

# Indian Poetry in English Today



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This fascinating anthology presents the poetry of some of the finest Indian poets in English who had made their mark by the sixties and early seventies. A.K. Ramanujan, Adil Jussawalla, Gauri Deshpande, Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, to mention but a few, have contributed to this collection some of their best poetry revealing an intense poetic awareness of the reality surrounding them without surrendering their individuality. Love, pleasure, pain, and contemporary problems are some of the main themes of the poets. The students and lovers of English Literature should find this volume a very rewarding experience.

**CATALOGUE**



# Indian Poetry in English Today

Edited by  
PRITISH NANDY

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# INTRODUCTION

The 'sixties was a critical decade for Indian poetry in English. The dynamics of a new sensibility which were released during the late 'fifties gathered force during these ten years and were finally shaped into a definitive movement. This movement was not restricted by reference to any specific infrastructure of values nor was it spearheaded by ideological considerations. It was determined by a quest for roots.

There is a song by Alice Cooper, that defiant bad boy of American rock music famous for his onstage saturnalia, that goes:

"We got no class  
And we got no principles  
And we got no innocence. . ."

This describes Alice Cooper's generation, a generation stranded by a strange loss of values. A generation for whom, according to Cooper, "America is sex, death and money and we laugh at all three". Bizarre, coming from someone who in a sense represents all three : a stunning success symbol for his promoters and a diabolic over-reaction to the search for the All American Boy who would be part of the silent majority, quiet on the campus, the

fastest gun south of Saigon. Alice, on the other hand, discovered deca-rock (deca for decadent) and speaks of transvestite rock, peddles unisex cosmetics, wears mascara, rouge and a sequined jumpsuit, and ends each performance screwing a lifesize mannequin. An apocryphal symbol of his time.

In a sense, the Indian poet in English shares a somewhat similar status. He represents his generation and speaks for it. Yet he knows his own generation is freak, part of an affluent subculture, rootless, often alienated from the mainstream of the Indian experience. But genuine nonetheless. As genuine as Alice Cooper, rouge, saturnalia and all. Sociologically perverse, a strange creature thrown up by strange circumstances. But so are we all in a sense. Almost all of us who think independently today are part of a tradition we cannot accept and we accept a tradition we can never really belong to. This is the dilemma of our times, the dichotomy our generation faces.

What was the movement of the 'sixties like? First of all, it was a moving inwards towards the roots of personal experience. After years of hortation and fruitless dialogue with eternity, long loud wails at the human predicament and a garrulous search for the spiritual dimension to man's fate, the Indian poet in English decided to look into himself and search for his answers there. Not in terms of prophetic generalisations about god and the devil and all but in terms of the voiceless vacant in the still centre of the heart, the silence on the other side of the apocalypse.

A few of the poets also started questioning the forms they were writing in. True, very largely the emphasis still remained on the accoutrements of conventional form and



diction. But it is also true that for the first time some poets tried to break away and speak in their own voice. While most poets still wrote sonnets on bees, roses and butterflies as the consumer price index rose from 100 to 236, most others continued to be satellite poets of the British 'thirties and 'forties, a hangover from the pre-Independence days when poets like Manmohan Ghosh wrote pathetic elegies to spring describing fields of buttercups and blossoming primroses. Few, very few really, believed like Georg Lukacs, that by refusing to take cognisance of social realities they were condemning themselves to sterile and regressive technical experimentation, accumulating naturalistic detail without referring to an hierarchy of values. This was because few of them had read anything other than British poetry and most were nurtured on the fallacy that poetry grows and ought to grow only from other poetry, that literature develops only within a literary matrix.

Among the liberated few was Kamala Das, who I consider the first original voice to emerge during this period. She wrote a different kind of language altogether:

“The language I speak  
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses  
All mine, mine alone. It is half-English, half-  
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,  
It is human as I am human, don't you  
See? It voices my joys, my longings, my  
Hopes, and it is useful to me as cawing  
Is to crows or roaring to the lions, it  
Is human speech, the speech of the mind that is  
Here and not there, a mind that sees and hears and  
is aware.”

(‘An Introduction’)

This is the sort of English she and others like her tried to forge: an Indian diction with all its peculiarities and distortions, yet authentic and not cluttered with quaint Indian imagery and attitudes. They rejected the rain/peacock/lotus image nexus and the renunciation/resignation/detached-action attitude and tried to make English a living language that Indians could create in. English, for them, was no longer a link with our colonial past and a dead language to chase mathematics in. It was a language of our own, yes, an Indian language, in which one could feel deeply, create and convey experiences and responses typically Indian. English began to play a new role. It became an intrinsic part of the Indian literary experience.

G.V. Desani's poem play *Hali* is another fascinating example of how originally the English language can be written by an Indian and, like his *All About H. Hatterr*, can hardly be appreciated without knowledge of the way English is used in India to explain and define local verities. Desani like Kamala Das has forged English diction in an original fashion to convey very Indian experiences and, in the process, has been able to establish a definite and distinguishably Indian style. A similar effort has been made by Nissim Ezekiel in his more recent poems where he experimented with converting newspaper reports into poems:

“Yashwant Jagtap demonstrates  
how he spends the night  
when the water rises high:  
he places the child on his shoulder,  
that is where it sleeps, has learnt  
to sleep, while the adults  
keep awake and talk it out.

He is sixty, the child eleven,  
he pushes a handcart—  
earns a rupee a day.  
A true-blue Indian he  
is reconciled to his lot,  
and so are we."

(‘Yaswant Jagtap’)

There was a common idiom that distinguished the poetry of the 'sixties, an undercurrent that ran through the work of an entire period, highlighting certain common elements in otherwise dissimilar individual sensibilities. It is this that can be called in generic terms the movement of the 'sixties. Not a movement in the real sense of the term but a heterogeneous coming together of poets with completely different views on life, society and poetry. A controversy of poets.

Different forms were used, ranging from the strictly formal villanelle to free verse hysteria. The attitudes were various, the language and its range differed from poet to poet, each spoke in a different diction and each had his personal worldview. Yet there was this common undercurrent that kept them together, coupled with a defensive ingroup camaraderie, remnant of the late 'fifties and an institution called the Writers Workshop.

The Writers Workshop was founded in 1958 with the objective of defining and substantiating the role played by Indian writers in English in the contemporary literary scene. It started with noble intentions and published for the first time some of the finest Indian poets in English till a decade or so later when it degenerated into a publishing house for hacks, frauds and peddlers of exotica, who were indiscriminately published and publicised, often at their own cost, in the hope of making the fast buck.

But then this is often the fate of all creative publishers: a decade of idealism and lossmaking is followed by the scramble for the specie. I, like many others who owe their initial publishing success to the Writers Workshop and its founder proprietor, consider this degradation a tragedy.

But, then, how did all this start? Or, to rephrase the question: What was the starting point of this movement of the late 'fifties which matured into the poetry of the 'sixties? But before that, the reasons. It was in the late 'fifties that Indian poets in English became self-conscious about their language and felt their position somewhat jeopardised by the onslaught of the Hindi enthusiasts. Till this time, Indian writers in English were considered freak and kept at a safe distance, rarely honoured but usually respected in a strange sort of way. In the 'fifties, the situation changed with the finalisation of Hindi as the national language and the exclusion of English from the languages of India. This was one of the main factors that brought Indian poets in English closer to each other, to reaffirm their faith in English as a language that could play a creative role in Indian literature and produce poetry in no way inferior or less Indian in content than that being written in the other Indian languages. In fact, several Indian poets in English at that time claimed, in what was perhaps an over-reaction to the accusations of the language chauvinists, that what they were writing was considerably superior to all that was being written in the other Indian languages. A claim totally unsubstantiated by their performance. It merely furthered their alienation.

Another alienating factor was the utter purposelessness of the poetry being written. The poetry was overwhelmingly concerned with the trite. An occasional poem on the rose

can be pretty but there were poets who were always in their rose gardens or writing poems on still life in their unreal living rooms totally out of touch with all that was going on around them. Political violence claimed innocent lives; the value of the rupee fell, dragging with it many more million people below the subsistence line; Tibet was taken over, thousands of refugees trickled in through our borders on either side; the Americans went on battering away at Vietnam; nearer home brilliant young men were led astray by glibtongued bandits and fake prophets of revolution. It is not necessary that poetry *must* concern itself with these issues. But surely poets are expected to confront these realities and in some insidious way all that is happening around oneself influences one's work. It is strange that Indian poets in English were usually not concerned with what was going on around them. This is perhaps because in reaction against the oral tradition of Indian poetry they were not speaking to a living audience. They were speaking to a strange subculture comprising admen, fossilised academicians and public school types. Surely not the best of all possible audiences.

It may help to quote in this connection the 1959 Kavita Manifesto introducing what may be called the first anthology of Modern Indo-Anglian Poetry which P. Lal and K. Raghavendra Rao edited, for it was this declaration of war that set the mood for the conflict with the mentors and the critics. It was an interesting document, hortatory, too-smart-by-half, aggressive, and full of illogic. But it raised some moot points and was, in a sense, the starting point for the new poetry of the 'sixties:

"A poet here and a poet there do not add up to a revival. Yet most of us included in this anthology are, after all, working towards an end in many respects

common; we practise the same craft; we suffer similar ridicules and receive similar doses of light applause; and we do manage off and on to get published, in India and outside. It is a sorry thing to have to gang up in order to get somewhere, but if each continues to move permanently in his tight little private world, obeying his tight little laws, there is a strong likelihood that the blurred and rubbery sentiments of a Sri Aurobindo will slowly clog our own poetry. We cannot let this happen. There is no compulsion to adhere to all the regulations, but the bases must be recognised. And I suggest that the bases for this unofficial Poets Workshop be adherence to these principles of language, method and intention :

1. We affirm our faith in a vital language as sufficient to write poetry in. A vital language may be in modern idiom or 'ancient' but it must not be a total travesty of the current pattern of speech. We consider all expressions like 'the sunlight sweet', 'deep booming voice' and 'fragrant flowers upon the distant lea' to be ridiculous. King's and Queen's English, yes; Indian English permissible; pidgin, bombastic and gluey English, no.
2. We think that poetry must deal in concrete terms with concrete experience. That experience may be intellectual or emotional or historical-tragical-pastoral-comical, but it must be precise, and lucidly and tangibly expressed. It is better to suggest a sky by referring to a circling eagle in it than to say simply 'the wide and open sky'.
3. Poetry must be free from propaganda. This means simply that a poet must be honest. In a sense, it means that we shall not write odes in honour of the army chief or sonnets to the Prime Minister. Nor shall we accept Akademi prizes.
4. We recognise the value of discipline, but commend the effort to experiment, so long as it does not lead to

excessive obscurity, eccentricity for eccentricity's sake, and perverse leg-pulling.

5. We condemn all forms of imitation and suggest five whip strokes as punishment for the editor who lets pass a monstrosity of imitation.

6. We claim that the phase of Indo-Anglian romanticism ended with Sarojini Naidu and 'I bring for you aglint with dew a little lovely dream'. Now, waking up, we must more and more aim at a realistic poetry reflecting poetically and pleasingly the din and hubbub, the confusion and indecision, the flashes of beauty and goodness of our age, and leave the fireflies to dance through the neem.

7. We realise the full-time nature of the poet's vocation if he is to do a good job, and pray that benevolent industrialists see it a duty to patronise poets and poetry without compelling them to write couplets on soaps and toothpastes.

8. Lastly, we emphasise the need for the private voice especially because we live in an age that tends so easily to demonstrations of mass approval and hysteria. For this reason we celebrate the lyric form as the best suited for a capsule-minded public, and we recommend it to poets because it makes a direct appeal to that personality of man which is distinct, curious, unique and idealistic; and we realise that it is to this personality, and not to the mass psychology, that poetry must appeal."

Surely the first point is ambiguous and controversial. One suspects the idea was to take a pot shot at Aurobindo rather than score a convincing point. The second point is almost autocratic. Why *must* one use an indirect image and refer to the sky by referring in turn to a circling eagle in it instead of simply talking about 'the wide and open sky'? A strange rule indeed. The third point is

certainly commendable, even in the wider sense of ideological propoganda, but it would be interesting to see how many of the poets have stuck to their guns on the score. Not many, I should think. Point four sounds all right but the point is how does one know in this age of Andy Warhol where genuine experimentation ends and leg-pulling starts. And terms like 'obscure' and 'eccentric' are certainly relative and their connotations keep changing all the time. Was Apollinaire eccentric or Pound obscure? This begs the question : Who is the judge?

Point five is again, I guess, a bit laboured upon and point six, like point two, is arbitrary. Certainly I would agree that the modern age provides sufficient material to write on but does that mean one should *never* write about fireflies? Can you really *restrict* a poet's world of experience? And *must* one's experience be rooted in the contemporary situation forever? Did not Kazantzakis use the epic form to convey modern ideas? And in any case, if one is to talk of romanticism, surely poets like Lal, Ezekiel and Kamala Das can be safely classified in the same category. Sloppy, sentimental, nature poetry, no. Romanticism, why not? Point seven is idealistic. A poet has to survive and benevolent industrialists, at least in this country, are rare. Benevolent is a rare virtue and where it does exist it is usually an income tax saving device. What can one expect from such motivated Medics? It is better to sell one's professional services and write couplets on toothpaste than to sell one's soul to the devil!

Point eight is another autocratic point I find totally unacceptable. The private voice is important, true. And certainly the lyric form *is* effective. But Pablo Neruda and Nicolas Guillen *are* powerful poets and, nearer home,



Kaifi Azmi and Subhas Mukhopadhyay, to take only two examples from a powerful tradition of people's poetry, are certainly worthwhile poets.

We are living in an age in which private gestures are often symbolic of the aspirations of an entire people. When a Catholic priest like Camillo Torres takes up a gun to lead a straggling group of guerrillas in the mountains of Colombia and then dies in conflict, he is not just one man dead. The key metaphors of our time would be Vietnamese women and children mutilated by napalm, Tibetan and Bengali refugees trekking across the borders, famine in Biafra and the haunted eyes of an entire people, the burning of the Harijan boy in an Andhra village, the bloodstained walls of the mosque at Jalgaon. *Must* we be lyrical? And *must* we speak in the private voice? Is not Kazantzakis' modern sequel to the *Odyssey* powerful only because he uses epic form? Is it not the moral duty of literature at times "to provoke dreams of terror in the slumber of prosperity" as Ernst Fischer once said? Above all, must we in an age in which frontiers of form are all crumbling down, thankfully, erect barriers to constrict the liberated voice of man from speaking as he chooses to? Must we *insist* on the private voice and the lyric form?

But then the point is not how logical this manifesto was. The point was its tone. This set the wheels moving and the entire revolt of the 'sixties can be traced to this first statement of faith in Indo-English writing. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, the idealism has since sagged and even the poets of the 'fifties are now more liberated in spirit. P. Lal, one of the signatories to the manifesto, has several Government sponsored awards in

his bag and now belongs to the literary establishment as a successful publisher and 'transcreator', whatever that may mean. Nissim Ezekiel, the first important poet we produced in the 'fifties, is now on the Executive Council of the almost defunct Sahitya Akademi, which has done very little to justify its existence over the years. Kersi Katrak writes advertising copy. So do I. Keki Daruwalla polices Lucknow. Rakshat Puri and Keshav Malik journalise.

The late 'sixties and 'seventies seem to have surfaced some new talent. Some have also moved away to other languages and arts. R. Parthasarathy, one of our finest poets, has turned to Tamil after a long and eventful affair with English. Gauri Deshpande is working on a Marathi novel and we are likely to lose her now that she considers herself truly bilingual. Kamala Das, very successful as a short story-writer in Malayalam, has now completed her controversial autobiography in that language. P. Lal prefers to translate from Sanskrit. Ramanujan seems to have settled down in America for good. And of course, Dom Moraes was lost to Britain many years ago. Ezekiel has turned to the theatre with success. Gieve Patel has made an impact on the art scene with some excellent paintings.

Meanwhile, two strong voices have emerged from Orissa : Deba Patnaik and Jayanta Mahapatra. Both are strikingly original and have added an experimental edge to the new poetry that is being written today, despite the fact that both come from the stifling environment of the campus. Patnaik teaches English Literature and Mahapatra Physics at the Ravenshaw College in Cuttack. Suresh Kohli has published two books of poems after

years of magazine appearance in India and abroad. Both books have been widely acclaimed by the press. Young poets like Siddharth Kak from Bombay and Subhoranjan Dasgupta from Calcutta have shown consistent promise and are likely to make the scene in a big way. Both have strong roots in the tradition they have grown up with and this has reinforced their work with confidence: both now speak in their own original diction having broken away from the conventional trappings of form.

On the other hand, Keki Daruwalla has written some very fine long poems recently, Gieve Patel has changed his style with remarkably successful results, Gauri Deshpande has recently published an excellent new book of her poems on Bombay—the city in which she seems to have finally settled down, Rakshat Puri is working on some new poems in a totally different style, Kersi Katrak has written some intelligent and provocative sermons and Arvind Krishna Mehrotra has given up some of his excesses and settled down to writing more mature poetry, some of which has been included here.

The stage seems now set for some excitement in the 'seventies. More experimental work is being done, more young poets are joining the fray and despite the claims of the language chauvinists the interest in Indian writing in English is certainly increasing. In fact, quite a few anthologies of Indo-English poetry have appeared during the last few years. Among them, P. Lal's magnum opus running into 600 pages, with 132 poets, most of them one-poem-by-accident Sunday versifiers, V. K. Gokak's outdated selection made on behalf of that prehistoric animal, the Sahitya Akademi, Saleem Peeradina's textbook selection of the Bombay poets for Quest magazine

which has now been published by Macmillan India, Suresh Kohli's backdated selection for Mahfil, the Journal of South Asian Studies published from Chicago, and my own hardback anthology for Oxford IBH tracing the poetry of the last 25 years, published on the occasion of our Independence silver jubilee celebrations. This paperback also testifies to the increasing interest in Indian poetry in English all over the country.

Things have changed over the last two decades. Much better poetry is being written today than ever before. The dialogue with fellow writers in other Indian languages has been initiated and a more living audience is on the verge of being defined. The vagabond has finally come home. To quote another singer, this time my favourite folksinger and lyricist, Bob Dylan :

"The vagabond, he's rapping at your door  
He's standing in the clothes  
That you once wore.  
Strike another match,  
Go start anew.  
And it's all over now, baby blue. . ."

The 'seventies, I am almost sure, will live up to these expectations. Things have changed. The past is now over. And that has made all the difference.

Pritish Nandy

Calcutta

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LOVE POEM TO A WIFE

Really what keeps us apart  
at the end of years is unshared  
childhood. You cannot, for instance,  
meet my father. He is some years  
dead. Neither can I meet yours:  
He has lately lost his temper  
and mellowed.

In the transverse midnight gossip  
of cousins' reunions among  
brandy fumes, cashews and the absences  
of grandparents, you suddenly grow  
nostalgic for my past and I  
envy you your village dog-ride  
and the mythology

of the seven crazy aunts.  
You begin to recognize me  
passing from ghost to real  
and back again in the albums  
of family rumours, in brothers'  
anecdotes of how noisily  
father bathed,

slapping soap on his back.  
You find sources for a familiar  
sheep-mouth look in a sepia wedding

picture of father in a turban  
and mother standing on her bare  
splayed feet, silver rings  
on her second toes;

and reduce the entire career  
of my erstwhile unique self  
to the compulsion of some high  
sentence in His Smilesian diary.  
And your father, gone irrevocable  
in age, after changing everyday  
your youth's evenings,

he will acknowledge the wickedness  
of no reminiscence: no, not  
the burning end of the cigarette  
in the balcony, pacing  
to and fro as you came to the gate,  
late, after what you thought  
was an innocent

date with a nice Muslim friend  
who only hinted at touches.  
Only two weeks ago, in Chicago,  
you and brother James started  
one of your old drag-out fights  
about where the bathroom was  
in the backyard

before, or after, the well  
next to the jackfruit tree  
in your father's house  
in Aleppi. Sister-in-law  
and I were rather blank, cut-outs  
sitting in our respective  
slots in a room

that was nowhere as the two of you  
got down to the floor to draw  
blueprints of a house from memory  
on everything, from newspapers  
to the backs of envelopes  
and road-maps of the United States  
that happened

to flap in the other room  
in a midnight wind; you wagered heirlooms  
and husband's earnings on what  
Benjamin Uncle in Kuwait  
would say about the Bathroom  
and the Well and the dying,  
and by now dead,

Tree next to it. Probably  
only the Egyptians had it right:  
their kings had sisters for queens  
to continue the incests  
of childhood into marriage.  
Or we should do as well-meaning  
Hindus did,  
betroth us before birth,  
forestalling even separate horoscopes  
and mothers' first periods,  
and wed us in the oral cradle  
and carry marriage back into  
the namelessness of childhoods.

### **STILL ANOTHER VIEW OF GRACE**

I burned and burned. But one day I turned  
and caught that thought  
by the screams of her hair and said : 'Beware.  
Do not follow a gentleman's morals

with that absurd determined air.  
Find a priest. Find any beast in the wind  
for a husband. He will give you a houseful  
of legitimate sons. It is too late for sin,  
even for treason. And I have no reason to know  
your kind.  
Bred Brahmin among singers of shivering hymns  
I shudder to the bone at hungers that roam the  
street  
beyond the considerable's beat'. But there  
she stood  
upon that dusty road on a nightlit april mind  
and gave me a look. Commandments crumbled  
in my father's past. Her tumbled hair  
suddenly known  
as silk in my angry hand, I shook a little  
and took her, behind the laws of my land.

### OBITUARY

Father, when he passed on  
left dust  
on a table full of papers,  
left debts and daughters,  
a bedwetting grandson  
named by chance  
after him,  
a house that leans  
slowly through our growing  
years on a bent coconut  
tree in the yard.  
Being the burning type

he burned properly  
at the cremation

as before, easily  
and at both ends,  
left his eye-coins  
in the ashes that didn't  
look one bit different,  
and some rough half-burned  
spinal discs for sons

to pick gingerly  
and throw, facing east  
as the priest said  
where three rivers met  
near the railway station;  
but no longstanding headstone  
with his full name and two dates

to hold in their parentheses  
everything he didn't quite  
manage to do himself,  
like his cesarian birth  
in a brahmin ghetto  
and his death by heart-  
failure in the fruit market.

But someone told me  
he got two lines  
in an inside column  
of a Madras newspaper  
sold by the kilo  
exactly four weeks later  
to streethawkers

who sell it in turn  
to the small groceries  
where I buy salt,  
coriander  
and jaggery  
in newspaper cones  
that I usually read  
for fun, and lately  
in the hope of finding  
these obituary lines.  
And he left us  
a changed mother  
and more than  
one annual ritual.

### BREADED FISH

Specially for me, she had some breaded  
fish; even thrust a blunt-headed  
smelt into my mouth;  
and looked hurt when I could  
neither sit nor eat, as a hood  
of memory like a coil on a heath  
opened in my eyes: a dark half-naked  
length of woman, dead  
on the beach in a yard of cloth,  
dry, rolled by the ebb, breaded  
by the grained indifference of sand. I headed  
for the shore, my heart beating in my mouth.

### THE GNOMES

Anxiety,  
the afternoon's shame

and tomorrow's leanness  
step out of the walls of wakefulness  
(the walls have vulgar names  
the scribble of pimply dreams)

like the midnight gnomes  
of some Gothic fairytale,  
heckle the pallor  
of my thin-skinned lady.

Sleep,  
and peep  
into the whites of her eyes  
and snickering, flee on the tiptoe,  
to leave her naked  
in the white weariness of bone . . .

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# ADIL JUSSAWALLA

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## SEA BREEZE, BOMBAY

Partition's people stitched  
Shrouds from a flag, gentlemen scissored Sind.  
An opened people, fraying across the cut  
Country, reknotted themselves on this island.

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

Restore us to fire, New refugees,  
Wearing blood-red wool in the worst heat,  
Come from Tibet, scanning the sea from the  
north,

Dazed, holes in their cracked feet.

Restore us to fire. Still  
Communities tear and re-form; and still a breeze,  
Cooling our garrulous evenings, investigates  
nothing,

Ruffles no tempers, uncovers no root,  
And settles no one adrift of the mainland's  
histories.



## NINE POEMS ON ARRIVAL

Spiders infest the sky.  
They are palms, you say,  
hung in a web of light.

Gingerly, thinking of concealed  
springs and traps, I step off the plane,  
expect take-off on landing.

Garlands beheading the body  
and everyone dressed in white.  
Who are we ghosts of ?

You. You. You.  
Shaking hands. And you.

Cold hands. Cold feet. I thought  
the sun would be lower here  
to wash my neck in.

Contact. We talk a language of beads  
along well-established wires.  
The beads slide, they open, they  
devour each other.

Some were important.  
Is that one,  
as deep and dead as the horizon ?

Upset like water  
I dive for my favourite tree  
which is no longer there  
though they've let its roots remain.

Dry clods of earth  
tighten their tiny faces  
in an effort to cry. Back

where I was born,  
I may yet observe my own birth.

## KARATE

Eyes sewn, my head a bag of tricks,  
I pad down streets to find my enemy.

New York London or any tall  
Story I've a part in,  
He is the same

White man whose daily dis—  
Appearance is my brief.  
Whose wars have put me on a false, if nimble  
Footing. Whose tame goings-on  
By-day  
Conceal a fratricidal fox by night.

What is it  
Disproportions me of my big-time twin,  
Symbiosis of loving that must kill? What pigmy  
In me wants it ?

I spot a giant. Call  
So he won't disappear down the fatal  
Error of some steps. Warn him  
As he comes:

Before night  
Takes in its tongue with its yellow pill,  
Before day  
Swallows it with a smile,  
Before dawn  
Breaks round his head the lights of his last  
Aromatic breath,

His head will flop,  
My hands steel choppers, maiming.

## THE RAISING OF LAZARUS

(for *Adrian Husain*)

The rapid indirections of a trip,  
A hand of stone secure about the throat,  
God's hateful hiss of air as through a tin—  
Reversal of a process I had been through  
Snaking back to sleep . . .  
Until I felt his mouth's coherence lift,  
I had forgotten what it was to die.

And then remembered: the slow  
Brutalities his knowledge drew to scorn,  
Scorn of my condition, scorn of scorn  
Itself, scorn of my last peter-  
ing outwards from his hands.

He brought me round but never asked the matter  
With my life nor why it went  
Nor took the fatal tablets from my coat.

## DOG

Unstinting moon,  
to uninitiate ears  
our monthly dialogue's  
always out of tune,  
a long-drawn howl on one side  
and you, sweet pudding, silent.

It's earth, my raw  
deal with just a bit of bone in it  
for all the bones it had

that's proving lean and tough. Strange  
earless creatures go about their ways,  
hearing no music, making none,  
who find plain talk enough. And muzzled  
poets, who, unintelligible to  
the earless multitudes, turn  
to you, like me; but bark,  
bang chains, bitch like my best wives,  
as the whips get worse.



That came and went like voices  
I had a dream this morning

Five worried whales  
Rushed out of the sea  
They stood up on the beach  
They moved across the land  
They turned towards me, tall  
And smooth in the early light

I confuse dreams with lies  
I was born with a thin snake  
Coiled over my head  
That snake was an amulet  
That snake only ate pigeons  
That snake spoke in my ear

### CONTINUITIES I

This is about the green miraculous trees  
And old clocks on stone towers  
And playgrounds full of light  
And dark blue uniforms.  
At eight I am a boy scout and make a tent  
By stretching bed sheet over parallel bars  
And a fire by burning rose bushes.  
I know half a dozen knots and imagine  
Tea in enamel mugs.  
I wear khaki knickers, I take down  
The numbers of cars  
I make a perfect about turn for the first time.  
In September I collect my cousins' books  
And find out the dates of the six Mughals  
To secretly write the History of India.  
I see Napoleon crossing the Alps  
On a white horse.

## CONTINUITIES II

My first watch is a fat and silver Omega  
Grandfather won in a race fifty-nine years ago  
It never works and I have to  
Push its hands every few minutes  
To get a clearer picture of time.  
Somewhere I have kept my autograph book  
The tincture of iodine in homoeopathy bottles  
Bright post cards he sent from  
Bad Ems, Germany.  
At seven thirty we are sent home  
From The Cosmopolitan Club  
My father says "No bid"  
My mother forgets her hand  
In a deck of cards.  
I sit on the railing till midnight  
Above a worn sign  
That advertises a dentist.

## CONTINUITIES III

I go to sleep after I hear him  
Snore like the school bell.  
I am standing alone in a back alley  
And a face I can never recollect is removing  
The hub caps from our dull brown Ford.  
The first words I mumble are the names of roads  
Colvin, Clive and Lytton  
We live in a small cottage  
I grow up on a guava tree  
Wondering where the servants vanish  
After dinner; at the magic of the bearded tailor  
Who can change the shape of my ancestors.

I bend down from the swaying bridge  
And pick up the river  
Which had once tried to hide me.  
The dance of the torn skin  
Is for much later.



POEM I

I have followed footprints of a cloud  
arriving here.

Heaps of green guavas  
& fresh cucumbers

On the roadside old widows  
dust dirty in white sarees  
sell pieces of pumpkins, drumsticks  
& groups of five tomatoes.

On rickety twigs tiny mangoes stick out like  
emerald drops.

These women with bangles & bracelets  
tinkling in their silver walk.  
These naked children with sunbaked bodies  
bursting out in laughter.

This land  
of myths & monuments  
pulses through skinned bones  
deprived of dreams.

Is this the place I yearned to return ?

My sisters sweat out cooking delicacies for me  
dishes I didn't taste for years & whose names  
I've forgotten.

My young sister-in-law proud as a new mother  
commands me to marry.



cobwebs on the ceiling, door latches don't hold  
sparrows & pigeons nest on the beams  
—how many have died here I can't count—  
—how long have my folks suffered I can't tell—  
My father's chair needs a new seat & refinishing.  
My mother's bed-clock has out-ticked her.  
The family still worships & worships the same  
god.

I remember you Irma & how I disappointed you  
when you asked me for a child.  
I remember you Anna-Leena & how you wept  
for me

because I've chosen to live alone  
I remember you all  
in whom I am scattered like an echo among  
leaves.

Do you remember our picking the Atlantic sands  
grain by grain ?  
Chewing rain with our faces toward the sky  
bubble after bubble ?  
No water is purer than your tears  
No fire calmer than your warmth.  
Can I retrace my steps following footprints  
of a cloud?

### POEM III

& those small white flowers pinked on the edges  
withstood the rain ravage  
crows racket on an unleafed tree  
a yellow bird—red-beaked, black-dotted  
drinks wet sun-rays  
but in Khulna there are no flowers

no birds  
anymore

steel-rain & tides of dismembered bodies  
elsewhere it stinks of decomposed souls  
in Khulna it smells of sandalwood  
& of jasmynes

outside my window in the university playground  
birds revel in pools of green water  
i wish i could believe in some pool of blood  
or of holy water

the souls of massacred children dance  
& sprinkle benediction  
on us

here in the room  
the debate on the morphology of tragedy  
or of comedy

on the etymology of *eleos & phobos*  
continues

loudspeakers still blare Hindi love songs from the  
movies

& celebrate the founding of a government as a  
grand finale

these days there are more beggar-girls on the  
Grand arcade

o

how many times have i not seen  
Byzantium

or

India  
dying in the eyes of a butchered baby?

'Life to live to the end is no child's play'

—Boris Pasternak

I yearn for the child  
I lost some 35 years ago.

At 10. I recall, I desired  
for the man to be.

Now I know eating an apple  
or craking an apricot  
is no easy job.

But there is something unique  
in being able to sniff the air once  
& feel all of it inside,  
or to glance at the starred sky  
& know that all the stars are in you.

Today I could quote Plato, Hegel & Freud  
debate impeccably  
win an argument.

But I cannot remember  
how it felt when I first pierced  
my fingers into a flame  
unknowingly

I cannot recall the thrill  
of chewing my mother's nipples.  
Life is a child's play, Boris.  
But we play it with another  
world's tricks.

If some day you & I walking together  
saw a child pissing on the roadside  
& arching his water like a fountain;  
or watch an old woman playing

with her haggard breasts;  
or catch a blue heron balancing  
on one leg to pick a fish  
we will flap our souls like leaves in wind.

### POEM V

Yes, the rains came. Came last midnight  
with scratch of manicured nails  
on cracked windows.

And I scribbled inscriptions on thunders.

In the valley of my bones  
lightning burnt residual desires.

Primal voices hymned a dirge

& I knew

it was the night of my death.

Yes, the rains came. Came last midnight  
with death between the teeth.

And I scribbled inscriptions on thunders.

What if rains poured

fire

What if lightnings hosed

water

in the valley of my bones  
only a signed death would turn  
on its side & try to sleep.

if rains had legs

if winds had ears

if thunders had hands

& lightnings eyes

in the valley of my bones

the dead would rise

& welcome blinded stars.

But the rains stopped so abruptly  
& the wind was muted.

And I scribbled inscriptions on the thighs of the  
night

TWO SELF PORTRAITS

One learns to live with  
all the misconceptions  
about oneself—the lewd snigger  
cold eye, charge of betrayal  
indifference, can only be met  
with hurt bewilderment, protests  
of I'm not like that, meet  
knowing smiles only.  
Have I not, perhaps, just back from a dream  
espied a leprous being in the mirror  
eaten away with desires  
of treachery, crime, untruth  
complicity—cruel, obscene ?

If I peel away, layer by layer  
at memories, deposits of habit  
residues of virtue, I find  
myself an onion  
layer after layer of seeming meaning  
and intent, sufficient by itself  
leading to no heart.  
Not even, as, a pearl, a grain  
of pain in its womb.



An onion merely—a little tang  
a little flavour  
and whorls of indigestion and bad taste  
in its wake.

### IT COMES SLOW

The sea has been like a sewer  
these many days  
nastily turbulent, foamy black.  
At low tide the waves curl  
slackly up the dark beach  
their push sucked up  
by storms, pre-rains at mid seas.  
The country like a harsh  
lecherous widow awaits  
rain that comes slow  
reluctant to freshen  
her wrinkled flabby greedy flesh.

### KNOWN IS THIS CITY

Known is this city to me  
stale with knowledge.  
On every stone I've stood waiting for the bus.  
Its garment of gaiety is wearisome  
its core of life flimsy.  
There is nothing I've to do here,  
nothing but smooth out its pavements  
with my beating feet, bear  
tightlipped its greasy caress & harsh endearments.  
Only because we were here once, in love.



**THE TIME OF LOVE**

Worked out on the bed, its slow bleed,  
to love's common head breaking away  
from the stale pillow; contriving the good  
conscience toward final happiness  
if you can, at its lonely insistent edge.

I believe from blindness. Breaking into;  
waking up quietly at three a.m. black  
among the short terrible arcs of blood  
and the beached fish slipping away  
only to be back; how do you close  
the circle, make it sing ? Inside  
the marvel once, the rest comes easy,  
like the words : to love, dying; and you  
hold back the right moment until you're blind.

**THE ANNIVERSARY**

Nothing happens, it only seems a pity  
we have the need to tell each other  
of this painful nothingness, our often  
pities standing in the door ready to leave,  
the air of the day  
wrought by the dawn.

A pity still the light is not prepared  
to accept an apparent innocence.

Nothing but another infirm day  
fondling my mysterious thoughts  
to anything possible

like an error on our curled tongues  
would help push this light out  
with its extended kindness;

rushing down the steep night, I would,  
awakening to the pleasure from the last  
bright star with limp surprise. Now when  
I'd spin the years on this dulled band  
the vacuum of devotion falls between us;  
the moment we would safely afford  
wearing the diamond-smile out of the store.

Yet every time a moment is established,  
other moments are waiting under cover  
to reason away the thin line of scar  
that joins our snake-arms; here there the walls  
- squeezing in your concealed space of guilt  
will await the sad bout of abasement  
as from an erection hard to improvise.

### SOME PEOPLE

People, deciding to go on calmly,  
trying out enviable attitudes under  
their canvas : horizontal positions.  
in particular, the gently-drunk  
drifting, and the warm tide, all theirs.

They are some people. Others hide  
beneath the waves of thought in doomed  
living rooms : sunken metal, monsters  
and anecdotes to madness, filling them

to survive. Out to salvage Tolstoy, and live.  
And the formula in between. Whose  
bodies, stripped to the secret seaweed,  
open to the shallows of the world's  
experience. Their ghosts happen like rituals,  
dragged across the frenzied wake of lives.  
Salvaging reasons among dying men  
the mess holding my fingers reaches  
my face. When night comes around  
I am in the glasshouse, the trance of despair  
breaking to light, a wax smile at my feet.

### THE REPORT CARD

The school report card that hugged  
his near-vinyl hand, emptied his  
eyes to upset him into duplicity  
of pose, the fear of reprimand,  
I recognise in the backward wear  
of days the escalation of greed  
locked within a father's bones,  
yet unknown is the seed of loneliness  
which seeks to make a boy's pockets  
its dark and poisoned home.  
And when I looked at him again,  
the drifting leaves shrugged in disgrace  
losing their fight for time's possession,  
a brown rectangle of card blazed  
of power, pitiful seemed  
love's cold hand.  
Years slid by as we stood,  
a black swan in a long-forgotten zoo  
glided towards us, as the sunlight  
split in fall, and a chimpanzee grinned.

Now his eyes were mine with dreams.  
The crisis over, empty failure behind,  
heavy with the distance between bottled years.  
The loneliness of a splintered mirror,  
a shred of silvered paper, or the torn hand  
from some clock's face, these his own.  
The card ? Foe or friend,  
he only found, I never understand.

## THE LOGIC

*(For a husband)*

Recline in your upholstered chair  
under the lemon-yellow logic,  
in the golden corner of the light  
clasping geometric hands together.  
Point a finger, quote;  
success, or something alike  
construes you an accomplice.  
Reviewing your cosy composed gesture  
troglodytes had to find out,  
you will not sleep with centuries  
any more as with your women,  
no more than you would  
find me to be proof of you.  
My skin cups unblemished milk  
you shatter each lonely vein with,  
my devoted pads of flesh pave the ground  
for what you screw to accomplish.  
Make me small and edible, love;  
this scalp hurts not from the steep drag  
of your hands but my own practised drivel.

POEM

What is it between  
A woman's legs draws destruction  
To itself ? Each war sees bayonets  
Struck like flags in  
A flash of groin blood.  
The vicious in-law  
Places spice or glowing cinder  
On that spot. Little bird-mouth  
Woman's second,  
Secret lip, in-drawn  
Before danger, opened  
At night to her lover.  
Women walk the earth fully clothed,  
A planetary glow dispelling  
The night of dress,  
A star rising where  
Thigh meets belly : target spot  
Showered  
With kisses, knives.

**THE AMBIGUOUS FATE OF GIEVE  
PATEL, HE BEING NEITHER MUSLIM  
NOR HINDU IN INDIA**

To be no part of this hate is deprivation.  
Never could I claim a circumcised butcher  
Mangled a child out of my arms, never rave  
At the milk-bibing, grass-guzzing hypocrite  
Who pulled off my mother's voluminous  
Robes and sliced away at her dugs.  
Planets focus their fires  
Into a worm of destruction  
Edging along the continent. Bodies  
Turn ashen and shrivel. I  
Only burn my tail.

**POEM**

Each moment, and moment after moment,  
Somewhere, a private and extreme act of menace  
Is performed. A thin continuous cry  
Hounds the universe, accompanies  
The turning of the earth; cry  
Continuously reborn and interred.  
Sometimes the menace is public.  
A multitude watches the body of  
One man subjected to ingenious  
Pain. I see a little knot  
Of flesh and muscle with shocking  
Patches of hair, and hearing him  
Cry, wonder how his differs from  
That thin cry extracted in  
A private room. Does one tormentor's  
Approval in the silence



Of a room, match weight for weight  
The shared full-throated applause  
Of a crowd made aware for once  
Of every sensation  
Under its dress.

### POEM

Direct day to day the distance  
I hold from slaughter. Unfolding  
The ball of the world into  
A sheet of paper  
Place pins to mark me  
And mark slaughter. Move us  
Among latitudes, longitudes;  
Freeze the victim's blood  
At polar limits, let equator  
Gut the body's flesh to wax.  
Inviolable I stand pin-pointed,  
Aloof, while slaughter  
Moves its jagged, well-aimed  
Line, never intentionally  
Missing me.

### **"NO SLAVE SHOULD DIE A NATURAL DEATH" : ELRIDGE CLEAVER**

If no slave were to die a natural death  
All slaves  
Would die young or  
Old should slavery descend on them  
In old age. I tabulate for them  
A dictionary of pain embracing  
Bruise, abrasion, cut, slash,

Gash, burn, blister. Body,  
Yield us a catalogue for wailing.  
Confess the qualities of torment  
Potentially hidden in your sleek fat.  
Sing out from hair-root to fingernail;  
Invent,  
If you please, new parts  
To offer carnage.

AND I REJECT THE INDIAN NOISE

I drown it  
in my inner silence,  
sheer strength of mind,  
a trick of violent levitation  
not to be demonstrated.

I shut it out  
with symphonies  
not meant to be heard  
or news in languages unknown.  
It is a form of self-defence;  
one noise cancels out the other,  
and I am free  
underground or in the sky.

I curse the noise.  
That's the worst way,  
but the sudden heat  
cools my kingdom,  
keeps my reason dry.

On rare occasions,  
ragged spirit roused to scorn,  
I play the ogre, striding out  
to crush the vulgar source . . .  
This does the job at last —  
but only in my imagination.

## FOR A FRIENDLY CRITIC

Awareness of acute  
deficiencies, my own  
and other people's, counterpoints  
my daily fiction, riddled with the spirit.  
I talk of ugly privacies  
as though of roses,  
flaunting them in button-holes  
mistrustfully. Tell me  
your improprieties  
and I will make them beautiful.  
Your motives do not matter,  
your delirium does. The moral  
is the life that you have lived  
not the doctrine or the day-dream.  
You are not the diagnosis  
but the disease, the epidemic.  
Do you think you are my critic ?  
Buy a mirror, learn to use it.  
I shall be around to encourage  
admonish, recognise  
the first shudder of genuine feeling.  
I too have headed for the open sea  
but what's the use ? We are land-lubbers.  
You look more sun-burnt  
than I can ever be, yet all  
you have gained is a rough-weather skin.  
I am protected by intellectuality,  
you by your lack of it.  
Neither knows  
his nakedness.  
We are both as reticent

as chorus girls  
who dance for money.

## GURU

The saint, we are told,  
once lived a life of sin—  
nothing spectacular, of course.  
just the usual things.

We smile, we are not surprised.  
Unlikely though it seems,  
we too one day  
may grow up like him,  
dropping our follies  
like old clothes or creeds.

But then we learn  
the saint is still a faithless friend,  
obstinate in argument,  
ungrateful for favours done,  
hard with servants and the poor,  
discourteous to disciples, especially men,  
condescending, even rude  
to visitors (except the foreigners)  
and overscrupulous in checking  
the accounts of the ashram.

He is also rather fat.  
Witnessing the spectacle  
we no longer smile.  
If saints are like this  
what hope is there then for us ?

I see her first  
as colour only,  
poised against the faded  
red of a post-box  
purple sari, yellow blouse,  
green bangles, orange  
flowers in her hair.

A moment later  
I sense her as a woman  
bare as her feet  
beneath the shimmer.

Then I look at her . . .  
the colour disappears,  
she's short, thin and dark  
without a cage to her name,  
as low as she can go.

She doesn't glance at me,  
waiting for her  
hawker of mill-worker,  
coolie or bird-man,  
fortune-teller,  
pavement man of medicine  
or street-barber on the move.

I see her image now  
as through a telescope  
without a single  
desperate moral  
to keep it in focus,  
remote and close-up.  
Of what use then to see and tink ?

I cannot even say I care or do not care;  
perhaps it is a kind of despair.

## GORGONLORE

The Gorgon never shows her face  
to brutal bosses, mad dictators;  
these are always free  
to carry on their vital work.  
The often frozen are the lovers—  
gentle, delicate, sparkling ones  
who gaze at trees or rivers  
and listen to the music of proverbs.

She threatens would-be nuns,  
minor poets, executives  
who cannot learn  
what it's all about, and others  
perpetually at a loss  
in self-created labyrinths.  
their smiles are carved in stone  
against the grain, and ill defined.

It is a kind of grace  
to be chosen for something :  
even the gratuitous role  
of sufferers with beaten animals  
and children, who trust  
the time must come  
when animals and children  
are not beaten any more;  
to such as these, ceremoniously,  
the Gorgon shows her face.

## POEM FOR INDIA

Think, history knows nations by  
The status of their enemies, not friends.  
The perennial multitude beneath your sky  
Sees no tumult in the farther ends  
Of a dream locked in old questions of power  
And the bounding line of ambition's green  
Domain, nor the yielding bones and days turned  
sour.

All alone on a lost and bloody scene  
Etched on distant glades of memory  
Violated by a shamble of screams and fears  
As marauding voices ripped the symmetry  
Of peace down your harvested years.  
Think, in the grief of nations violence  
Must die as men reap the last silence.

## COLLAGE

See the bare legged boy on  
The sunlit patch lost in  
A game of marbles,  
Eyes bunched for grit  
In the howling thatch  
Of wind hunted autumn  
In hills  
Sweeping to a landscape



Where limping Taimur drummed  
Through the waking passes  
In bloody descent  
As history surged and swelled  
In fields ploughed past  
Individual death and birth  
And the dim hawk screamed  
Dry in the wheeling sun.  
Dream a boy's path  
By hill, river, earth,  
And autumn's cycle  
Of Turk, Tartar and Hun.  
The hawk-bunched eye  
From a game of marbles  
Wheels dry in dim  
Search of the copper sky.

#### DESCENT

In the dream time circuit  
This figure: the flea bitten bitch  
Passed down the crowded street  
In a moment of many civilisations.  
The bitch consumed millions and loped  
In the dusky spaces hungering for more. In  
The returning hours of yesterday  
A tomorrow speaks of less than  
Pestilence.

In the returning hours of yesterday  
Gardens are forever. A peeling  
Corner of Lahore and buds  
On a rose bush relate to a school boy  
Grape green of desire spawning  
Sun dry days and long treks

Dreamt in eastern reaches  
And the love of short skirted spindly  
Girls seeing beneath the dream  
From the corner of pointed eyes  
In peaked faces. Fairy tales are forever,  
And the dimension caught before  
The shadow blots light on the ground  
As the sun braves another day  
Is forever.

In the Ravi's quiet flow  
Clouds float back in the return  
Of many summers washed by  
The monsoon's cough and cackle  
As an old man waits in tomorrow's  
Deep wrinkle down the profile of  
A passing universe.

Mirror, mirror, in the river  
Dim your image, dim forever  
The old man in tomorrow's  
Universe wrinkled deep as death in  
A passing hearse.

Tomorrow's scraping of paper in  
Midnight streets as the flea bitten  
Bitch passes by and ghosts write  
The history of distant heroes  
And backyard wars,  
Tomorrow's scraping of paper in  
Midnight streets recounts  
The returning hours of yesterday.  
Yesterday the Buddha starved  
For nirvana. The spring of  
Desire, Yashodhara, diminishes in me  
The measure of sun, star and spirit, I

Would seek between shadows my truth  
Alone with fire and the last flame.  
Thus yesterday in the morning.

Now the structures of being touch  
A naked moon as the last shadow  
Breaks from the darkness, calls  
Quietly in the grape green sleeper's  
Ear. In the howling of flea bitten  
Bitch, the first and last dreams snake  
Around tomorrow's universe.

### ROAD MAP

Travelling over a road map between  
Qila Raipur and Kermanshah, and with  
Mindsteps bent to distant summers green  
To an occasional word (as they drew myth  
And all that into talk of new directions)  
When the aged help in faded rust kameez  
And a single silver pendant swinging on  
Fallen breast stood at the tandoor—geese  
Orchestrated life across a trough  
Drying behind the eastern yard baked  
In the sun's ancient childhood round above  
A game of marbles—he could not but remark  
On the vagaries of map-makers who chart  
Ways from points of death to points of art.

### LODHI TOMB

Across the eight cities of Delhi where time  
Meets the renewed seasons of love and play  
In the life music of a honey heavy stream  
Around the canopied grave of a Lodhikhan

Who leapt before ambition's sword to the slime  
Of beginnings when night uncovered day  
And history raced down a laughing dream  
To a dark and unknown grace in the grey span  
Of an old man's years, he now sees the seasons  
mate

And bear their wrath and pass, lilac cruel,  
Watches death intervene to evaluate  
The golden hurrahs of love's mortal fool.  
And waits on the shore of the teeming river  
Afraid that only graves are forever.

**THE OLD MAN**

I was stronger than you are, but living  
is cruel, and loving is crueler, he said . . .  
I was swifter and fiercer, but sinning  
sears, and thought saps; his white head  
was bowed; I was swifter in running,  
more violent in loving; I had spread  
more laughter than you gave or are giving . . .  
but when he turned, his eyes were red.

Thoughts ran like tremors in my mind.  
I was wise, but wisdom goes; I was mad,  
but sanity comes; when I looked, I did not find;  
when I saw, I did not see; when I laughed, I was not glad;  
light in his eyes, he bowed his head;  
he was an old white man, but his eyes were red.

**YAKSHI FROM DIDARGANJ**

Bubbles of bead necklace like a river  
Flow through the valley of her opulent breasts  
Briefly trapping the touring eye; to their carver  
These sandstone breasts with broken  
Nipples were like apples taken;  
In token quenching of monumental thirst.

Eyes travel on twin folds on her asking  
Belly, in the navel's whirlpool is pulled  
Youth of voluptuous innocence asking  
The same question. . . why,  
Why is the flesh, why  
Belly and navel, innocence and whirlpool, pulled.

Only in lonely dreams is the answer : Fairy,  
Yakshi, beloved, stone, girl with feather fan,  
Carved in dreams for fits of phallic fury,  
Purge flesh of desire !  
Purge it in pools of fire !  
Till, purged, man discover he is immortal stone.

But all in delight ! All in sensuous  
Delight, yakshi, with left arm missing, the right  
With feather fan, broad things feasting the  
senses,

Hair in two frozen buns  
Breasts between whose two suns  
A rivery necklace awaits descent of night.

#### THE BEE'S LOVE

This bee is sensible,  
Loving fragrance, not flower;  
Saint-like and stone-like,  
Limiting desire.

But lovers are wiser  
Than saints or stones,  
Loving rings round dark eyes  
And brittle bones.

Love like a flower  
Has roots that reach  
Beyond fragrance, beyond power  
Of loving speech.

## THE BRONZE GIRL

Emperor and dancing girl  
lie in the cracked heat:  
the sun ignores his knuckles,  
the dust is on her anklets.  
Ash, dew, and cricket song.

Singing and the chariot dance  
to brisk hands by the fire :  
Once cornfield and ballad  
and harvest in the heart.  
Till the star-stricken Aryans.

Ah, a bittersweet geometry  
in the peeling moonlight :  
Open bathhouses and  
a harvest of sand.  
Lizard home and beetle home.

Apple-bent, the sun catches  
voices like drums clear :  
Look here, Kunitz,  
a bronze girl. Then silence.  
Where the living are dead.

## THE MURDERER

At noon he broke away by gently closing  
The grilled gates like passionless flowers.  
His last glimpse was of thick blood nosing  
Catlike towards the drain, and the slow oozing  
Matched the hourglass fading of his spirit's  
powers.  
A week later, down the monsoon-gurgling drain  
Slipped waterfalls of guilt, and the drops

Flamed like corpuscles splattering on green  
terrain.

The corrugated sheets of rain  
Brought back the gates.  
His watch stops. His pulse stops.

Was there a murder at high noon ? Poor man.  
Most do it at dead of night, and go scot-free.  
Love without tenderness, lust with a plan,  
The deed of darkness does what daggers can.  
His only is the terrible penalty.

How many hates, and how many pious hells !  
If yawning houses could speak, their doors vomit  
Foul horrors of who buys love, and who sells,  
Who coldly kills, and kills his heart that tells  
Him coldly : *This must be it. This must be it.*



ANY FATHER'S SON

I made myself an expert  
in farewells.

An unexpected November

shut the door in my face :  
I crashed like a glass-house  
hit by the stone

of Father's death.

At the burning ghat  
relations stood

like exclamations points.

The fire stripped  
his unwary body

of the last shared of family likeness.

I am my father now.

The lines of my hands

hold the fine compass

of his going.

I shall follow.

And after me unborn son

through the eye of this needle

of forgetfulness.

And so it eventually happened—  
 a family reunion  
 not heard of  
 since grandfather died in '61  
 in March this year.

Cousins arrived in Tiruchanur  
 in overcrowded  
 private buses,  
 the dust of unlettered years  
 clouding instant

recognition. Later, each one  
 pulled, sitting  
 crosslegged  
 on the steps of the choultry,  
 familiar coconuts

out of the fire of rice-and-pickle  
 afternoons.

Sundari who had squirrelled  
 up and down forbidden tamarind  
 trees in her long skirt

every morning with me stood there  
 that day  
 forty years taller  
 her three daughters floating  
 like safe planets near her.

Time had built a fence  
 around us.

We looked uneasily.  
 The broken glass of sand  
 cut our eyes.

## 1

The body sputters : your flesh  
was the glass  
that cupped its hands over me.

Hours glowed  
to incandescence. An uneasy  
world swarmed around us.

Now, only the thought of you  
(live coals I blow on)  
burns distance to a stub.

## 2

Observe the town in a haze.  
Under the heavy lens of noon  
passion, quicker  
than candles, burns  
smoking the glass of their bodies.  
The haze lifts.

Evening disfigures  
vision : stones of the day  
turn phantoms.

But in the dark  
hands and lips  
have marked the spot they touched.  
Still as crockery, these two,  
rinsed and dried  
after half-a-day's legitimate use.

I am all fingers when it comes  
 to touching them. Their fullness  
 keeps the eyes peeled  
 with excitement. A nipple hardens  
 on the tongue. Here  
 pleasure is elliptic, wholesome.

It is night alone helps  
 to achieve a lucid exclusiveness :  
 Time that had dimmed  
 her singular form  
 by its harsh light now makes  
 recognition possible  
 through this opaque lens.  
 Touch brings the body into focus,  
 restores colour to inert hands  
 till the skin takes over  
 erasing angularities, and the four walls  
 turn on a strand of hair.

Tonight I breathe on your skin :  
 it clouds over.  
 Soon it will reflect nothing.  
 You are, love, touchable  
 (my limp tongue thickens  
 in your furrow,  
 delicately sniffs at odours

from seasoned flesh).  
Inexpungable sometimes,  
sleeved in a childhood  
I cannot overtake. O night,  
darker than ever in our arms.

## THIS BUSINESS

### 1

It doesn't make any sense  
to me, either . . . this business of poetry.  
Who the hell cares  
if an entire  
lifetime is burnt up in a page ?

Pressed between one day  
and another I am short of breath.  
O the analgesia of routine.  
Ceaselessly the sun tolls :  
the tall air leans and reverberates.

It's a dog-fight all over.  
Noises, noises. A public bus spits  
me out at my doorstep. I enter  
awkwardly, the day  
an indigestible lump in my throat.

I am often dissatisfied  
with it . . . the only thing I can do  
reasonably well.  
Yet I write and reach after  
the dead by breaking this bread.

Each rolling day is a stone  
 upon the chest. The tongue gathers  
 little of the proverbial moss.  
 On the mind's impartial  
 sand, words turn yellow and betray.  
 Words have eaten deep  
 into my life, am scarred forever.  
 I have sold my larynx  
 for the price of silence.  
 The true poet suffers from aphasia.

## 3

There is little you can do  
 about it, except throw up your hands.  
 How long can foreign poets  
 provide the staple  
 of your lines ? Turn inward.  
 Scrape the bottom of your past.  
 Ransack the cupboard  
 for skeletons  
 of your brahmin childhood  
 (the nights with Father droning  
 the *Four Thousand* as sleep  
 pinched your thighs blue).  
 You may then, perhaps  
 strike out a line for yourself  
 from the iron of life's ordinariness.

## NIGHT

It is night alone helps  
 to achieve a lucid exclusiveness :  
 Time that had dimmed

her singular form  
by its harsh light now makes  
recognition possible

through this opaque lens.  
Touch brings the body into focus,  
restores colour to inert hands

till the skin takes over  
crasing angularities, and the four walls  
turn on a strand of hair.

**TOWARDS THE POLE-STAR**

Heart, raise your slogan :  
If you pitch your voice  
You may yet go far  
Towards the pole-star,  
Here you have no choice.  
Nor rock nor stone  
But sky or sea  
Are the elements to be :  
At tides suck energy,  
From the four corners of the lightning sky  
Restore the lungs' battery.  
Thrust  
O sleeping motors of the heart  
And rocket towards the far  
White star.

**BIRTH OF PLANETS**

A comet, sperm-tailed  
Trailed from beyond  
The great bend of space  
On an endless wander lust.  
He brushed past  
The golden ovum of the sun.



The comer was soon gone,  
But hear well —  
He left behind in his wake  
A pandemonium of fire  
Unmatched in the heavens.

Torn scraps of flame  
Flew all about  
In the surrounding wastes.

Thus began the long spin  
Of the nine  
Around their mothering parent.

### GHOSTSCRIPT

Such and such were the temporal cares—  
The hair-raising spectres;

The sudden drop in wind  
And the closing in of the fingers of emptiness  
Around the throat — the heart beating wildly,  
The brain's bells gone mad,  
The mice of secret fears  
Tearing back and forth  
Beneath the boards of the head.

Oh there too was the fear of fear,  
Of the inward eye running  
Or the glassing of that inward running eye  
With still other fears  
And terrors unknown.

Panic, like a crowd on the stampede  
Ploughed through the blood,  
Faced as if with some darkly lurking thought

Some man consuming emotion.  
The bones froze in the commotion.

Now all is calm,  
No fear or fright  
Of the night.

### JEHOVAH'S WITNESS

As blind I rolled upon the pitch-dark seas —  
No light-house near — sharp He spat in His  
brilliant rays

Down my lightless pits.  
Then, how hot the red gushers that jumped to  
blind eyes.

And through the wide gorge the tremendous cries  
Coughing out the black night !

All pins, needless — sweet swift pain,  
The sparked flood went thundering down the vein;  
For He had flung me His bold bolts —  
Flung He in His mercy the fierce surprise of His  
flaming face.

While I lay lost He  
Caused the scalding tears to rise :  
He punched the vital spring  
And lo, there forward unsheathed naked tongue  
of His scorching light  
Blocking out all but His mammoth height.

### ESCAPE ROUTES

(a)

Notice, now that your eyelids have slid down  
on your weary sky-scanning eye-balls

and your fingers have plugged your ears  
by and by the world become a submarine scene —  
gentle gesture flowing line, silken movement  
and no meaning but the meaning  
you shall give it by the magic caress  
of your heart's hidden music.

(b)

From the walled city of Despair  
there are no drawbridges lowered really;  
there to breathe out the deep sighs  
and then to lie down finally  
in your ultimate sleeps.

On, but wait, bend over backwards a little  
and there within, observe unrealing once more  
the gayly running ribbons of the world waterways  
and horizon opening up on horizon.

AFTER THE WAR

Disgust creeps into the  
voices of tomorrow's victims :  
a matter of barricades and gunfire.  
Gluing the ear to any wall  
the thud of sledgehammers  
announces the lumbering approach  
poised ready to devour.  
Struggle can be gleaned along the passage, in  
the prospective victims' exasperation :  
justice is blind in one eye.  
The soldiers' accumulated rancours  
produce new flow of traffic :  
tragic vibrios caught up  
in a complex adventure.  
With a tornado of enigmas  
I inscribe luminous distress-signals.  
Death's flirtations are notorious in battlefields,  
as the Indians' eye:  
Death is a metaphor of life.

PERTURBED EMOTIONS

Refuge —  
a preposterous analogue  
ogling semen venomously.

The world drains the senses away,  
the refugees appear like  
an ocean of corpses :  
softness lost  
in the struggle with poisonous insects.  
The process reminding the act of white ants.  
A taint of sulphur discreates creation  
and wisdom turns into blunder.

The ocean of corpses appears, disappears  
like a childhood vision  
a piece of peace betrays reality;  
observers crawl feebly for a compromise:  
semen has no more potency,  
Shiva's organic organ has lost its base,  
the face of reality perturbs emotions:  
sirens slowly collapse:  
no vengeance, no hate.  
Stones split like personalities,  
tangles of barbed wire restrict function  
and wars break to subside actions:  
death only a secondary assumption.

## TO LOVE

Now you know what love meant to me ?  
The open carcases, the  
flowering valleys springing  
with autumn winds:  
now all lost like virginity  
after crude seduction.

Do you remember the first night  
when we never were  
tried of making love ?

Do you remember the mistful days  
when we never left the bed,  
leaving the world to do  
what it wanted to ?

Perhaps you have forgotten.  
Perhaps you find me no longer  
a vigorous love maker  
(or is it the other way round ?).  
Has the child something to do with it ?  
Perhaps not, Perhaps it is the age:  
corruption, starvation and hunger  
on which we are fed.  
From top to bottom all powers are naked:  
growing plump in mud and stink.  
The Age. I think it is corrupt.  
No surprise then if love too is now corrupt  
and the age has certainly lost its sensations.  
Why make fuss over this or that ?  
Come, let's make love.  
Think it all over again, my love  
and hope to be in bed again, together.

### I SHALL BURN MY OWN CANDLE

And I shall burn my own candle.  
I shall sweep the world in one blow.  
I shall kill the lot that disgusts and frustrates.  
I shall live the way I want to  
And I shall die the way I do not intend to.  
I am the vision incarnated for every bird  
with soft plumage.  
I have my thoughts submerged to ashes.  
I shall break the snow that encapsulates  
the silent valley.

I am alone in the vast multitude:  
a human strayed by inhuman wishes.  
I know not what destiny beholds.  
I know what beauty is.  
Encircled by the arms of desperate love  
I shall hurry across the formalities  
and be lost in the world aglow,  
leaving my imprints on the sand of time.

Love disgusts, love pains  
when not carved the perfect way.  
Love in its indifference is not what  
breaks the vision.

Love in all glory is a distraction.  
Far away from the range of love  
I shall strike on my destiny  
and fly away from the violent world  
to start afresh a life of wine :  
swim through the oceanic vastness  
into a continent broken by the  
segment of lost love.

And then I shall burn again my own candle  
and sleep aglow in love's desperate being.

### **CALCUTTA : EARTH EXPLODES**

Explosively intoxicant,  
the city that bred culture once  
now breeds poisonous smoke.  
Blackly brown velvets and stones  
fish through the roads  
with sparkling toys in pockets and blouses  
and wisdom given to the dogs.  
Earth explodes to powder the faces  
like sand that powders the sea.

The melancholy explosions of ghastly spirits  
evaporate the walls.  
Perfume no longer stills the twilight  
and at dawn the city is dark.  
Poets make bombs not words,  
annihilate the sky  
not create the earth.  
At the evening's afterglow  
fire leaps forward  
like a mongoose at a snake.  
Life's lost in wilderness  
and violence feeds them with dreams.  
Calcutta has changed the face of mother.  
Will it survive putrefaction ?  
Better to be exiled  
than be in Calcutta, he thought.



# KAMALA DAS

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## A MAN IS A SEASON

A man is a season,  
You are eternity,  
To teach me this you let me loss my youth      like coins  
Into various hands, you let me mate with      shadows,  
You let me sing in empty shrines, you let your      wife  
Seek ecstasy in others' arms. But I saw each  
Shadow cast sour blurred image in my glass,      somehow  
The words and gestures seemed familiar. Yes,  
I sang solo, my songs were lonely, but they did  
Echo beyond the world's unlighted edge, there      was  
Then no sleep left undisturbed, the ancient      hungers  
Were all awake. Perhaps I lost my way, perhaps  
I went astray. How would a blind wife trace      her lost  
Husband, how would a deaf wife hear her      husband call ?

## MADNESS IS A COUNTRY

Madness is a country

Just around the corner  
Whose shores are never lit  
But if you go there  
Ferried by despair  
The sentries would ask you to strip  
At first the clothes, then flesh  
And later, of course, your bones.  
Their only rule is freedom.  
Why, they even eat bits of your soul  
When in hunger,  
But when you reach that shore,  
That unlit shore,  
Do not return, please do not return . . .

### FOREST-FIRE

Of late I have begun to feel a hunger  
to take in with greed, like a forest-fire that  
consumes, and, with each killing gains a wilder,  
brighter, charm, all that comes my way. Bald  
child in open pram, you think I only look, and  
you too, slim lovers behind the tree and  
man with paper in your hand and sunlight in  
your half . . . My eyes lick at you like flames, my  
consume; and, when I finish with you, in the  
pram, near the tree and, on the park bench, I spit  
out small heaps of ash, nothing else. But in me  
the sights and smells and sounds shall thrive  
and on and on. In me, shall sleep the baby  
that sat in prams, and, sleep and wake and smile  
its

toothless smile. In me shall walk the lovers,  
hand  
in hand, and in me, where else, the old shall sit  
and feel the touch of sun. In me, the street-  
lamps  
shall glimmer, the cabaret-girls covert, the  
wedding drums resound, the eunuchs swirl  
coloured  
skirts and sing sad songs of love, the wounded  
moon  
and in me, the dying mother with hopeful  
eyes shall gaze around, seeking her child, now  
grown  
and gone away to other towns, other arms . . .

### MY SON'S TEACHER

My son is four. His teacher swooned on a  
grey pavement  
Five miles from here and died, From where she  
lay, her new skirt  
Flapped and fluttered, a green flag, half-mast,  
to proclaim death's  
Minor triumphs. The wind was strong, the poor  
men carried  
Pink elephant-gods to the sea that day. They moved in  
Long gaudy processions, they clapped cymbals,  
they beat drums  
And they sang aloud, she who lay in a faint was  
drowned  
In their song. The evening paper carried the  
news. He  
Bathed, drank milk, wrote two lines of  
Ds and waited.

But the dead rang no doorbell. He is only four.  
For many years he will not be told that tragedy  
Flew over him one afternoon, an old sad bird, and  
Gently touched his shoulder with its wing.

### HOME TO MOTHER

You have aged a little. Friends visit you rarely.  
Your phone fills with the grocer's voice, the V.I.P.s  
In your husband's official life come now and then  
For a sit-down-dinner. You buy food from Bombellis  
But accept all the compliments. You brush your hair,  
Wear smart clothes, maintain a clean enough skin.  
You quote splendidly. Each new acquaintance  
Who comes to your house is impressed. You talk of  
Resisting Communism and of taking lessons  
At the Alliance d'Francaise. But at night,  
Lying between your husband and the child,  
You dream of running home to your mother past the  
School-yard and the church, with two pigtails  
and a satchel.

THE NIGHT OF THE JACKALS

It's just the telephone between us  
grey, impersonal  
"The children are sleeping," she says, "come !"  
She had to think of me now  
                        in this weather  
with the elements in full cry  
and the air smelling of lightning-burns  
like a scorched pelt !

I park my car eleven blocks away  
People scurry off the roads  
                        as the sky crackles  
I press the buzzer hard  
and tap at the glass door  
along with the thunder.  
Tonight she will be waiting  
arched fully backwards  
vibrant as a leaf !  
She sits there, knitting away, and laughs  
She sits there in her white  
                        cardigan and dark slacks  
caressing a rug with her bare feet.  
The blankets over the children  
heave with their regular breathing.  
It will go well with her

if I kiss them on their foreheads;  
suddenly

she is in my arms

swarming

Her nipples and the grass outside  
harden together  
tense with coming thunder

Kissing her on the neck, I nibble  
the words as they come out :  
did the thunder frighten you ?  
Yes with both the kids asleep  
it was eerie, terrifying.

And if the kids had been awake  
you wouldn't have thought of me  
for another three months ?

I don't articulate the thought  
but as if in reply  
she presses me harder to herself

I enter her  
the way a boat starved of fresh water  
enters a harbour

## II

Dust spurts as  
the first rains come  
gaunt and spindly  
Winter was dying  
she says shivering  
till this . . .  
pointing to the drip outside.  
Near my village, facing the foothills  
it must have hailed  
killing the mango blossom

But July, you must come then  
there is a different feel about things  
— the treacled blackness of the earth  
fat grubs, white

as intestinal shreds  
fireflies like blood-cells of the night  
even the hiss of the scythe  
in the wet grass  
is different !

When I tread the leafmould  
and the soot-black earth  
gives way under bare feet  
then alone I feel  
I have not been carved out  
of a patch of dried blood  
Why not go in the rains then ?

Not in the rains, she said  
by no means in the rains !  
What will the women say (!)  
The bleached woman has come back

to the green grasses !

### III

Through the night we  
drift apart  
and drift into each other  
Overhead the night roars  
Our blood soars and jackknives  
burns and then drifts away  
on the cry of a bird

Next morning she is a coriander-leaf

newly plucked

rain-washed

A feeling leafs, branches out  
like a baby-arm  
across the webbing that cocoons my ribs  
a feeling softer than skull-membranes  
and I reach over for her  
soft and willing and naked  
and slowly rhythmic

The toddlers are around now  
or I would have rested  
my head on your thighs  
and buried my face  
into your soft belly

Whence this ache in the eyelids  
the forehead, the lips  
this terrible ache  
for being belly-smothered ?  
I close my eyes and dream the moment away  
this flash-flood in the veins for you  
you soft and yielding

#### IV

In the afternoon  
beer and salted snacks  
alone she is busy with the children.  
The hail cannonades on the roof-tiles  
and then the wildeat wind.  
It is now that the spasm gets her  
cough and sputum and  
even a little blood.  
In our village, the wind  
is not a beggar, she says



It comes riding on the hooves  
of wild horses  
or shrilling on the cry of a bird  
not like an *Agori*, gritty and alone  
while children watch  
cowering from the windows

Let's go ! She said, I'll park  
the children with my Aunt  
Let's go !  
The place must be ablaze now  
the bougain swarming  
over the roof !  
The *semal* tree !  
The flame of the forest !

## V

This, she said, is the well of the goddess  
—but if it were the well of the goddess  
the rust on this persian-wheel  
would have been temple-bhog by now  
and these hooded oxen  
ploughing through eternity  
round the well, circumambulating  
they would have stored up merit enough  
to be gods in the next birth !

Then, as a shadow drifted across her brow,  
she added, but what heaven can afford  
a million kine-gods ?

## VI

“When the *semal* tree  
flowers with embers

that's the time the cough gets me.  
It's the flower-dust, I think."

"Pollen," I corrected her  
and read dismay in her eyes  
"How will you ever write, my love !  
Poetry is written with  
the wrong words, don't you know !"

## VII

I look for hairline fractures on the glass-panes  
as the cry of the jackals  
riding on the wind  
crackles against the windows.  
The jackals eat the night  
                                chunk by chunk  
the winds only extemporise.

## VIII

In march they say  
"a spirit inhabits her.  
Don't you see the flush spreading  
like a contusion on her cheeks ?"  
And I tell them I am not  
a vine that starts leafing  
only in spring.  
Whenever you are near me I flower.

## IX

The wind outside is still  
and shadows freeze like dogs  
awaiting their master's commands

For an hour now the cough  
has shrilled and rasped around her  
like a jackal-pack.  
When I can stick it no more  
I take her in my arms.  
The cough does not subside  
but she says : "One day  
I'll die like this  
on your shoulder, coughing !"  
Shadows come scrambling back, although  
the branches of the semal tree  
do not move across the window.  
Have I a touch of the acid-god ?  
One month with me, and she is  
already talking of dying !

ICON I

Shattered and scattered  
At your feet, their feet,  
The bartered image  
In whose bronze body  
Strangled compulsions  
Met to be released  
In fragmentation—  
In an empty room  
Whose windows opened  
Onto the winter's  
Bleak impersonality.

This fragmentation is  
The iconography  
Of a Time imposed  
On shifting focuses;  
A time moving  
In sections, sections  
Held in images  
This image is  
The bartered god  
Whose broken body  
Is our element.

ICON II

(After Seeing Bryan Winter's Kinetic Sculptures)

Caught in a room of

mirrors

your reflections

meet and objectify

By space cast forward into the human eye,

Image in flux in a

divided moment

ENDS suspended from a visible MEANS

Defines space with an imposing mystery.

The sound of colours

clash of cymbals

the uncoloured silence

Behind the metal shield.

Motivated force framed

in a moment

angular tenderness

Or curving terror.

From strips of ordinary cardboard

image imposed on image

a myth MOVES

Through the human mirror and is created.

### ICON III

Reflection from a

Stage of artifice

And act : icon of

Dreams whose smashed face is

The mathematics

Of fear.

Over slow

Years the dragons changed

To twisting branches

In the burning wood

To grey scarred metal  
To masks cast by man  
And scored by noughts and  
Crosses falling to  
The stilted shadows  
Whose demesne is a  
Memory of split  
Wheels

The dragons are  
The icons dragging  
Masks and tall shadows  
Through my dark backyard.

#### ICON IV

The screaming beast the terror  
Of a laugh the tiger bent  
Behind the image breaks then  
In the metallic water  
The lunatic nurturing  
Machines in his garden plot  
In the tin moon tin icon  
The steel fishes voyaging  
Through space supposing the shapes  
Of the mobile collide O  
Cataclysmic war of gods  
Chaos on earth and in the  
Heavens still greater chaos.

#### ICON V

Lunatic icon  
In the moon's last phase  
Face carved out of the

Rock of dreams hardly  
Voyaging through space  
In an area  
Of precarious  
Balance the cymbals  
Of your life clash at  
The stark white crossroads  
In the sullen night  
Behind the clenched cage  
Of your skull battles  
Of stasis recede  
Into the rage of  
Distant myths. The shields  
That clash like cymbals  
In relentless games  
Of noughts and crosses  
Break in your head the  
Screaming music of  
Forms changing.

RHYTHMS THAT CONTRADICT

1

no wonder,  
    my challenger sighed,  
        after years of circumlocutory  
limousine-love,  
    that you,  
        like the highest engraving,  
        always remained chisel-untouched.  
even today,  
    in this nasty-nuptial hour,  
You, replica of some lost monastery,  
recall in a thwarted voice  
blurred madrigals  
    sung in shrines . . .  
and my car stops  
    his has halted already,  
        while the immobile born  
        fills the night and seats  
        with delicious hindol  
    “the sky is a shehnaï”—  
    You comment.

2

yet can you ever confuse  
the urban confirmation



that you, your mother,  
indeed your entire lineage  
cherished pre-natal affections  
for dreary nursing-homes.  
no earth-sprung prothalamions  
re-echoed in those corridors  
disinfected, imprinted with  
sordid birth-initials,  
only in the drab streets  
a few hermaphrodites  
grotesquely attired  
sang out like sirens  
to hail a prosaic arrival.

3

while chaos prevails  
in this two-seater  
admit, dear love,  
that you are bound  
from the first cry  
within the city-walls,  
that you, like Antigone,  
will never trespass  
its legitimate realm.

4

from you emerge  
neither repudiation—  
    at least that would have begun  
    a logical debate broken by  
    reconciling kisses  
nor approval—

103

at least that would have given  
the ecstatic ointment  
needed to part your thighs . . .  
unanswered  
my queries, like misled embraces,  
merge in your ignorant love.

5

no, i cannot deny  
that even now  
in this still-born hour  
from your musical network  
rapturous notes emerge,  
you force me to confuse  
your gharana-response  
with shehnais or city-blues,  
and the sky collapses  
on your slender sitar  
drenching my persistent  
strumming fingers  
and exultant breath  
with its cloudy alap.

6

that was the stern warning he gave—  
you never did visit 'Harmony House'  
a place that limited all hindol  
within the confines of temporary showers  
nor any hypocritical flower-stall  
which usurped the odour of riotous flowers  
and then their leaf-encircled embroidery.

104

nevertheless,  
     on the first evening,  
         you did not reject  
 the nameless flowers,  
     my scented fingers clasped,  
     you looked dreamily askance  
     when, swollen with rhyme,  
     i recited in troubadour-tone  
     some weebegone flower-passages.  
     only while returning  
     in this dramatic car  
     you crushed the petals, one by one,  
     and then in oxonian diction  
     reminded the world and night  
     of the pseudo-pastoral mode.

## 8

yet, incredible as it seems,  
 you cannot do without them . . .  
 when these passionate fingers tire  
 what rouse you but purchased stalks . . .  
 your shehnai, though undecorated,  
 yearns only for faded garlands . . .  
 and Siddhartha in your closed cloister  
 would he have recalled Yasodhara  
 but for the buds that twined your hair . . .  
 yes, I have observed  
     your transformation  
         into a sunflower  
             in the thickest phase of night

and is this your only offering  
 untimely pollen-amour  
 restless hindol outbursts  
 to a disturbed Tathagata.  
 even the city courtesans  
 when they annually visit  
 the Mahabodhi Society  
 clad themselves in saffron robes  
 buy virgin flowers from College Street  
 before entering the sacred precincts  
 they repeat the sahaiya strains  
 almost in a faultless tone,  
 chants that throttle your voice.

## 10

“Stop” your voice shrieks out  
 in midst of mantra-melodies  
 (anekajata samsaram  
 sandha vissam anavissam  
 gahakarakam gavesanto  
 dukkhajati punappunam)

“Stop your senseless muttering  
 of the barren lotus sutra.  
 can you on this auspicious night  
 in the backseat of this car  
 like that productive demigod  
 give me a perfect Rahula”  
 I try to leave you like Siddhartha . . .  
 the courtesans escape . . .  
 the contraceptive sneers at me.

On all these religious nights  
 This city and I  
 Notice your manifold change  
 Your transmutations into

s h e h n a i s  
 s u n f l o w e r s  
 S u j a t a s

Your interlacing  
 peculiar patterns  
 of tempestuous rages  
 that Sugata willingly receives  
 while the frenzied car proceeds  
 trampling desire and roads  
 to some rejected shrine  
 beyond the city walls.

**THE SIGN OF THE CRAB**

Purc

Salt swell of the giant sea.  
Keeled over Merlin—motorbike  
Throttling through fierce spray.  
Scattered shriek of gulls  
    And that single  
Flaming spire of Afghan Church  
Thrust into the sunset. Below  
Fish dead in boiling, muddy trenches.  
Overhead clouds ribbed and flayed  
    like bloodied fish scales . . .

**BUSINESS POEM**

Graphic presentation  
of a market failure.  
X axis : Campaign months.  
Y axis : Sale  
Byproduct of Srinagar  
Exportable. Processed  
in Simla, refined,  
test marketed in Delhi  
with good results.  
Campaign in Bombay  
saturates the media.  
'Guaranteed deep thinker  
with

Historical analogies  
to Interpret,  
Reason, evolution  
to Identify,  
Philosophic yardsticks  
to Evaluate  
Man and state  
of Nature  
beyond argument.'  
Campaign fails.  
World problems here  
are  
packing, prices, late delivery:  
War, a shaky dollar,  
Racialism—loss of exports.  
Greece admired for tourism,  
Japan some place where shrimps go.  
'Bombay needs inexpensive,  
Grade II calculators', they  
say  
'Segment the market'.  
Product is withdrawn.

### POET EXECUTIVE

Poems after office hours  
begin and even end  
professionally  
but bear the stamp of overtime  
around their middles.  
Not that the poet lacks potential.  
But between the bugle call and files  
Advertisement for underwear and miles

of train interiors  
potential tends to stay as much.  
Prodigies at seven, middle  
aged executive  
poets; no marketing experts  
not much at poems,  
do a little of both, badly.

Advantages  
for part time poets ?

Introduced  
at cocktails or before the play  
as 'kaviraj', find eyebrows  
fringe their frame. And well  
made up, expensive girls  
shaping secretarial careers  
fall  
hard for soft recited poems  
and into bed.  
Like dogs then,  
the stillborn poets  
after office hours  
devour their little day.

### EVENING COUNTRY

Train halts in nowhere;  
puffing, snorts contentment . . .  
Breeze raga while peacocks prance,  
boughs sing to an infinity of grass nodding . . .  
Brambles prickle at mynahs shabby  
with rain lying deep  
as the evening  
on miles of upturned earth . . .  
Rain



birdsounds, windsounds and the silence  
of dark hills like reptiles at the edge  
of ploughed horizons . . .

## A GIFT OF FLOWERS

### Birthday

Among the slums along the harbour.  
Lavatories and cats and garbage tins.  
Among these common images and  
Rooms, cupboards looming in the dark,  
A gift of flowers.  
Tall strands of green and white  
and red rippling in fan breeze.

### Iris fields

Along the path to Mahadev, gaiety  
of whites and purple trembling  
In mistwind. Warm plateaus of  
Bees and ladybirds. Stirrings of a poct,  
And hours of rambling  
Forest slopes and walks  
of introspection, grief  
Mist around the mountain  
Rain crystal on pineneedles  
Flung ungracious by the storm . . .  
This gift of flowers swaying gently in the room.

**AMBIGUITIES IN HELL**

*(The manual of daily instruction for  
William Empson and Jean Paul Sartre)*

Morning is the place from where you start :  
Aubade, aubade, a glass of beer.  
On the left bank of Chelsea, morning stirs the  
heart.

Aubade, aubade, the end is always near.  
So live it up but also face this fact :  
Although you down that glass you cannot lose  
your fear.

Slowly the poison fills the digestive tract.  
It's not the effort nor the failure tires:  
The waste remains and forms a constipact.  
Although you screw you cannot damp your fires.  
The fear of breakfast is you cannot move.  
The waste remains and kills. The heart expires.  
So shave and bathe and get into your groove,  
And analyse your syntax with a minimum of fuss.  
Hell is other people and they don't approve.  
It's ten o'clock and you have missed your bus:  
The fear of running is you've lost your shoe.  
Slowly the bloodstream fills your boils with pus.  
It's six o'clock; you've nothing left to do  
Nowhere to go and nothing more to tell  
And what your mother warned you of is true.

Slowly the poison rings its warning bell:  
Being and nothingness, the womb, your

mother's tit.

You stray into a pub, but you're in hell.

Slowly the seven sonnets do their bit:  
The fear of standing is you cannot shit.  
The fear of absinthe is you cannot glow.  
Like whiskey. William Empson 'huis clos'.

### FRAGMENTS OF A CONJUGATION

First Person Singular.

Because she said I love you dear,  
I gave what kindness can give.  
How poor is love, she would not bear  
Comfort and let me live.

I love you dear, I love dear:  
Words must be said and love must grow  
And kisses crown my life so bare  
With nothing left to show.

Second Person Singular.

Thou wast murdered by bitches, dear heart  
And that in a public place.

Third Person Singular.

After it happened he hid.  
Reduced his commerce with the world  
Was careful of the things he did  
Avoided girls

Pretended it was nothing new  
Obtained another job and found  
A room with a restricted view  
Settled down

Controlled his rage, refused to give  
Stopped writing verse, slackened his pace  
And found at last a way to live  
With his own face.

Till one day answering his fears  
She saw him on the street and turned:  
Scattered the careful accumulated years  
Opened his wound

### POSTSCRIPT

Yes yes one can be gay  
Charming or profound or even dead  
Queasy with drink and performing in a

woman's bed:

The choice is easy, whilst you can still sin  
And the question seems to be: who'll win;  
And the date is the thirty first of May.

But let November come  
And shutter the heart with blasts  
And limbs grow numb:  
We'll see who lasts.

### POET

You must write better he said:  
A minor poet gone to seed,  
I thought how even the dead  
Will voice their essential need.

Discipline comes first he said,  
Smiled the old quiet smile  
Then turning to raise his head  
Lapsed into silence for a while.

Don't write so much, discriminate he said  
Make artistic choice,  
Learn what technique can mean he said  
And find your own poet's voice.

We drank our coffee in the open air  
I watched him play his part,  
Fiddling vaguely with the chair  
Talking of form in art.

I did not tell him what I thought,  
He would not have accepted it,  
But smoked the cigarettes he had bought  
And listened to his tired wit.

Not knowing how to help him then:  
Who was my friend for thirteen years  
Who was the gentlest of men:  
And close to tears

I rose and left him to the worst:  
Voice broken, head a little bent,  
Returning home to write this verse  
And raise him a small monument.

**THE RADHARANI OF THE  
HEVAJRA TANTRA**  
*(Addressed to Thakur)*

Was it my Lord as you imagined  
Caught in your nightlong dream  
Frozen and involute and contemplating  
The secret movement and your juices like a Yogi;  
Before your suns had risen and she had

borne you

Her bright effulgent holy children;  
No, in the darkness while you held your blood  
Secret as a snake, all diamonds of the night  
Glittering the age-long hood, and she coiled

her length

Virgin to your perfect body, while her

recurring dream

Excessive as your heat, rubbed and fondled  
Your black forked stick to lightning, my Lord  
Was it as you imagined? Was the real thing  
Waking not less than dream?

For if your answer is yes,

However given, however dimly thrown my

unseen way

In dream or gift or prophecy

Then so is mine yes also.

Not yet articulate, not able to pronounce my Om,

But stuttering and inchoate wrestling my blankets

Of sleep like hoods and caul and shrouds, all

Sweat and malformed struggle, underwater

Open my mouth and say it

'Yes' or 'Yeth' or 'Yef', whatever comes

Syllabic or no, echo your victory.

Often struggling for my hump

My humped and crippled sainthood, I envision

Your blood that warms the world, the flood

That purifies the sins of your good child.

But if you push me further Lord

Into my thorns of ego, my fierce black sweat

Insisting on my manhood, break my crutches.

Force the small unwilling Crown upon my brow:

Then give me more than random blood: reveal

The secrets of your sperm,  
The coiled luxury, the scented snake.

For I have tested my excesses and in the bargain  
Bred most perfunctory children:  
Bright sunlit heads turning to monsters:  
From what unguarded guilt  
Stored in the liver, what secret revulsion  
Of the beloved flesh, what glut of old remorse  
What swarms of cowardice and love betrayed  
O apprehension of my father's father:  
There is no paradise in seed:  
All childhood on my head.  
But if you answer no, then knife me dead.  
O jackknifed on your book my Lord, and

O my Lady

Broken in your belfry where the monsters swarm  
My nightly dream, spider and octopus  
Betrayed by ditch and hag in a month of blood.  
Playing with golden girls in most unreal  
Blue glossy urinals. Each toy and plastic teat  
Precursor of the wind that sweeps my home  
Pre-empting all the carrion in my blood  
Defining every small and real death:  
The coil of flesh rising to smail  
Baffled erections in the light:  
Smell of Balmain and sainthood in her dugs  
Churns my recurring night.

But was it perfect Lord when you awoke  
At your first kiss ? A galaxy of broken  
Empires flood my limbs. Sun upon sun  
The Neptunes of desire,  
All lust caving my limbs, my shrines bereft

The nightstreets of my wife deserted,  
My mother's mother's blood smearing like

servants,

My mind forming like holes. Assure me now  
My friend and worker of my blood:

You Alchemist:

When she arose, Rose of the World  
And Queen of all your gardens  
And kissed you on the mouth alone:  
Did glands of honey burst within her throat  
And flood your mouth with love,  
Her sweets unbearable to hold: O you  
My secret and most hidden Friend:  
When your first bird had flown ?



WHAT SHALL WE DO WITH  
THESE MEMORIES

what shall we do with these memories  
fierce symbols of wrath cornered at question-  
hour  
the inward walk of silence towards the sun in  
your bones  
the stilled tendril raging at night when the spiral  
of wings moves through fractured arabesque  
armful of memories and feral nautch  
across the exhausting waters of sleep you have  
come with the fragrance of burnt flesh  
I see your footprints on lightning  
wind blood corpses screaming in the city of  
dreams  
and a nebula dark and immense breaks through  
the deep seas of the night when we move across  
a path of stone with unknown dreams in our  
eyes  
*this is my country*  
the smell of blood that I have known and the  
silence that I would have recognised  
and yet they have sentenced me to death

a silent wordless execution on the nineteenth hill  
of fury

a death even memory cannot disown without hate

**AND FOR YOU I LEFT BEHIND THE  
PALIMPSEST OF A DREAM**

*and for you I left behind the palimpsest of a dream*

since you spoke of history and the wild rose  
withering on a familiar face when mysterious  
tangents of sense intersect each other and the  
sun blinds with gold the filigreed leaves on a  
battered soul.

for you are the question and the inquisitor taking  
transient shape from among the whispers and  
rainbows etched on phantom breasts

the cicada sings of secret transactions and the  
thousand eyes of an equinox

*and for you I left behind the syllables of dust and  
rain*

terror hides behind the darkness of the thinking  
mind like the limpid dream of an antique month  
when rains destroy the imperishable metal of  
your arms and thighs and each avenue of the  
mind circles love from ruin to ruin from barren  
field to windlost voice and the dusk sleeps with  
death its lover in the overwinged ritual of an  
unloving mind

*and for you I left behind the accolade of twilight*  
when passion speaks and the last sunrise

becomes the first and death is the rootless pain  
of gods who forget and yet try to speak with the  
voice of lightning near a delta where the first  
rajanigandha burns with godlike strength and an  
apocalyptic vision of beauty breaks through  
for those who are not afraid of memories and  
would dare live through a deceitful summer when  
the birth and the renunciation of leaf in a single  
gesture of silence becomes one with the season  
and the same

*and for you I left behind the tigerlily burning in my  
eyes*

### CALCUTTA IF YOU MUST EXILE ME

*Calcutta if you must exile me wound my lips before  
I go*

only words remain and the gentle touch of your  
finger on my lips Calcutta burn my eyes before I  
go into the night

the headless corpse in a Dhakuria bylane the  
battered youth his brains blown out and the  
silent vigil that takes you to Pataldanga Lane  
where they will gun you down without vengeance  
or hate

*Calcutta if you must exile me burn my eyes before  
I go*

they will pull you down from the Ochterlony  
monument and torture each broken rib beneath  
your upthrust breasts they will tear the anguish  
from your sullen eyes and thrust the bayonet  
between your thighs

Calcutta they will tear you apart Jarasandha-like  
they will tie your hands on either side and hang  
you from a wordless cross and when your  
silence protests they will execute all the words  
that you met and synchronised Calcutta they will  
burn you at the stake

Calcutta flex the vengeance in your thighs and  
burn silently in the despair of flesh

if you feel like suicide take a rikshaw to Sona-  
gachhi and share the sullen pride in the eyes of  
women who have wilfully died

wait for me outside the Ujjala theatre and I will  
bring you the blood of that armless leper who  
went mad before hunger and death met in his  
wounds

I will show you the fatigue of that woman who  
died near Chitpur out of sheer boredom and the  
cages of Burrabazar where passion hides in the  
wrinkles of virgins who have aged waiting for a  
sexless war that never came

only obscene lust remains in their eyes after time  
has wintered their exacting thighs

and I will show you the hawker who died with  
Calcutta in his eyes

*Calcutta if you must exile me destroy my sanity  
before I go*

**NEAR DSHAPRIYA PARK THEY  
FOUND HIM AT LAST**

near Deshapriya Park they found him at last

nicotine-stained teeth clenched in despair and  
his long dirty grey hair reaching into the night  
blood casually signed a wound that need not  
have been there for he was already dead  
even when he sat on that broken bench wonder-  
ing about seven pairs of eyes and hunger that  
had tracked him there  
when they asked him to go they had not known it  
would come to this  
an empty chair and three files less business went  
on as usual in Monohardas Katra  
seven pairs of eyes and hunger waited for him in  
that one room where he returned every night  
except one  
when they found him near Deshapriya Park at  
last  
his nicotine-stained teeth clenched in despair  
and his long dirty grey hair reaching into the  
night

### **EIGHT TIMES THE BLACK FLOWER SUNG**

eight times the black flower sung and eight times  
he died  
they slung him on a gazelle night and brought  
him back to paradise  
in Barasat they said the eagle summer was dead  
and yet reach time the black flower sung his  
shadow roamed the glade

walk along the meter gauge and down the station  
road

and meet his night with silent words and the  
ancient cry of gulls for in his eyes you will find  
eight corpses that led him on to paradise

each time the black flower sung he rose and  
walked the captured countryside

and each time he met his silence in the feral dusk  
of the fields that tracked the unspoken word for  
Barasat was in his eyes

the land was his and the silenced chatter of guns  
that could no longer speak

and fury that had bartered him to paradise

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which were published by the Writers Workshop.

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*Subhoranjan Dasgupta*, born in 1950, writes both in English and in Bengali. His book of poems, *Bodhisattva*, appeared in 1971 followed by two books of translation from modern Bengali writing.

*Suresh Kohli* (born 1947) is the author of two books of poems : *Death's Epicure* (1969) and *Target for a Kiss* (1972). He is the editor of a publishing firm in Delhi.

*Tilottama Rajan* lives in Canada. She has one book of poems : *Myth in a Metal Mirror*, which appeared in 1967. A second collection is under preparation.

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