is still on my mantelshelf  
to quench my final thirst.

You too carried from your Santiago

a cross and a poor man's bread  
along with the sickle and the inkwell  
and the sayings of J. Krishnamurthy. .  
Mystery got trapped in your throat,  
the unknown choked you  
like it did a Rumi or a Hafiz.  
It pricked your soul,  
a sharp stone inside the shoe,  
when, among the men without  
names , birthdays and sandals,  
you knew that bread was  
farther away than any star,  
when you carried your solitude like  
a wood-cutter his axe,  
and even when the wine of the multitude  
gave you a high.

In the end the universe  
ate up your intestines  
and your manuscripts at one go.  
You had no place to hide,  
to conceal your Spain  
from the vile aggressor.  
It was blood, miles around,  
Immeasurable, blood,  
until the edges of language.  
Every strand of hair  
exploded with pain.

I too have not slept  
since you left, Vallejo:  
you bequeathed your weeping  
to my crumbling cells.

*No Borders For Me* Travel Poems

Let it ever be so.  
Let the dead be ever alive  
Let our goblets bubble with hope  
Let green have green,  
red, red and history, history  
Let infinity ever have levity.

HAVANA

*(Old Havana, Cuba)*

Stubborn yet tense,  
black rock encircled by water,  
lighthouse amidst fortresses,  
life besieged by death,  
the island of pearls  
many times plundered  
blood drained by a knife  
held between the coconut palm  
and the banana.

I saw the face of the dictator  
in the clouds, and rifles  
levelled from stars.

How long will they hold on,  
with faith in one eye  
and pity in the other?  
when the lightning strikes  
and the tornado rages?

Hear the Cuban drums:  
they are hearts in panic.  
The warships have not yet moved  
and the sea has ceased to speak.

O, Lord of Martyrs, the rebel of Galilee,  
safeguard this golden island,  
this falling star.

## CHE, TODAY

*(Che Guevara Museum, Havana Fort)*

I saw everything :  
Granma, the yacht  
that smuggled revolution to Cuba  
as a stow-away from Mexico,  
the stairs of the besieged palace  
you claimed with Fidel and Camilo,  
your tools of life, your tools of death,  
your letters written in love's ink,  
your stethoscope that knew  
the country's pulse,  
blood-stained uniform,  
blood-stained dates,  
blood-stained affection.

I hear Guillen sing of the fire-horse  
propping up your guerrilla image  
and the guitar you had raised  
like a cup for Fidel.  
Your every advance reduced  
Our age by an year  
until we became children,  
our ears keen to hear  
the lullaby for the new world.

We too had  
our home-grown Guevaras  
though their bullets  
struck their own heart,  
though only the desert  
took up their battle cry.



No one sang them;  
they have no museums.  
Only an eye eaten away by ants,  
a tooth thrown off by a blow,  
a jaw-bone that used to sing,  
and a line of poetry smelling of gunpowder  
retrieved from an exploded police jeep  
haunt our calm sleep  
on some ghoulish nights,  
along with the tribals' cries of hunger.

Now your face, passionate and firm,  
slowly assumes the shape of a cap  
that priests and merchants can wear  
and your battle-scarred body hangs,  
a T-shirt in the fashion-market.  
Apes put them on and show their teeth  
in front of the camera.

The survivors' memories make  
our brandy more potent, like your  
Motor Cycle Diaries did once.

Bye, Guevara, take this:  
some fire for your revolt in heaven  
from this Indian pyre  
on which I burn.

2013

## STILL

### SRINGERI

*(Saraswati Temple, Sringeri, Dec 30, 2013)*

This little marvel in stone,  
like River Thunga 's flower.  
At its centre, an inaccessible,  
silent Saraswati.

Time is an illusion  
for the Advaitin.

The one without ego is  
neither born nor does he die  
and leaves no footprint.

A cold wind is blowing  
from the woods.  
My beloved, it will  
claim us in no time.

The soul is  
a state of the body.

## THE POET'S HILL

*(Kavishailam: Poet Kuvempu's final resting place, 29 December 2013)*

A meditating hill in the midst  
of an ocean of green.  
Over the fossils of history  
the poet, evolved into a signature.

Sitting here he dreamt of  
another Ramayana:  
a Shambooka untouched by Rama's arrow  
a Rama tested by fire  
a Bali not slain by deceit.

Now he sleeps  
in the rocks' cradle.  
The breezes of another world  
sing lullabies for him.

Place your ears close to this rock:  
you will hear the poet  
revising his lines:  
the never-ending journey of  
words to perfection,  
the groan of meanings  
forever postponed.

STONES

*(Chennakeshava Temple, Belur, Dec 30, 2013)*

Have you seen stones sing  
and turn into handsome demons?  
Or dance without moving  
and turn into perfect goddesses?  
Have you seen lionesses flower  
as wild creepers, horses burn with energy  
like the sun, apes being blessed  
by forest trees in spring and  
elephants, frozen nights,  
raise their trunks to greet the moon?

I read Mahabharata here once again.  
Each pillar is a canto. Only  
the sculptor who reined in time  
won the war. For a thousand years  
everyone on these walls have been  
dying at night to rise at dawn.  
Over the chatter of tourists falls  
the incessant clink of Brahma's chisel,  
the seductive laughter of the infinite.

I am no master-sculptor, yet I try  
to capture that laughter  
in letters with curves that  
mimic these dancing girls.  
Tomorrow  
someone is sure to come this way.

## BAHUBALI

*(Gomateswara Statue, Sravanabalagola, 31 Dec 2013)*

I grew strong in arm knowing  
the strength of arms is useless.  
I won the duel, won too  
the water-battle and in the final  
war of pride Bharata's wheel  
circled me in reverence and  
went back, humbled.  
But that was the moment of  
my defeat. I hung my head  
in endless shame: I had fought  
my blood-brother to  
capture his royal throne.  
There is no wisdom without humility  
The moment I climbed down  
from my elephantine ego,  
my father, Adinatha, I realized  
the transience of human life,  
the ceaseless decay of the muscles,  
the endless anguish of the heart,  
the fleeting vanity of power.  
Earth, turned by battling brothers  
into a pool of blood, throbbed  
in front of me like a piece of raw flesh  
cut off from a body.  
I burnt like a torch, hoping  
everyone would now see  
what I had seen. That was not to be.

Now, from the top of this Vindhya hill  
I see everything once again-  
in this second life given to me

by the sculptor's hands:  
the ascent and descent of small men,  
the rising and setting of sun and moon  
in the milky pool below.  
Stardust keeps on falling  
on my broad shoulders.  
My eyes, neither open nor closed  
carry no regrets nor hatred.  
I stand, I watch, I keep silent.

I am history's gigantic helplessness,  
power that is detached,  
the monolithic monument  
of naked suffering.

## MEDITATION

*(Chandragiri, Sravanabalagola, 1 Jan, 2014)*

One can celebrate the New Year  
this way too: climbing up the hill,  
renouncing desire even if  
for a few seconds, turning  
ascetic, kneeling in calm meditation  
in saint Bhadrabahu's cave,  
his footprints carrying one  
beyond time.

This widow in white shouting  
victory for the Thirthankaras too  
longs for the same , and  
this single cloud crossing  
Chandragupta's flag-pole.  
Everything intense  
burns down fast;  
only what is placid survives,  
like non-violence that  
survives violence:

a flower blossoming among the stones  
of a house ruined by war.

2014

## I AM A LANGUAGE

*(For Rene Magritte, Rene Magritte Museum, Brussels)*

I am a language:  
a language of  
lines and colours  
between the real  
and the unreal.

In this language  
the sky is inside the bird  
and the leaves and peaks  
are themselves birds.

That human head  
among the tea cups on the table  
is a noun; the cloud  
swaying on the window curtains  
is another.

The eye is a synonym for apple,  
and a bird can mean  
a flower or a plant.  
The face imprinted on the palm



is a pronoun; the spotted deer  
inside the wine cup, an adjective.  
Turning female breasts into  
striped tigers is a transitive verb;  
bottles growing human bodies  
and pillars putting on branches  
are intransitives.  
The hawk in a coat  
is an adverb.

This is a language of metaphors too:  
Houses and trees like  
the heaps of colours displayed  
by a *kumkum* seller in a temple festival;  
headless human forms  
flying about in space,  
forests with palpitating hearts.

The grammar of this language  
is that of dreams:  
female bodies breaking free  
from prisons, men's foreheads  
rising like the moon,  
candles turning into keys,  
earth opening all her eyes at once,  
nights that longs to be days.

Art's theme is not the known;  
and the world is there  
not just to be copied, but  
to be remade by imagination.

2013

## SRILANKAN SKETCHES

*(Sri Lanka, April 20-26, 2014)*

### COLOMBO

Every vessel that anchored here  
Turned these people slaves.  
The last ones that arrived  
Brought more ashore

The wind trapped in the Freedom Monument  
Longs to tell that tale.  
When its voice breaks and falters,  
It thirsts for human blood.

## THOUSAND BUDDHAS

I seek my own Buddha  
Among these thousand Buddhas  
In wood and stone, ivory and gold,  
Filling temples, museums, squares.

A breeze that wanders among the *Jatakas*  
Whispers in my ears: 'He is yet to come.'

At night I dream a white elephant,  
A banyan leaf, a lotus.

## DRUMS

Drums speak the same language  
In mosques, temples and *viharas*  
and on the performing stage.

Earth screams through animal skins  
From Congo to Colombo.

Drums are beating hearts that  
Assure everyone that Tomorrow exists.

THE TOOTH-TEMPLE, KANDY

For this tooth of Thathagata  
That had not hurt even a blade of grass  
Ten thousand swords bled men to death.

The relic of the vagabond  
Who had renounced the throne  
Chokes and sighs from caskets of gold.

We offer faded lotuses to the One  
From whose baby-steps  
Lotuses had once bloomed.

## BATTICALOA

Water did not save this land;  
He foamed at the mouth  
In anger and devoured  
Children and coconut palms.

Now you cannot recognise him:  
Quiet like a sleeping tiger.  
The eyes of the survivors are still open;  
There are tempests in their memory.

Waves retreat only  
To advance with greater force.

## COCONUT PALMS: BELIHULOYA

Coconut trees speak God's tongue,  
Whether in India or Lanka,  
Cuba, Hawaii or Madagascar.

The bunch of coconuts  
That slipped from Heaven down the clouds  
Scattered and fell in distant lands  
Sprouting under different rains.

The mild sweetness of the tender coconut,  
The intense fragrance of its inflorescence,  
The green murmur of the coconut fronds  
Are all crunchy memories  
Of the Paradise it had left.

That is why  
    Those who take toddy  
As well as their words  
    Go this way and that  
And slip and fall as if  
    Walking on rainbows.

THE LOST MOTHER-TONGUE:  
PERADENIYA

We poets here cry in four languages:  
Tamil, Malayalam, Sinhala, English.

What we don't have is  
The fifth language: the common  
Mother-tongue humans have lost.

That is what translators are after:  
Going beyond the Babel  
They write a hymn, a cup raised  
For the first humans and the first beasts.

2014



## I WALK INSIDE A CLOUD

I walk inside a cloud  
like the moon walks at times,  
and at times, Michel Jackson.  
The valley's breeze caresses me  
like mother does at times and  
at times, a banana leaf.  
Red flowers glisten on the hilltop  
like desire does at times and  
at times Ashan<sup>1</sup>

I tread softly;  
on the mountains, every stone is a goddess

While wondering if this violet flower  
would turn pink if I name it 'love',  
there appears before me :  
a dancing blue waterfall.  
'Leela'<sup>2</sup>, she says, ' I am the eternal beloved'  
'You are death', I say, 'a blue Menaka'.  
She disappears into the mist  
with a scream; only a light remains.

It is because I write in that dim light that  
my poems become fireflies with a  
dark present and a bright future.

Now light may be.  
That may be the beginning,  
the genesis we always insisted  
was not this , not this.  
The story is yet to begin,  
inside the cloud.

I am a Yaksha<sup>3</sup>,  
you won't understand my language.

2016

Notes <sup>1</sup>Kumaran Ashan, a great metaphysical rebel poet of Kerala's renaissance <sup>2</sup>Leela, one of Ashan's famed female protagonists <sup>3</sup>Yaksha is an otherworldly being.

## MEDITATIONS: SHIMLA

### THE MONOLOGUE OF THE ROCK

Once I was in the Pacific:  
among seahorses and coral reefs.  
I was flung into the solitude of the shore  
as the continents began to drift apart.  
The secrets of the earth  
lie engraved inside me, layer upon layer.

Wearing a flower I become goddess;  
trampled upon, the outcaste woman.

When you sharpen your weapons  
on me, I bleed.

I make no distinctions  
between love and prayer.

I have in me the sea and the sky:  
beginning, evolution, end.

This umbrella cannot  
save you from my questions.

THIS FLOWER

I didn't know until yesterday  
the colour of forgetting is violet.  
And man's tendency to name everything  
won't lead him anywhere.

## SNOW

I was the first-born.  
I covered  
all the languages.

Letters were revealed  
as sunbeams melted me  
They turned into trees and beasts,  
thoughts and images.

I still stick to languages:  
rendering them translucent.

2016

## NOT ONLY THE OCEANS

*(Shimla, December)*

Not only the oceans,  
mountains too have their secrets.

You will say the laughter  
you hear from afar  
is the sound of waterfalls.  
No, it is seven fairies laughing.

These little crisscrossing pebbly  
paths are ways that lead you  
to different worlds. You may reach  
the netherworld or the world of the dead.

Those wild paths that go up may  
lead you to the Moon or Mars or Heaven.

Don't mount those horses:  
The black ones will take you to the Middle Ages  
and the white ones to solitude.

Did you see that blue bird?  
It was a violinist in its last birth  
and that brown bird was a drummer-  
just as this white stone here  
was a star.

The people here  
call salvation water.

It is at night that nothingness,  
beasts and ghosts come out.

The ghosts are mostly  
of the White who once ruled here.  
Don't be scared, they are no more;  
only their guns live on.

Go through that tunnel,  
and you will reach Hell.  
That is where the subjects live.  
They have been weaving  
a blanket for centuries.  
When it is done, this place  
will come to an end.

This posture of the earth,  
lying on her back,  
eyes closed , knees in the air,  
is an invitation.  
You cannot refuse it  
nor accept it.

None who came here has gone back;  
and, as for her,  
she never parts her legs.

2015

## I SPEAK TO MY GLASS

(*Shimla, March*)

Alone I sit in this valley of crickets  
in the fog spreading like frozen moonlight.  
This house-gecko does not understand Malayalam,  
so I speak to my glass that knows many languages.  
It winks at me and tells me: 'Your time is not far'  
I feel like flinging it down and scream, 'Yours too',  
But I restrain myself. Instead like a beloved  
I raise it to my lips, and intoxicated,  
forget I am alone.

'Anand re...' Ulhas Kashalkar sings an *abhang*  
in Bhairavi. Accompanied by the orchestra  
of the future, assuring me that death happens  
only in the present.

Pushing open the door I had locked from inside,  
you and wind and rain rush in. You sit on my lap,  
I play you like a *veena* in *yaman kalyan*.  
Lightning or death can no more frighten me.  
I will rise again and again in your love,  
like the morning sun that reddens  
that nameless flower below.

Marlon James's novel on my settee  
opens by itself and the slain Bob Marley  
descends its pages and sings: 'Rise up!  
Stand up! Stand up for your rights!'

'Is it the right to love?', you ask. 'Yes,  
That too is a right. And to sing. And dream.  
Dreams have no constitution.'



I want to live. Until the earth is covered  
with green feathers. Until that parrot sings  
this time about Ravan who was  
ready to die for his love.

2016

## MEMORIES OF SHIMLA

That watch has been stilled

The woods below the mountain  
are now a green line  
under a blue one

Those days lie scattered,  
like the coins flung on a rock,  
leaving only a jingle

Only the laughter of some friends,  
like some thoughts,  
gleams in the dark

I confuse memory with wine,  
like clouds with peaks.

Something like a rainbow  
is exploding in my brain;  
something like rain  
is pouring under my skin

Shimla sobs on my shoulders  
like the love I never had there.  
A white, white solitude  
dissolves in my mouth.

I am water: transparent,  
body, memory, desire.

Shimla, I have kept a page vacant for you,  
in my blood's autobiography,

a pallid one.

From calendar to memory:  
a fatal poem : like an  
irrepressible arousal.

A cobbler is getting  
drenched in the rain.  
Have miles to go.

October 2016

## HOW SPAIN WAS\*

### THE SCREAM

*(Madrid, 3 August, 2016: Watching Picasso's Guernica  
and the sketches done by the artist for the master piece at  
the Reina Sofia )*

The ruins of the holy city  
had driven the artist's fingers mad  
His nightmarish imagination  
roamed his sketch book  
like a wounded beast in its forest  
turning all the colours on his palette  
into blacks and greys, the only shades  
now left in the city.

A horse's neighing from the dark  
poured molten silver into his ears.  
A burning lamp moved towards  
the pupils of his eyes,  
with the glint of an open knife.  
A new Mary, a pale skeleton,  
her dead son in her lap,  
her house on fire, her hands raised,

emerged- may be from David's psalms  
or from Matthew's gospel-  
and went on crying on his page.  
A soldier, his sword broken and his chest  
heavy with many battles, came to lie beside her.  
An ugly head with buffalo's ears and curved horns  
rose from a Goya painting in the dark.

There was flower, but no fragrance  
There was blinding light, but no eyes  
There was heart, but no hope  
The formless night was devouring  
the tightly held kerosene lamp.

Time and space got all mixed up  
as in a bad dream; nothing was in its place;  
everything was deprived of its meaning.  
Signs lay writhing in blood  
like the limbs of a body caught in an explosion,  
screaming, 'My city, my heart'.

He put the signs in order  
in the emptiness within the emptiness  
vainly dreaming of an endless picture  
that goes on growing at both ends.

My heart flew among the clouds  
bearing the dead body laid on the floor,  
like the disgraced Shiva with Sati's corpse.  
Its parts fell in different places,  
in Aleppo and Bagdad,  
in Croatia and Kashmir .  
Temples of death came up everywhere  
like the churches of shame  
that rose from Christ's sacred blood.

## THE BLOOD-SQUARE

*(Madrid, 4 August 4. At Plaza Mayor built first by Philip III in the 16<sup>th</sup> century with nine gates and 237 balconies. Spanish inquisitions were held here; also public executions and bull fights)*

Plaza Mayor is a circular scream:  
a scream with two hundred and thirty-seven heads  
stuck on a spear. You can enter  
that scream through nine gates, but  
there are no gates to go out.

These arches stand on the smoke  
of the innocent burnt alive.  
These walls have been reddened by  
the still-flowing refugee-blood of  
those decapitated here.  
Bull-fighters' bellowing blood  
pierces the wild flesh of bulls  
pushing them into death.

Lovers chat beneath the sword-bearing emperor  
on the bronze-horse ready to take off-  
in that short sunny interval between  
the reluctant ecstasy of the first kiss and  
the rude shock of the sword falling  
on their entwined bodies.

## THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA

*(Madrid, 5 August. Seeing the restaurant that used to be frequented by Ernest Hemingway on the Gran Via, the main street in Madrid)*

There he sits, leaning against the wall  
with its red paint peeling off,  
the old man who had fought the sea:  
stroking his sailor's beard  
grown grey like an ancient sail,  
staring at the morning sun clothed in mist,  
polishing his old rifle, lighting a cigar.

The half-drunk beer on the table  
winks at Hemingway and asks him:  
'This time it was the sea that won, no?'  
Hemingway, his lips slightly twisted, says:  
'My old man had will,  
and the dictator, only power.  
The will here was with the people  
and the bell tolled for the tyrant.'<sup>1</sup>

'Do you still have your fatigues?'  
Martha's form emerged from the nylon sun.<sup>2</sup>  
'it still hurts here,'  
the writer rubbed his knees.  
Before she could ask whether  
his wound was love's or war's,  
Hemingway, sipping beer, remarked,  
'I am working on a play, *Fifth Column*'<sup>3</sup>

Suddenly a bell tolled from the past.  
Hemingway put on his uniform  
and got ready for the next battle.

## DYING POETS

*(Soria, 7 August. On reading poetry at the home of the Spanish poet Antonio Machado [1875-1939] )*

Some of the dying poets  
turn into statuary, some into books.  
The houses of some become museums.

This poet too could not escape the fate;  
but he rises from the dead  
whenever his lines burst from nowhere  
into the everyday conversations  
of the common Spanish folk.

He did not craft his poems, measuring,  
cutting and chiselling like carpenters  
but addressed history and people  
in the voice of storms or of prophets:  
Whitman, Lorca, Neruda, Darwish...  
from the same family where  
oceans had been born,  
poets whose high tides broke the walls  
among love, nature and freedom;  
those who gathered honey from defeats.

He saw spring sailing across water,  
the setting sun launching his boat  
in the sea of the orange trees .

He entered the memories of stone.  
Intoxicated by a mixture of sunlight and poison,  
he sang the lost gardens of his land  
and the stilled wheels of its dried up streams.  
Children, excited, touch these photos and



the pages of books he had underlined;  
spiders teach their offspring  
not to try webs in these shelves and  
geckos echo his lines: *'Traveller,  
the passage is nothing but your footprints;  
ways are made as you walk'*

There , in front of his eyes open even in death  
we read our poems, light like flowers  
placed on his tomb.

The acid rain of symbols  
from his burnt brow turned into  
poetry's wine as soon as  
it touched the red earth.

Listen to his statue's Spanish heart :  
it beats faster and ever faster.

## LANGUAGE INTO LANGUAGE

*(Soria, 6 August. Translating my poems into Spanish with Carlos Aganzo)*

You don't listen to my poetry at all;  
you just hear the words, one by one.  
You weigh each word, lifts each  
to your keen ear to hear its melody.  
You touch it to test whether  
it is rough or tender, taste it to see  
whether sweet or bitter.  
You hear, watch, measure, ask, think  
and make sure whether it is  
slow or fast, soft or hard, subtle or loud,  
long or short, country's or city's.

I remember the goldsmith, the carpenter,  
the folk singer and the tribal dancer  
of my village, all together.

Now you are opening the word's shell  
to prise out its memories. Then you wear  
the word's aura around your head  
and read the poem, from beginning to end,  
from end to beginning, vertically and horizontally  
Here, there, you stroll with the lines,  
take the words apart, join them again,  
copy my structure into your grammar.  
Now it is your poetry.

Or, rather, there is neither  
your poetry nor mine;  
not even our poetry;  
there is only poetry,  
without possessives.

## THE SIESTA

*(Segovia, 9 August. As is well-known, the Spanish cannot do without the siesta)*

The day is asleep,  
so is the sun  
The earth is asleep,  
so is the sky.  
A whole people sleep  
closing their shops and  
offices, giving a holiday to  
their thoughts and cares,  
an interval to their stories,  
games, battles.

The past appears and  
disappears in sleep,  
the future revolves:  
the freedom stolen by  
kings after kings,  
the life that generals  
broke apart: for an hour  
they get them back; they seep in  
through a porous dream.

Here the beggars and kings  
are all the same;  
all the same the rulers  
and the ruled.  
Men and beasts are equal here,  
the mountain is one with the sea.

As they wake up  
the world has changed;

looking around  
the heart gets torn.  
The bygone past,  
the unborn future,  
the people are  
caught in their endless war.

By the time they are  
ready to rebuild,  
it's time again  
for the siesta.  
'Let's sleep now',  
says the yawn,  
'to rebuild  
there's plenty of time!'

THE UNKNOWN TONGUES

*(Avila, 10 August. Listening to the many tongues spoken  
by the pilgrims at the St Teresa Church)*

I don't know  
Avadhi or Azarbaijani,  
Kashmiri or Kurdish,  
Konkani or Kokborok,  
Gondi or Kirundi,  
Bangla or Burmese,  
Marwari or Malagasy,  
Mundari or Mandarin,  
Sindhi or Sudanese,  
a thousand tongues besides.

But I know the tongues  
of cuckoo and gecko  
leaves and elves  
deer and fish  
rain and earth  
body and wind  
sea and sky,  
flower and star,  
sun and snow,  
of mind, of mind,  
and thousands besides,

for, I know  
Malayalam.

\*The title is of a poem by Pablo Neruda

<sup>1</sup>References to the Spanish Civil War. Hemingway was one of the last news reporters to leave Spain . He had also taken part in the First World War

*No Borders For Me* Travel Poems

<sup>2</sup>Martha Gellhorn, journalist and playwright, was with Hemingway in 1937-38 in Spain and was Hemingway's wife from 1940 to '45

<sup>3</sup>Fifth Column (1938), the only full-length play written by Hemingway, about Philip Rawlings, a counter-espionage agent of the Comintern who identifies the fascists who had clandestinely planned the overthrow of the Republican army in Madrid from within, has recently been revived.

## THREE COORG POEMS

### NIGHT AND THE ELEPHANT

In Coorg it is hard to know  
the elephant from the night.  
You think it is night ; but  
do not find the moon.  
You think it is the tusker; but  
do not find its tusks.

Is it that the night and the elephant  
gave up both as they could not tell  
the moon's curve from the tusk's?

But this intense fragrance, mixed,  
of sugarcane, wild berries and  
the Queen of the Night blossoming  
in moonlight : is it the night's scent  
or the elephant's?

## KAVERY

We crossed Kavery several times.  
At one place it was just a  
tiny stream among the rocks,  
in another a stagnant pool and  
In yet another a full river.

But the images falling on the water  
was the same: bamboos, trees,  
clouds, us, an unbuilt bridge  
and an unborn rainbow  
in an angel' s golden dream.

Like the images of earth  
falling on every soul.



## FORESTS

Several forests passed through us,  
several birds flew, several beasts ran.  
We just stood still, hoping, with every breeze,  
to turn into trees, put forth leaves  
and wait for flowers to blossom  
and fruits to ripen .

Kavery flowed past us,  
watering our long- forgotten roots.

## THE CAVE

There is a deep cave  
in Vilenica in Slovenia,  
dark and cold like the unconscious.  
It is into the stillness of Time  
that we descend its steps.  
Thoughts and bats that have  
lost their direction  
fly about in the dark.  
We suspect whether this cave,  
with neither past nor future,  
came about at the beginning of the  
universe or after its end.  
In the faint light from above we see  
some pictures scrawled on its moist wall,  
and some script we fail to decode.  
We wonder whether they were engraved  
by God or Devil or the primal man.

We, some poets, went down the cave  
looking for the language of the unconscious.

*No Borders For Me* Travel Poems

Some came back;  
some roam about there  
still, seeking the source  
and the meaning of dreams.

2016



## K. SATCHIDANANDAN

K.Satchidanandan (born on 28 May 1946) is an Indian poet, essayist, playwright, travel-writer and translator writing in Malayalam, the language of Kerala and a bilingual (Malayalam and English) critic and editor. He has been Professor of English at Christ College, University of Calicut, Kerala, editor of *Indian Literature*, the journal of the Sahitya Akademi (The National Academy of Letters) and later the Chief Executive of the Akademi. He then worked as a Language Policy Consultant for the Government of India and has been associated as editor with *Katha*, Delhi and the Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature. He edits the poetry quarterly *Kerala Kavita* in Malayalam and has edited a series of selections of poems by distinguished Malayalam poets and a series of translations from South Asian literature, *The South Asian Library of Literature in English* besides several collections of poetry and essays including *Words Matter*, an anthology of dissent published by Penguin India. He retired in 2011 as Director and Professor, School of Translation

Studies and Training, Indira Gandhi National Open University, Delhi. He was also on the Project Advisory Board of Indian Literature Abroad, and the National Executive of the National Translation Mission and has been on the Executive Board of Sahitya Akademi besides being on the academic/governing bodies of JNU, (Delhi), Ambedkar University (Delhi), Malayalam University (Kerala) and has been on the PhD board of four universities. Until recently he was a National Fellow at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla and is a Distinguished Member, Loka Kerala Sabha, Member, Kerala State Higher Education Board and Co-Chairman for Art and Literature, Kerala State Planning Board. He is also the Director of the Kerala Literature Festival.

Satchidanandan has 27 collections of poetry in Malayalam, 16 collections of world poetry in translation, four plays, three books of travel and 23 collections of critical essays and interviews besides five collections of essays in English. He has edited several anthologies of poetry and prose in Malayalam, English and Hindi. He has 33 collections of his poems in translation in 18 languages, including seven collections in English, the chief of them being *While I Write* (HarperCollins), *Misplaced Objects and Other Poems* (Sahitya Akademi), *The Missing Rib and Not Only the Oceans* (Poetrywala), eight in Hindi, four in Tamil, two in Kannada, two in Oriya, two in Assamese, two in Marathi and one each in Irish, Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, German, French, Italian, Bengali, Telugu and Gujarati. He has won 52 awards and honours for his literary contribution including Bharatiya Bhasha Parishad Award, Gangadhar

Meher Award and Kavisamrat Upendra Bhanja Award, Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award (5 times, for different genres), Kumaran Asan Award, Bapureddy National Award, N T Rama Rao National Award, Kuvempu National Award, Kusumagraj National Award, Kerala Varma Award, Ulloor Award, P. Kunhiraman Nair Award (twice), Odakkuzhal Award, Vayalar Award, SBT Suvarna Mudra, Padmaprabha Puraskaram, V. Aravindakshan Award, Kavyotsav Award, Hariyorma Award, Kesari Nayanar Award, first Kamala Surayya Memorial award, Navamalayali Award, Kerala SSF award and Ezhuthachan Award, the topmost award for any writer in Kerala, Kadammanitta Ramakrishnan Award, Baharain Keraleeya Samajam Award, Oman Kerala Cultural Centre Award, Kamala Surayya Award, UA Exchange Award, Sahitya Akademi Award for Malayalam, Kala award for total contribution from London, and Poetry for Peace Award from the Govt. of UAE. He has also won Green India Excellence Award for environmental writing besides Sahityasree from the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, Delhi, Senior Fellowship from the Department of Culture, Government of India, Sreekant Verma Fellowship from the Government of Madhya Pradesh and the K.K.Birla Fellowship for Comparative Literature. He is a Fellow of the Kerala Sahitya Akademi. Many of his books of poetry and criticism have been textbooks in Universities and there are several PhDs on his poetry. A film on him, Summer Rain was released in 2007. His name was in the Lad-broke list of the first ten probable winners of the Nobel Prize in 2011.

Satchidanandan has represented India in several international literary events like the international lit-

erary festivals in Sarajevo, Berlin, Montreal, Beijing, Moscow, Ivry-sur Seine, Rotterdam, Jaipur, Delhi, Hay Festival-Trivandrum, Medellin International Poetry Festival in Colombia, Struga Poetry Evenings in N. Macedonia, and book fairs at Delhi, Lahore, Kolkata, Abu Dhabi, Frankfurt, Leipzig, London, Paris and Moscow. He has also read and talked at Bonn, Rome, Verona, Ravenna, Leiden, NewYork, St.Petersburg, Damascus, Aberystwyth, Manchester, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Oman, Sharjah, Singapore, Beijing, Shang Hai, Hang Zhou, Colombia, Cuba, Peru, Venezuela, Johannesburg, Skopje, Perth etc. besides most of the cities in India. Satchidanandan has been honoured with Knighthood of the Order of Merit by the Government of Italy, with the Dante Medal by the Dante Institute, Ravenna and the India-Poland Friendship Medal by the Government of Poland. He has also been an activist for secularism, environment and human rights.