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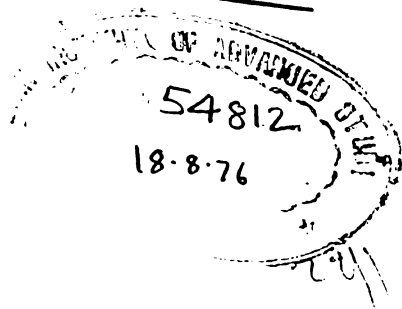
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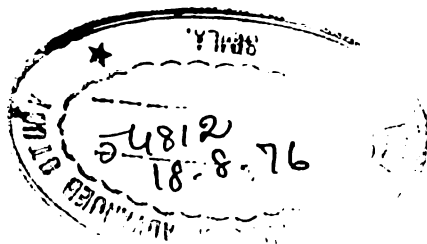


## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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This is a collection of mostly unpublished poems written between January 1968 and June 1969. Only three poems — *Elegy — II*, *The Revolt of the Salt-Slaves*, and *Railroad* — were written earlier. My thanks are due to the editors of the following magazines for allowing me to include some poems published in their journals :

*Poetry Eastwest*  
*The Illustrated Weekly of India*  
*Poetry India*  
*Opinion*



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“In vain have oceans been squandered  
on you, in vain the sun . . . You  
have used up the years and they have  
used up you, and still, and still, you  
have not written the poem.”

---

*Jorge Luis Borges*  
translated by Alastair Reid





*DEDICATION*

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*To Anaheita*



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•



*CURFEW — IN A RIOT-TORN CITY*

Blood and fog  
are over half the town  
and curfew stamps along the empty street

a thinning drizzle  
has smeared the walls  
and given moss and fungus a membrane of bile  
You glide along, the headlights rake the walls  
barracuda-eyes  
    searching for prey  
amongst nocturnal glooms.  
Gears shift and change with the streets  
wild eyes follow you  
behind shuttered doors  
fish-eyes following you from a reef-crack

the starch on your khaki back  
turns soggy, the feel of things is queer  
you wish to forget it all  
the riot, the town, the people  
— that mass of liquefied flesh  
seething in fear

the town is tumour-growth  
mud-brick and concrete  
streets high-walled and brick-sandwiched  
houses back to back / streets  
back to front, walls bulging towards  
each other in a half-embrace  
lanes branch tentacular  
you prowl along  
    an octopus on his beat

at the crack of dawn  
    you enter the reef

above you a ledge of black light  
turns its overhanging limbs  
towards the first embryonic fingers of the sun.  
A scurry of footsteps  
a jungle of walls interchanging shadows  
announce that dawn has come !

suddenly a gunshot  
dynamites the silence  
— a scamper of feet  
you rush there, pistol cocked  
search the lanes and scan the walls for blood.  
You feel weak with relief, knock-kneed  
the bullet hasn't claimed a corpse !

you know what is waiting on the rooftops  
brickbats, soda bottles  
and acid bulbs  
“Get on to the roofs !” you shout  
Lanes swarm with khaki  
reluctantly they move up over crooked stairs  
no one wants acid running down his face  
the face running with acid  
and spend a lifetime  
trafficking  
with bizarre mirrors

a street is lined with idle butchers  
strange : death and curfew have not stampeded here ;  
tense and sullen they watch your prowling jeep  
— red meat hanging on the cambrel  
red meat hanging on their jowls.  
you keep them within gunsights  
behind the forehead is the pit you fear  
for they are the sick tribe and if they lose their heads  
others will lose theirs



theme for a nightmare :  
carting headless bodies in a burning van

No one remembers how the trouble started  
it was a fight over the dead perhaps ?  
was this a graveyard or a burning ghat ?  
A ploughshare bit through the mud graves  
one night and exhumed passions / iron  
and for these neither pyre  
nor grave was the answer

two days have passed  
without turning up a corpse  
Knuckles return to their original brown  
tomorrow you may come out with a press communiqué !  
but the war has travelled  
outwards in a spiral  
two men climb into a rick  
and drive into the dusk  
                  where the town  
dwindles into mudhouse and machan  
                  over maize-fields. they get down  
one pins the rickshaw-puller's arms behind him  
the other takes a brick  
and excavates his brains

trailing the siren comes the iron law  
you clamp the curfew on the outskirts now  
on the outer fringe  
the outer striæ of this whorl of madness

| what the hell is it, you wonder  
| curfew or contagion ?

*portrait of curfew*

*PESTILENCE*

pairs of padded feet  
                                   are behind me  
 astride me  
                                   in front of me  
 the footpaths are black feet  
 converging on the town

brown shoulders      black shoulders  
 shoulders round as orbs  
 muscles smooth as river-stones  
                                   glisten  
 till a dry wind scourges  
 the sweat from off their backs

they are palanquin-bearers of a different sort  
 on the string-beds they carry  
 no henna-smeared brides.  
 prone upon them are frail bodies  
 frozen bodies      delirious bodies  
 some drained of fever and sap  
 some moving      others supine  
 transfixed under the sun

the hospital-floors are marble-white  
 black bodies dirty them  
 nurses in white habits  
 unicef jeeps with white bonnets  
 doctors with white faces receive them  
 "who says they have cholera ?  
 they are down with diarrhoea  
 who says it is cholera ?  
 it is gastro-enteritis  
 who says they have cholera ?"

the land's visage is unmarked  
soot-brown        soot-green  
                 soot-grey  
mongrels tail the ambulance  
till dust and gasoline-fumes  
choke them off

but memory like a crane-arm  
unloads its ploughed-up rubble  
ancient visitations is what one recalls  
the sweep of black feet  
                 towards the ghats  
dying villages  
the land surplus once again  
as after a flood  
migrations as only birds have known  
forgotten cattle dying at the stakes  
— someone left them untethered

this is miniature by contrast  
but the image lingers  
string-beds creaking  
over padded feet  
and when of a sudden  
cholera turns to death  
the feet keep up their padded progress  
only the string-bed is exchanged  
for a plank

beautiful  
description

*THE EPILEPTIC*

Suddenly the two children  
flew from her side  
like severed wings

Thank God, the burden in her belly  
stayed where it was

The rickshaw-puller was a study in guilt  
It was too much for him :  
the convulsionary and her frightened kids  
floundering about in a swarm of limbs

A focus in the brain  
or some such flap  
the look had gone from the mother's eyes  
the way her children  
had flown from her lap

The husband dug through the mound  
that was her face ; forced the mouth wide  
plucked out the receding tongue  
warped into a clotted wound  
and put a gag between her teeth

The traffic ground  
to an inquisitive halt. A crowd senses  
a mishap before it sees one  
They fanned her, rubbed her feet, and looked around  
for other ways to summon back her senses  
A pedestrian whispered  
"Her seizures are cyclic  
they visit her in her menses"

She was not hysteric, she didn't rave  
her face was flushed, abstract, the marionette-

head jerked from side to side to side, a slave  
to cross-pulls. A thin edge of froth  
simmered round her lips  
like foam-dregs left by a receding wave

The hospital doctors frowned with thought  
light words like *petit mal* were tied  
to the heavies : "psychomotor epilepsy"  
a physician pointed out with pride  
the "spike-and-wave" electrical activity  
prescribed belladonna and paraldehyde

Just when he said "she isn't shaping  
too well", she recovered, bleached white  
and utterly raped.  
As a limp awareness slouched along her face  
I found it was the husband who was shaking

II

*At Bansa*

His hand came up to his tartar-beard  
in archaic salute  
Take her to the mosque at Bansa, he said  
on the night preceding  
the first friday of the month  
Inshallah ! She shall be cured

and so to Bansa  
on a night when the moon  
was an ellipse

Suddenly you find  
that everybody is here  
thin, scrawny girls  
carved out of a single thigh

hysterical quail-like brides  
banging their foreheads on the floor  
and loose-fleshed women  
with a foetus and a demon  
in their ballooned bellies

It was a village like any other village  
mustard fields incised by dirt-tracks  
tumorous outgrowths of mud and wattle  
and here and there a patch of stonework  
— beginnings in a new atrophy.  
Around one mud house  
white chalk-prints of a palm  
— Khamza, the protecting hand of Fatima —  
run all along the wall

The hawkers sell a pulp of gram  
steaming, poisonously spiced  
Lost among them is a face  
where age and grime have dug themselves  
His wares are papers where thick black ink  
in thick black squares interrelates  
the 28 arab alphabets  
with 28 houses of the moon

You've got me wrong  
It is not an esoteric carnival  
— gnostic papyri and pentacle  
subtle divination and brute exorcism  
with a hundred frenzies  
cavorting round the mosque

only the ritual mascara  
which is pencilled on each eye  
is talismanic

43  
43



Otherwise  
it is a *mazar* like all *mazars*  
you receive the *tabaruk* on bended knees  
you kiss the stone and make a secret wish  
releasing it like a partridge  
from your inner pocket  
A filigreed chandelier  
sheds its lambence on the grave  
The *Mujawirs* that lie in wait  
are vultures / quacks / simpletons  
a few are even genuine  
— echoes of an ancient ululation

Wrapped in a green tahmat he comes  
this black-bearded silhouette  
bare feet approaching with  
padded animal softness  
In low melodic murmurs he intones  
suras from the Quran  
— kindled arabesques  
that unwind from his mouth  
like a thread of light  
With a black finger-end he smears  
mascara on her eyelash  
“daughter ! your troubles are at an end !”

---

*Notes*

*Mazar* : Tomb

*Tabaruk* : Oblations

*Mujawirs* : Half-caretaker, half-priest of a muslim *dargah* —  
tombs of the saintly

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*MONOLOGUE IN THE CHAMBAL VALLEY**(the Bandit Chief to the Informer)*

In this fissured valley everything cracks  
the heart through minor skin-burns, the skull  
when the sun tramps on it long enough  
(though the ancients say, it is hot sands at your feet  
which give you the stroke and not the sun above)  
and friendships crack at the tug of a crosspull

Do you recall how it was with the women  
when we started ? taut-breasted ones from the hill /  
brown ones from Bihar — soft and overripe /  
daughters of the desert / daughters of the forest tribes ?  
And where did we not sell them ?  
In holy fairs, in cattle markets  
to old men — girls younger than their daughters  
to the young — one-eyed and lame who couldn't get a wife  
You remember the one from Kulu, wire-thin and catty  
a night I lay with her, and next day  
when the buyer came, the shindy she kicked !  
Clinging to me with her nails and her teeth  
as if we were married for over twenty years !

And the night the patrol came knocking at our door  
you were so calm, why did I get the jitters ?  
You know I fired only to scare them  
but a bullet got lost in a copper's brain

Later how smoothly you did it !  
plying me with drink till I turned and retched  
"It will steady your nerves" you said  
as you slipped away and the raid got me

You'd like to know how I escaped, won't you ?  
It was graft all the way — first the Judge's steno

"It's the rope for you" he said, we bribed him more  
and he didn't type the judgement on the given day  
We bribed the Warder, got large sized  
handcuffs and a wrist-band to boot  
and beneath the band a thick layer of grease  
After that it was simple : a jerk and I was off  
before they could load their guns  
before they could train their sights  
I was a fragment of the city traffic  
and you don't go shooting in a crowded street.  
Into the jumna I leapt — it was summer  
the river shoulder-high, else my goose was cooked  
for I never had your swimming prowess  
I remember when the crocodile  
streaked after you in the Chambal  
you ripped your vest off and threw it at him  
when he came for you again, you flung your dhoti  
and before he could finish with it  
you were over and across

I tell my stooges, you're a better bandit  
than I : your blood is colder  
you have more of instinct, more of guts

To turn the heart to leather, I lined up  
six goatherds and started target practice  
With the first shot they exploded into legs  
scattering like grapeshot before I could reload.  
But I got what I wanted — the adage "Killer"

I like it the way it is : power and cordite smell alike  
and there's nothing like a barrel on a cold night  
It gives you warmth, it gives you light  
it is the pulse of a severed artery  
an animal pulse spurting with life  
and passion. What more can a man ask for ?

Ten thousand coin in silver was my daughter's dowry  
not to speak of cash, not to speak of gold  
Who else could do it but a king ?

We met again, in the sense  
we heard each other's voices  
We were tall silhouettes around your house  
the night we came to kill you. Six rifles we had  
and yet with that damp-squib, toy, twelve-bore of yours  
you held us off ! It was a marvel !  
Only you didn't know I had  
an army deserter in my gang, and when he  
lobbed a grenade on the rooftop where you sat  
spitting lead, it burst — flakes of overripe fruit  
thrown against a wall !  
Fourteen wounds, and still you escaped !  
Some tenacity ! They tell me the grenade  
took off with your manhood  
but I know they say that only to please me

My nights are still uneasy, turning over  
what bait you will set for me  
what ambush you will spring  
my dreams are full of rat-traps  
The desire to kill and the fear of being killed  
are aspects of the same passion

You too have done well I notice  
the mud in your house has changed to sandstone  
the window thatched with khas  
and camels work your persian wheel.  
They pay you your percentage, I am told  
cattle-thieves and brothel-owners  
and rice-smugglers, lest you have them caught  
Yes we both have made our way up  
I as bandit you as informer

Brown mp

*SHIVA : AT TIMARSAIN (12000 ft.)*

Lord of the stalactite  
I have seen  
icicles growing from your tonsure

Overhead a pair of monals  
kept vigil over the crags

Around you austerity  
the grey of nicotine stains  
a landscape of slate  
where thought turns hermit  
only the sky a vibration  
upon blue vibration

The crags here are rock-temples  
of some abandoned cult  
that brood over strips of alp  
and upland pasture,  
limb and shoulder of rock  
rearing from frozen landslides.  
Perhaps I overreach, but the thrust  
of lava that formed them was yours  
some side-flicker from the divine  
orgasm of the *Tandava*

Exiles, solitaires — these were your pilgrims  
(and Bhotia women, crisp  
from their ice-baths in Dhauli Ganga)  
as they brought you oleander flowers  
and leaves of Eagle marmelos  
as they clutched the iron phallus of your bell  
and sent it clanging  
against a hemmed-in universe  
the sound cleaving

like a sword-edge through the hills  
— here in these mountain-wastes  
where silence is crystal  
where concentrics in the lake appear  
at only the shadow of a wheeling kite

Lord of the stalactite  
of the third-eye and the rimed beard  
will you leave these heights  
where calcified columns  
rise and descend in rectilinear thrusts ?  
Will you wear a raffia wig  
and let them tame you, domesticate you  
and pat your ice-cone sharpness  
into a rounded lingam ?



SHIVA AT LODHESHWAR (*our own sea level*)

From five hundred miles the *kamerrathis* come  
walking in a chorus of feet —  
— bare feet are the essence of a pilgrimage  
The water on their backs  
could be *ganga* or the *sarju*  
or the *chambal* flowing  
like a vertebral column —  
its ravines ramifying  
in forked cartilages  
or just a village pond  
aspiring to merit

Near the icon  
the water-urns are emptied  
and the *kamers* bristling  
with peacock feathers  
are flung on the temple-dome

In the morning twilight of dilute black  
the temple-floor turns a greasy brown  
with *chandon* and mashed flowers  
libation waters and foot-mud  
and bits of pulpy dough  
The crush of faces, limbs, breasts  
is so great, you may walk away  
with the wrong feet !

Outside, iron railings buckle over  
with the weight of people  
Yet every hour the gates are closed  
the litter on the floor is swept  
into sacks and taken to the Mahant  
who lies petrified, the legs stricken  
watching the sacks unstitched  
the currency notes sorted from the pulp  
of flowers, sandal and oblatinal food

opposite  
Cave-god, to me who have seen you  
in your habitat  
— a thought lost in its own intensity  
an icy sphinx — only without a face  
just a half-orb mounted on a phallic thrust  
which did not speak of generative powers  
but of life, completeness, a thrust that spanned eternities  
a more intense bit of earth  
protruding from the earth —  
to me this show here looks like vaudeville  
the temple-bhog like brothel-meat

of the cave  
of the yeti-print  
and the vulture-eyrie  
you have come to the wrong place

*ECCE HOMO*

A goan Christ upon a goan cross  
two linear rhythms  
turning interfluent

This is dry muscle, dry spirit  
the woodwork turning fibrous with age  
a Christ, spare and stark  
without the Botticelli blurb  
of Madonna kneeling and angels wringing hands.  
You show the altar meant for easter candles  
the protuberance on the cheek  
turning green and gangrenous  
where the kiss was planted by Judas of Kerioth  
and this is where the spikes drove home  
Observe the nimbus  
which the thorns have marked  
a red weal curving like a crescent round the head  
Observe the thread of blood upon the feet  
and the dehydrated look  
of the cadaver

But I would go about it  
in a different way  
First I'd mark a tree  
fluent with muscle  
with limbs transverse  
and on the crotch  
nail a splay-winged Christ  
— a tiny statuette  
just about a foot  
but I would graft it so  
the sap would run into his veins  
and they grow one-veined  
with a common pulse

the Christ and the tree  
like lovers caught in a cramp

A rumour of life  
will make the cell-walls pulse  
with moss and tendril  
— green congeries  
round a dryad Christ

and his hair will turn to leaf  
and his eyes run with pollen  
and in autumn under a harvest moon  
the leaves will flame so  
that we will know  
they have been dipped  
in the fire-bowl of his wounds

*ELEGY — I*

We saw your flight bending  
to a darkened skyline

It was all so death-clear  
that when it came  
the simplicity of the whole thing  
left us quite bewildered

I never caught your subtler refractions

Others saw

the shadows that flecked your face

the light that got lost in your eyes

(pardon me, the clichés are theirs)

They say now

“She was always on the margin of things

imagine to have died

when she was on her way to herself !”

Even this, I being what I am

do not understand

Your words

and my memories of them

turn meaningless, unreal now

your absence is so irrefutable

There were more gestures to your hands  
than I have words

The sharpness

in your voice

in your fingerends

the tilt of the head

drove a cold wedge through our later nights

your moods were hovering

round you like dark instincts

But I who saw the black snow  
flake by flake

am not so certain of things now  
A night-sky will have trouble  
holding on to your image  
in all this sleet.

Your smile disintegrates  
into a carious bowl  
and as I grab at your receding words  
long, spun-out fibres, thinning into air  
I feel faint and foolish  
grabbing at nothing with nothing



*ELEGY — II*

*(For Clea killed in water)*

When I show you round this little world of mine  
where plane and level and line  
twist into each other like wounded hands  
where the lie of the land  
is a heap of scrap iron — I will counsel patience  
Don't conclude I speak of hallucinations

Vision, sir, is surely queer fish  
the retina a rubberized wall  
where the world comes for target practice  
Each shot leaves a rip, a tear  
bullet-hole-edges start teething there  
next morning, however, all is alabaster  
glory be to God for glue and sticking plaster

the leaf in sun  
    crinkled, yellow  
unreacting to the axis of the sun, seems  
still yellow as when twilight crinkles on it  
or night sheds on it her wet dreams  
Under the palm  
    her arm, half sunlight, half shadow  
comes to me as just one arm  
The children / in my lap / or as they race  
making straight for me from a hundred yards  
acquire the same two cubic feet of space  
Images are processed into a rationale  
cool, cerebral, clear  
the coin though tilted near my eye, appears  
not as an ellipse, but as arched and discoid  
circular and finished  
her shadow as she slips into the past  
is undiminished

The spear etches queer patterns on the eye  
the spear-gun bleeding against your thigh  
has got the rickets, Clea !

The planets have ganged up in a strange cohesion  
your limbs beating about

in the dying water  
are double-vision

all due to a screen of water

all due to a veil of water

the tide wears a flush now, a red tone  
fleeting

a light year leaves its shadow behind  
bleeding

thank God for it that the earth does not refract  
and I can see your outstretched arms  
distinctly as they reach for me  
can still read the constellations  
frozen on your palms

as I retract  
my steps from the grave  
the flowers recede in size

*ELEGY — III*

*(Black Rain)*

I cannot cry like you  
shoulders hunched into a knot of pain  
and the face breaking into a thousand pieces.  
I must stand erect, my eyes  
spaceless and open ; too much blinking  
against the cold wind and they may think  
I am holding back tears

I must live with my grief  
as a stone-breaker lives with his vocation  
must feed them on the thirteenth day on plantain leaves,  
go to office with a shaved head  
hang my coat on a peg and pretend  
that nothing has happened

The roles are reversed in a way  
... not exactly, for that would look stage-managed ...  
but others are crying around you today  
As live ash sizzles on the cold river  
like a dying passion  
it takes all the strength in me  
to restrain a shiver  
And yet with all the cold despair around  
this sterile moment oozing thin black rain  
I envy you the quiver  
with which your tears came  
and your relief

As for me, grey hair-roots  
sprouting from the scalp next week  
may be my only catharsis

*ELEGY — IV*

a month before you died  
the crab-claw words  
started falling from your mouth

death spoke through you  
turning bitter before its time  
the words earthy  
born under the sod  
loam turning into thin black gruel  
falling from your wounds

“don’t let me turn my words to ink”  
you said, “or to the smear of paint  
— slashes of charcoal and gum  
across a perforated slab  
this way i’ll be exposing  
my innards to light  
freezing them in time  
as an abnormal foetus  
is preserved in a jar”

from a bleak, birdless sky  
you walked into  
a moment of wings  
(if seraph

had been a cold word  
a hard word  
a knife-in-the-guts word  
i would have used it here)

in what you thought were your  
sane moments, you said  
hold me hard  
harder, harder, do it harder  
gag my mouth with yours, and hold on

stuff my mouth with your words / your tongue  
any words / any tongue  
what i am saying is senseless / cruel  
my words are are a witch's fingernails  
i fear my words may keep alive  
and hide in the corners of these rooms  
and plague you when i am gone

but your body ran with  
the ichor of your wounds  
wounds which acquired  
rat-legs of their own  
and scuttled across  
from your body

love  
how could i hold this leak ?

*you may elope,*

*EASY AND DIFFICULT ANIMALS**(to Khurshid)*

You have no problems such as mine  
you do not cower  
from your own thoughts  
    it doesn't frighten you  
the iron edge awaking from its rust  
the crawl of oxidized dreams  
    in lonely hours

Where do you get your insights from  
and your simple words ?  
teaching our daughter that day you said  
    some dreams are animals  
    some dreams are birds

The moonface was either  
    turned towards light  
    or away from it  
dark fruit / incandescent fruit  
Your distinctions were a knife  
that went cutting to the root  
You divided in two  
this animal delirium that we call 'life'  
into 'easy animals' / 'difficult animals'  
All that moved on legs  
    flew on wings  
    crawled on the belly  
    inhaled through fins  
hedgehog and weasel and polecat  
all that went to the taxidermist  
gizzard and buzzard and bat  
you lumped together as 'easy animals'

and pitched against this menagerie  
one solitary cry  
the one 'difficult animal'  
that was I

in the best of family situations

*LEDGE WALKER*

The street is concave  
the street is a sea of hands  
as traffic freezes  
into upturned faces  
— eyes that look up  
like an alien desert

Her eyes lose their focus  
to a migrating dream  
She stalks the ledge  
intense and feline  
she is stalking herself

The lizard-street crouches  
with its eyes upturned  
A rain of shrieks  
comes pelting down the windows  
as her scream is lost  
in a sea of echoes  
time buckles with a gripe — one  
long intestinal moment  
as the concave street  
comes up to meet her  
and rubber-walls flow out  
as she takes the leap  
into the abyss of herself



*DIALOGUES WITH A THIRD VOICE*

*Myth-talk*

*I*

Surely one must go through  
the bravura numbers

Courage, the timbre and temper of blood  
must be given trial

Surely one must live the passions  
first by burning with them  
and then by forfeit

But already you are afraid of disillusion  
beneath every cliché as it floats like spawn  
you hope to see the myth-mask  
Already you know  
behind gummy-eyed images  
like "dark night of the soul"  
there is no fiendish grin  
no rape-smile of a bleeding womb  
only perhaps  
a blank face  
that thinks there is something  
special in its smile

Too early this cynicism  
which probes for the damp in the soul  
with a fistful of dessicants  
Too early to discard as futile  
this thinking of things  
that thought can never change

Doubt is a forced growth with you  
and a false striving for poise  
Where will it take you  
this search for the myth-worm  
behind the membrane of fact ?

*II*

There are never any private rituals  
and this when it happened  
was not ritual then

Are you glad you were not there ?  
You may not have stood it  
— all these animal smells,  
the fresh steaming dung  
the hay soggy with urine  
the tang of branmash and body-heat  
and somewhere the placenta  
like a bloody undergarment

Efflorescence of the body  
— in the mud of the eye  
the born vision screaming

There is nothing as raw as a new-born child  
not even a still-born one

And the Magi  
— their bodies coated with desert lice  
hair riddled with desert lice  
stank to the barn roof  
(they hadn't shaved their armpits)  
and again you muffed it up  
for though you caught the whiff  
of frankincense and myrrh, and clasped

the musk at the suppurating gland-root  
you missed the aroma of their desert souls  
coming on spring water

and yet the heart asks sardonic  
between all this and faith  
is there any relevance ?

*III*

There is no time like myth-time  
spurt of the taut grape  
in cedar glooms  
fables of the sky  
and fables of the earth  
meeting on a young horizon

Any time is myth-time  
a tent of camel hide  
flapping in the wind  
bread and goatcheese  
wine and smoked meat of the lamp

And children wide-eyed squatting on the ground  
there is no time like children-time  
— red laughter in silver-oaks  
words like the little  
harness-bells of lamps  
words like the sound of young water  
cries like birds in pheasant-runs

There is a time for pleasant myths  
and a time for cruel myths  
liquor — and the live ram  
hanging from a hook  
one torn leg roasting  
on a faggot-fire

Any time is death time  
 for child-god or breastless manad:  
 with the sky a snake-pit  
 agog with snake-haired furies  
 the rottenness of death  
 unmitigated by maggots

But there is no death like myth-death  
 first dismemberment and worship  
 blood turning to berries / red flowers  
 and then a transfer to the skies  
 re-enacting myths in a starry drift

There is no time like myth-time  
 green orchards and golden fruit  
 virile gods and young nymphs  
 a mankind unburdened with guilt

a hungry people, a sad people  
 have the happiest myths

#### IV

How long must I sacrifice  
 the body to the soul  
 the codpiece  
 to the masterpiece  
 lost in some vague, aesthetic future?

How long must I wait  
 for the asphodel to burn  
 through the ground  
 upwards  
 or for wings to sprout  
 from the shoulders of song?

For most of the time  
the future does not come  
                  under the roar,  
          the descent  
the tarmac on the runway  
does not keep on coming  
in a black sizzle  
But days I have never lived  
have sped towards me  
          not as future  
but as past already lived  
Again you were vague  
"You trust the ear too much  
                  rhythm is a passage  
after the phrase is voiced  
What would you have, the intimacies of silence  
or silver accumulations of tone and sound ?  
the open-to-touch, or the impalpable ?  
I'll take the augur's whisper in the cave  
Give me the occult from the  
                  mother-urn  
          of vestal silence  
only it must have  
a mouth that bleeds with words  
Not the sphinx, not muted omen-birds  
  
"Experience must be firsthand  
What would you like" you asked  
                  "the sun  
          from the sky  
walking into your eye  
or float with the tadpoles

thrice refracted ; one live, twisted  
incandescent  
rod of fire  
burning both form and formless  
damp as a blanket of lightning  
only wider, only more crooked

 $V$ 

## Poetry Talk

My conscience is a road  
— a childhood has been tramped here  
concretised and stamped over  
with the feet of passing years  
We erode each other, the road and I  
neither giving way,  
I scrape the road's back as I walk  
my heel is horned  
calloused and worn away

Fellow-travellers we  
on this flinty track  
this patriarch and me  
our eyes meet as I look back  
for it's dusk and I fear  
he may knife me in the back

No grudge between us  
although there's one catch  
I once lit his beard  
to save on my match  
— I think of sin  
as a curio, not an archetype  
Hence guilt wears thin  
There's nothing much to choose between  
a ghostly presence and a ghostly absence  
yet at night sometimes  
the ghost-beard haunts me  
burning through my chin

He can't help his sermons  
"Words must flow  
like gestures from your hands"  
I smear henna on my hands  
"Allegory is the habit  
of a secondrate mind"  
I strip off my habit and  
stand naked in the wind

"In a curved universe, a straight metric line  
is floundering in a rut  
you must give it multiple meanings  
A work of art must hit you in the gut"  
I strike an attitude and knife a pig  
and tough-guy that I am, I bring out his guts  
"Three dimensions of space, one of time  
dreams, memories, senses, — your meagre tools  
— and a tradition that is portly  
Can you fashion reality with these tools?"  
I agree. I will be starting  
a sausage-factory shortly

"You have escaped your deserts  
by the skin of your teeth  
but guilt, that inner nemesis  
you can't avoid." I face up squarely  
and kick him in the teeth  
guilt is a moral delicacy  
I cannot stand  
Crudeness is power, power claw and teeth

"Cleopatra's death, breasts stung by asps  
was aesthetically satisfying"  
"Pordner" laughed my girl-friend "you make me feel like  
crying"  
She eyed her body, struck with palsy  
"The snakes would be hard put to find  
my tits beneath the falsies"

"Ritual, chant, litany"  
the cant goes on through Provence and Brittany  
"Rearrange your universe of ordered words"  
I avoid the stock response  
for strange bugs have bitten me

"You should turn to the wand  
the airy and the abstract,  
voices in the sky  
Concreteness is only stone  
Do you favour the half-truth or the half-lie?"

I take an air-gun  
and blow out half his eye

"Your words will mirror life  
have no worries on that score  
for truth and beauty,  
are embedded, sir, in life"



I have slipped into the covers  
and am bedded with his wife

*VI*

*Tragedy Talk*

march is asizzle  
with mating flies  
but we don't mention this  
in the armoury of spring

a sparrow gets caught  
in fanblades and turns  
a wet downy pulp  
only children are supposed  
to cry at such things

the disastrous and the tragic  
you tell me  
are not the same  
the burst gaslight  
the broken tyrod  
the livewire dangling with a hidden flame  
are things apart

but tragedy we imbue from the start  
with overtones  
music firstly  
david harping melancholic saul  
which isn't all  
strophe and anti-strophe  
the anapaestic march  
a chorus that spans  
time and sin and an irrational scheme  
the dionysian dithyramb

cyclic spells behind  
    the wheeling year  
    corn and oil  
transfigured, humanized  
the crack in the crystal  
    foreshadowing  
the crack in the skies :  
    exalted fear  
as thunderheads roll in low across the plain  
    distemper of the skies  
    all spiral up throwing  
    bits of this universe  
    bits of corn-god-meat  
    to a waiting destiny  
    and the eumenides

but we all agree  
that you and i  
are unfit subjects for a tragedy  
our tragic-wheel gets stuck  
in every rut  
our passions slick  
get lost within our guts  
destiny, stars, fate  
we don't measure up to such words  
if fate were to squeeze me hard  
all that would remain of me  
would be a bit of turd  
in our piddling little lives  
our stone-in-kidney lives  
evil is not landscaped  
on the horizon. the skies  
don't rain portents  
augury and omen, both stand skittered  
— the waxing moon has turned to wax  
the baying bitch has littered

so let me hold tight to the angst/the fear  
it's all i have, my dear  
the things i panic from  
could never excite a lyre  
— parents drunk in the basement  
while children roast in a fifth-floor fire

littleness is all :  
the fault, dear brutus  
lies in the passage of the mother-uterus  
that we are so small

*a fine collection of reflections*

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## COLLAGE

*(two poems — 1967)*

Rock'n'rollers around Ravi Shankar  
mods around Maharsi Mahesh  
and beatles around both  
and we are thrilled  
They have a lot to learn  
from the ragas still, these burns !  
It is that same sentiment —  
that Tagore-euphoria  
after the Nobel prize

At times we do well  
in dog-shows

Since Oppenheimer quoted Bhagavad Gita  
after the first A-bomb  
since Allen Ginsberg and the psychedelics  
wore dhotis, and with clanging cymbals  
chanted cow and Krishna  
I stand bowled by Indian culture  
and Indian hemp

Who says we have done nothing ?  
We have abolished zamindari  
and liquor and english  
and driven the prosses from the G. B. Road

What have we forbidden  
veils in front of eyes  
or eyes behind veils ?  
Freeing robbers and rapists  
on Republic Day  
the amnesty adds  
“We'll review with sympathy

the cases of the following  
pimps, pederasts, poets"

We have inaugurated crematoriums  
with an unclaimed corpse  
a V. I. P. has opened  
the sluice-gates of a drain  
and given it an epithet  
"the drain of hope"

Some day, here  
the sun will refuse  
to light the path for lepers  
In India  
the left hand is outcaste  
because it cleans the arse



Discussing personal destiny  
and collective destiny  
you turn bitter  
My horoscope is only a half-truth  
Where are inflation and taxes  
floor-crossing and black gold  
written on it ?

If we had plague  
Camus-style  
and doctors searched for the virus  
there would be black-market in rats

*a brilliant poem*

✓ COLLAGE — II

*Mother*

They were quick to notice  
the flame in my spine  
had gone limp  
“Go to Auden and Sartre” they said  
“for a vocabulary of defeat”

From a saturnine priesthood  
of parchment faces and plaster voice  
they picked out figures  
like poison-bottles from a secret shelf  
“For a landscape of meaninglessness  
go along with him  
he has a palette smeared with almost-colours.  
For impotence which is disembodied  
and become a way of life . . .  
for greater insights into the fear of death  
go to such and such . . .  
and she’s your girl for the abyss  
she knows one tone of darkness from the other”

My looks turned to yours  
— we were meeting each other outside of ourselves  
But Mother your face was so fissured  
I couldn’t see my face in it

In the drought year  
armlets couldn’t stay upon the arm  
— the limbs had shrivelled so

Mother, some men have heard you  
crying to yourself

Mother, you are a floating foetus  
on a larval bed

around which we thrash about  
“black colonies of summer fish”

corruption is the chemistry of flesh  
no wonder the senses suppurate, passions putrefy  
but you survey it all  
with a smile pasted on your lips  
inanities pasted on the smile  
Somewhere in the dust and drift of history  
you lost your good-luck amulet  
and your face  
today you are an empty slogan  
that walks an empty street  
— walls tarred with slogans

Mother I hope  
something happens to my vision  
the day you  
    dragging your feet  
    wounds smeared with ants  
    crawl towards Benares  
    to die

Then why should I tread the Kafka beat  
or the Waste Land  
when Mother you are near at hand  
one vast, sprawling defeat ?  
—————

*MY POETRY*

The legs don't move  
sometimes the back turns over  
like a river changing beds  
sometimes the eye gropes  
towards an object  
— bat-instincts  
at times the arms thrash around  
my dreams  
like windmills  
But the legs are withered roots  
memory has slipped up somewhere  
for I don't remember  
what hit me in the spine  
to turn the legs torpid



TOWARDS REALITY

Metaphysics : reality, being, existence, cause

Logic : validity and invalidity and its laws

Ethics : good and evil, duty, right and wrong

Aesthetics : the beauty and the beast in parable and song

Morality : the prudish pronounced with a prurient grin

Religion : the devil's tailbone and original sin

Pathology only knows, for he's no fool

he deals with faeces, droppings, stools

He knows his bit

We have a lot of names

for the same

shit

Orion

The He. m. c.  
matter

*A SIMPLE POET*

He writes so simply, damn him  
that learned men  
are hard put to understand him

*THE WRONG MATCH*

This was a queer wedding  
Livingstone matched with Cora  
the woman was from Lesbos  
the husband from Gomorrah

*THE REVOLT OF THE SALT SLAVES*

(after reading *Exile and The Kingdom*)

Truths hung perpendicular here  
like sunlight  
and the only shadow apart from fear  
was the night  
Both were black, the slave-drivers and the slaves !  
Only the sun was white  
and salt columns bristling like an infinity of stakes !

This was the land of salt where the sun  
poured white fire  
on an endless vista of rock and dune  
sparkling with intensely white  
embers of salt and sand ashimmer  
with pulverous light  
land of million atom-mirrors  
where mirror-worship was a rite

Theirs were the bodies of salt, sweat-dregs  
left behind.  
The bull-whip spoke in syllables of fire  
to whimpering spine.  
The eyelash was a film of salt that stung  
the eye surprised  
Each salt-grain turned into a prism  
and a mirage bright  
The spectrum was confined within  
a single colour — white !

When the land's white laughter went to their heads  
and to the bi-focal look of their insane eyes  
they rebelled for the night and its starry trails  
for its lambence reflected in rock-salt-shells  
for the dew sparkling on salt-crystals

like lapis lazuli  
for the night that would mean once again  
a woman's body  
and the feel of cool hands and salted lips  
under Orion !

This was the land of salt and iron ;  
and they wrote the truth of iron in blood  
with fanatic hands  
and the slave-drivers lay impaled on earth  
in the blinding sands  
on an evening of iron, as a dehydrated  
dusk rolled over the asphalt line  
Truth to one's salt is hardly the thing  
to expect from slaves in a salt-mine



*UNDER ORION*

*I*

There is never any trouble  
                                rowing north  
you row north by the Bear  
and if you keep on rowing  
                        night after starry night  
you will avoid the nightmare straits  
and gulfstreams of the blood  
and before the old moon dwindles  
and his powers wane  
you will find the north  
half-viking, half-druid  
water skying near the thaw-mouth of the sea  
with two icebergs for feet  
But if you drift with Orion  
                        the perils are yours  
night after night you will go along  
the black drum of the skies  
trailing the cold spear-silences of the stars  
— spears that are poised night after night  
but never leave the hand  
looking for that hill  
                        where Orion drops  
                        a forest of stars  
                        in a forest of fir  
you will never find it  
all you'll find is a rootless, dreamless drift  
the wheezing words of the saw  
as lumberjacks go  
                        serrating through the wood  
the river dying amongst hot boulders  
wind in the pines reminiscent of surf  
dog-howls from the nearest village  
and cicada monotones

and such will be your fever  
 that never will your dreams  
 break into a long light  
 sleeping with the surf

it will be a back-trek  
     along the cold rains  
     of the previous years  
 the squalls will be half-memories  
 moving on the margin of a shadow.  
 And strange emanations :

hot restless dreams from quiescent blood  
 Between the dying limb  
 and the dead reef  
 between jeopardy and renewal  
 between frustrated love and failing art  
 between sulphur-yellow and sulphur-blue  
     the difference is of tone  
     and a feeling for tones.

At night the reef is like a monster-limb  
 the moan of the tide  
 the white-flowered surf  
 are all its emanations

    star-hunter  
 you walk by sealight and landlight  
 your flares brighter than an oildrum  
     flaming on a black horizon

    a stroke of light  
     cancels the rain

II

*The gates are burning !*  
*As she leaned away from the light*

her shadow flashed darkly across my eyes  
that is the nearest I have got to her  
for when you look for her  
    in the forests of the spirit  
you find she is gristle, tendon  
                    cartilage, bone  
*the gates are burning !*  
and when you look in the waters of the flesh  
her presence is as fleshless as her absence  
*the gates are burning !*  
and while you comb  
dry thorn and brambled shadows  
her smile is kindling some encaverned pool  
*the gates are burning !*  
Yet in a tiger-flash Orion  
you pinned her elf-like body on the earth  
*the thigh-gates of the goddess are burning !*

Before the ritual-murder, came the ritual-rape  
the goddess deflowered  
Thence flowed fertility down the thighbone of ages

*III*

Flesh has done worse things ;  
in the first thrust came  
nails and claws and octopus-arms  
and shark-tail which broke the boat-back  
and monster-enzymes  
that could digest iron  
You were of that flesh Orion

The sundial is no measure of your rhymes  
                    yours are vaster  
flowing down the cold capillaries of the skies  
At first light they have seen you

on the horns of the summer-bull  
as head lowered, he charged into the sun

after grape-treading  
and the ritual-drink from the scething vats  
othere have seen you  
walk the streets of the skies  
at midnight

and when cold squalls are at it  
wind sending tongues of foam  
into your eyes ; and the seas churn so  
you can't see the wake-drag  
behind your scudding boat  
the seamen know that you are rising late  
their fears foregathering  
in the dark dormitories of the heart

but always you sink  
when the scorpion rises

#### IV

Thin across the saw-grass  
a thread of blood  
on the earth's belly  
Musician

now all you are left with  
is dark keys and skeletal music

Orion  
you poured in vats  
what you can't remember  
Not only the squirt of grape  
not only fig and fire-tulip  
or rat-



legs or the green dung of spring  
but even your kelp-covered skin  
not just the daydreams from your eyes  
but even the nutmeats therein

this seething in your body-vats  
left you no choice — you ran amok  
torn caves for ears  
snakeweed for hair  
bronze-clubs for arms  
and flares that scorched the ground  
for eyes

You came  
maple leaves were falling  
at your tread  
your words like leaffall  
a stretch of flame

From the level upland basins  
stars crawl downhill to the glooms  
of cave-deposits  
where bones of men and animals  
commingle in communal tombs  
— dregs of your passion as you slew them  
in the pine-woods of Aleppo  
in the low brushwood of carob  
in the fleshy thrust of headlands

There is no exit-hatch in Crete  
— mountains, oceans, coral-dust  
earth quails before your fire and lust  
and nurses in her womb the poison  
pats the belly where it sings  
in all its blinded purposefulness  
the scorpion's prehensile sting

a stroke of rain  
cancels the light

*V*

Can we measure you in digits ?  
Can we measure you in time ?  
Orion if you slash your wrists  
    you'll bleed with light  
    deciduous light, eternities of light  
and that will be the sign  
for the scorpion to close in  
with the star-sting of his tail

Upheavals will rock the skies  
    as they rocked the earth  
when heaving yourself over the eastern rim  
you plucked the promontory of pelorum  
clawing at the mountain roots  
and dredging away the silt  
with your mad tentacular fingers

Orion it is not you who fade  
a forest of stars  
in a forest of fir  
it is the eyes that go out

the width of your girdle is lightyears  
the curve of your girdle is time

*VI*

You row through fog-shapes  
somewhere in the distance  
a foghorn sounds  
like a forgotten echo

on the far-edge of dream.  
The sea is choppy, the stomach turns  
upon itself, the boat  
bobs along like a drunk oil derrick  
A swordfish breaks water  
sending the spray exploding in your face  
Brine and sweat, both tangy and warm to the lick  
gleam along the rib of the taut muscle  
and effort thaws the ice within the heart  
Yes it is winter. We have seen in the late sky  
the sandlight of your splayed presence  
touch wind and water and wraiths  
                                into fluency  
And through the chop and sway of water  
the boat moves through the spray-ridden dark  
— an amputated stump of light

Orion you ran along a deeper nerve,  
spearing the temples and the hidden walls  
of the blue skull of the skies

What fog-banks will we lurch against ?  
What passions come to terms with ?  
What sands will we hit,  
What stretch of dreams, what regions of the blood ?  
We stalk the light, we trail the westward drift  
even though I distrust that  
delirium of light you move in  
Orion ! With you around  
          the heavens need an anchor  
or someday you may run away with the skies

*The sameness of it*

*N o t e*

[*Orion in legend* : Lest *Under Orion* seem obscure to those who are not acquainted with Orion I feel a note is necessary. A mythical hunter of great size, strength and beauty, Orion was gifted by Poseidon with the power of walking over sea as well as over land. He tried to outrage the goddess Artemis for which she is said to have slain him. Another legend has it that the earth, terrified by his threat that he could root out every wild creature from Crete, sent a scorpion which killed him. In Homer (*Odyssey* XI : 572) Odysseus sees him in the lower world as a shade still pursuing with his club of bronze the creatures whom he slew in former times. The morning rising of this constellation heralded summer, its midnight rising denoted the season of vintage, and its late rising the beginning of winter and its storms.]

*YOU WERE THE FIRST*

you were the first  
it was from you i learnt  
that the stroke went parallel  
                    to the body  
not vertical  
like a cross  
hammered down  
on a grave

it was in you i learnt  
that the body was a home  
lying curved upon a fleshed earth  
spinning its way  
among the drifting voids.  
beneath was the caliban-earth  
above it you  
from the crotch to the feet  
the body pointed like a star

you were used to body fluids  
exploding in little white lights  
we call sex. my thrusts were a doubt  
moving towards a truth  
but the moment was too concentrated, cryptic  
for such abstract thoughts  
the moment was a string of white lights  
that died within the moment

others can think of you  
            in barebone terms  
they rake up your memory  
like schoolboys who have found  
            a serpent-skin  
—prodding it, turning it over

with sticks, forgetting  
it once sheathed a serpent-body  
and a serpent-fire

for me  
you were an outpost of love  
where first i floundered  
you taught a gawky boy  
what to do with his hands  
smiling all the time  
the light as it came back-  
trekking from your eyes  
was a warmer light

later  
time would walk the grey streets  
of your misery  
and steal your bird-children from you  
to set them wandering on a wandering earth  
looking for their own white lights  
dotted lights

you, older in the marrow  
and in understanding  
what would I have done  
without you ?

12 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

*THE HERO*

I wail  
for the dead male

ah ! the young brigand-lover !  
the hot one ! the quick one !  
the wild one !  
slim, lithe as a lash  
he could out-gun  
anyone in the street  
          anyone in bed  
But they got him where they wanted  
in the hayloft or the sawmill  
with the milkmaid or the vintner's daughter  
As they threw a lighted match  
the hay crackled or the sawdust sizzled  
(the horses tethered in the sawmill roasted)  
Burning-haired he came out  
spitting lead from both his hips  
his body a shield for his crouching girl  
          6 waiting guns  
          put both him and his flame out

I wail for the banderillero  
(olé olé olé in slow refrain)  
*"Oh blanco muro de España !  
Oh negro toro de Peña !"*  
He had mastered the bull within him  
          and the bull without  
nonchalant he could turn his back  
on incensed horns  
he had withdrawn  
from a faithless girl  
halfway through an intercourse  
— just to show his control

Ah ! the banderillero  
extrovert as skin  
handsome as the sun !  
"Toro, hah-hah", and as the bull charges  
the crowd is a mass hysteria  
for no one had seen this before  
so elegantly, surely, dangerously  
he placed the banderillas  
so elegantly, surely, dangerously  
he placed the cortas !  
Till once at five in the afternoon  
as he treaded the bullring  
(no one had known  
he was constipated that day)  
an unfinished bull  
bristling with banderillas  
finished him an hour  
after five in the afternoon  
(the legends were many  
he had waved to his girlfriend at the moment of truth  
slipped on a banana peel  
the bull was cock-eyed, double-visioned  
and had turned the wrong way  
into the wrong vision)

I wail for him  
king of a hundred wives  
lord of two hundred thighs  
(His kingdom was so big  
it extended to half his harem)  
You only had to clang a bell  
and if he wasn't drunk  
or whoring or sleeping  
he doled out instant justice  
When the battle rolled over to his door



he doused his elephant with drink  
and getting hold of a spear charged  
(the spear was the only  
sober thing on the elephant)  
No wonder the enemy ran.  
He won every battle  
except the last — against syphilis

I wail for the espionaut  
the gold-fingered Bond  
the lone wolf pitched  
against international combines  
He has eyes that outdistance telescopes  
biceps that outmuscle iron  
few beds can stand  
the rigours of his virility  
Enormous, the scientific  
and sexual gadgetry at his command  
But aren't we getting stale with all this  
the stance and the maleness, both out of date ?

I wail  
for this  
stupid  
romanticised  
non-existent male

*THE ASSASSIN*

Ever so often now  
We wake up to a black dawn  
and a landscape of rubble  
                    and fly ash  
Crater-eyed we watch  
the psychodrama  
and when embassy blinds go up  
— the flag again atop the flagpole perch —  
we thank God for photographs  
that we can still recall him  
before his memory turns faceless

And what of him, whose dreams  
explode into a different plane,  
fire-coils that unwind  
from the catherine wheel  
of his cavorting mind ?  
He doesn't have to sport  
a low-brimmed hat  
or a hood over his eyes, and  
Mars may not be his ruling planet

From the black arsenal of his dreams  
he pulls out a gun  
adjusts the sights, cleans the barrel  
and puts a smooth, encapsuled  
bit of death up the spout  
(Freudians might call the cartridge  
a small iron penis)  
Then curled up within himself  
he sleeps with his abrasive thoughts  
and his whipped-up passion  
and his imagined wrong

*Under Orion*

75

The next morning is just  
a carryover from the dream  
as death is transferred  
from barrel to the brain

2 p 5 p - cm

## POEMS FROM THE TARAI

## IN THE TARAI

*(to friend Raju)*

They have gone, hog-deer  
 and elephant-grass  
 and malaria in the kidneys  
 (thanks to shot-guns, Rai Sikhs  
 and paludrine respectively)  
 You get used to cattle-fairs  
 in mango-groves here  
 and townships huddling  
 in water-logged half-moons  
 scooped out of the earth  
 an earth in ferment  
 a landscape articulate with despair  
 and steaming with cruel longings  
 You get to know the tang of uric acid  
 the hum of insect-dialects  
 You get to know the feel of skidding tyres  
 and termites rising like a winged fountain  
 riding the snout-like beams  
 issuing from your headlights  
 Bandits of course are everywhere  
 scraping the two-inch soil  
 from the bone of the land  
 burning thatch and chopping fingers  
 — with gout or elephantiasis, there is  
 no other way of taking a ring off.  
 Perverse thought : how would a gold necklace  
 be removed from a goitered neck ?  
 It is not a bad district they all say  
 Over the Ghaghra you have a ferry

to carry your car  
There's an ice factory in town  
(ice that drips and sweats like flesh)  
There's a dhobi in your compound  
but take a tip, don't get your  
    bush shirts starched  
they will hang limp all the same  
and smell like an Insemination Centre

Your neighbours think you are rather snooty  
not because you guzzle beer or play squash  
but your sleeping naked under a ceiling fan  
They think you are snooty  
that since your bodies are smeared  
                                    with odomos  
you can't make love

bad smell

---

*N O T E*

*Odomos* : an anti-mosquito cream.

*THE GHAGHRA IN SPATE*

And every year  
 the ghaghra changes course  
 turning over and over in her sleep

In the afternoon she is a grey smudge  
 exploring a grey canvas  
 When dusk reaches her  
 through an overhang of cloud  
 she is overstewed coffee  
 At night under a red moon in menses  
 she is a red weal  
 across the spine of the land

Driving at dusk you wouldn't know  
 there's a flood 'on'  
 the landscape is so superbly equipoised  
 — rice-shoots pricking through  
 a stretch of water and light  
 spiked shadows  
     inverted trees  
         kingfishers, gulls  
     as twilight thins  
 the road is a black stretch  
 running between the stars

And suddenly at night  
 the north comes to the village  
 riding on river-back  
 Twenty minutes of a nightmare spin  
 and fear turns phantasmal  
 as half a street goes  
 churning in the river-belly  
 If only voices could light lamps !  
 If only limbs could turn to rafted bamboo !

And through the village  
the ghaghra steers her course  
thatch and dung-cakes turn to river-scum  
a buffalo floats over to the rooftop  
where the men are stranded  
Three days of hunger, and her udders  
turn red-rimmed and swollen  
with milk-extortion

Children have spirit enough in them  
to cheer the rescue boats  
the men are still-life subjects  
oozing wet looks  
They don't rave or curse  
for they know the river's slang, her argot  
no one sends prayers to a wasted sky  
for prayers are parabolic  
they will come down with a plop anyway.  
Instead there's a slush-stampede  
outside the booth  
where they are doling out salt and grain

Ten miles to her flank  
peasants go fishing in rice-fields  
and women in chauffeur-driven cars  
go looking for driftwood

But it's when she recedes  
that the ghaghra turns bitchy  
sucking with animal-heat,  
cross-eddies diving like frogmen  
and sawing away the waterfront  
in a paranoic frenzy.  
She flees from the scene of her own havoc  
arms akimbo, thrashing with pain  
Behind her the land sinks

houses sag on to their knees  
in a farewell obeisance  
And miles to the flank, the paddy fields  
will hoard their fish  
till the mud enters into  
a conspiracy with the sun  
and strangles them

*a beautiful tree*



THE PARIJAT TREE

After the battle  
here the pandavs came  
(here on the Ghaghra)  
licking their wounds  
drifting under the hangover  
of blood and bitterness

Not in scriptures is the Ghaghra sacred  
She doesn't wash the feet  
of temples on her sides  
No one dons ochre on her banks  
corpse and clay-lamp  
are not consigned to her water  
She churns with stronger enzymes, fiercer fish  
in whose stampeding swirl  
a corpse would turn to morsels in no time

Why did they come here at all ?  
the Ghaghra doesn't flow  
down the valley of the kings  
Goatherds in the marshes / salt-workers on the flats /  
melon-growers on the sands / and on the river fishermen  
spearing and netting fish

Perhaps they tired of the heavy symbol-world  
— the spiritual constellations of the Ganga  
and hence to the Ghaghra  
wayward and pubescent  
and sensually brown  
And so they came to the Parijat tree  
squatting in the shade of its fleshy branches  
cross-legged and transverse-limbed  
All yoga was here — all the *āsans*  
every fluent stance

in the arboreal jungle  
of this single tree

Parijat tree  
the implausible extravagance  
in the outcrop of your limbs  
your retrospective moods  
the light in your aisles  
— the smile of the Bodhisattva —  
speak of timelessness / or the dawn of time  
of peace beyond the regions of the blood  
days of the tree-god and the dryad.  
Only the Fall shows  
that you too have your cycles

The pandavs left you  
as birds leave you at dawn  
sick birds that flutter and have nowhere to go  
All flight from you  
was a flight into emptiness  
and emptiness was a mental  
equivalent of their skies

*Don't forget to*

*THE BEGGAR*

He is grey stone  
with hog-bristless for hair  
he is a wound trailing fibres  
the wounds reduced to wares  
as they combine  
to make flies and the senses reel  
He is a focus  
    in the mad brain of time

He does not corrode through incarnations  
moving from one plane  
of destiny to another  
while layers on the flux of experience  
shift and change  
    like oil-patches  
        on the sinews  
        of moving water

He just sits there, while time  
wheels round him like a kite  
It is incarnations that come to him !  
He sits there, with the same  
tired light in his eyes  
    turning opaque  
Maggots, moments, worms  
crawl like changing seasons  
He is a straw Buddha with sperm

There is no change after his death  
nothing to be feared  
another warty growth  
arises in the streets  
a gumboil or a tumour  
spiked with a beard

## GRAFT

Black-cowled he sits, is he Notary or Scribe ?  
 Or a juryman of a rigged set-up ? Base thought !  
 His eyes flick away from the open law-book  
 as I cough out an amount I had quite forgot  
 the statute blurs to palimpsest, and hence  
 this dissertation on the buyer and the bought

He doesn't have to wear a gargoye-grin  
 he may not be given to liquor, females, betting  
 he is handsome, suave and yet a family man  
 his wife thinks this is overtime he is getting

You may adulterate oils, make tablets out of chalk  
 sell meat turning maggots, fish turning stale  
 switch sawdust for jute, at the worst of times  
 the right buck at the right time tips the scales

To legalize a bastard you've to bribe the priest  
 — the catechism also has its price —  
 he'll wed you to a turk or a Rabbi's daughter  
 even though you may be uncircumcised

The pity is decent chaps too are corrupt  
 Those who walk hospitals with a silent tread  
 who leave the car to stop urchins fighting  
 who will not force an ailing wife to bed

men who can stand a fight, a drink, a bullet  
 a rap without squealing, not those who say 'Christ !'  
 on seeing a figleaf, frauds who observe  
 thier navels sprouting into giant flowers of vice

but good men risen from the body's swamp  
 untangled from its carnivorous weeds

having swallowed their stomachs or transcended them  
and yet the hand grasps, the nails gouge, somewhere a socket  
bleeds

With extorted fruit the belly doesn't turn  
to fire. The swift bacterial spread  
across body junctions does not always follow  
a fishy deal or an adulterous bed

And hands don't flame when they accept the bribe  
Palm-lines are impervious to change  
— fate heads for saturn, Mount Jupiter remains raised  
the lifeline extends to the elbow almost  
nine notches denote nine children — God be praised !

*DEATH BY BURIAL*

for a month past  
copper-faced hoodlums  
had been sneaking in and out  
of the Baba's grove  
smoking ganja

but when bandits struck  
and raped the daughter-in-law  
and plucked earrings  
from lacerated lobes  
torturing the mother till she pointed out  
the cash hidden in the haystack  
and made off firing far into the night  
they said nothing to the Baba  
for he was after all a Baba  
and was only halfway through  
his silence-fast

two months later  
during the dark phase of the moon  
there was an outcry as if  
hail had come down on standing harvest.  
the thieves had only one country-made pistol  
looking for all the world  
like a crooked man-made penis  
that couldn't rise to the occasion

it was a different story now  
when after the mêlée  
the burglars had been cornered  
for they were low-brow  
sprung from the feet of Vishnu  
growing out like toe-nails  
sprouting like hair on the metatarsus

pen  
fiction

— a Kalwar working country stills  
a cobbler flaying hides  
a Singhi whose totem was a blue-bull-horn  
through which a Singhi  
sucks the malady from wounds  
a Manihar who made bangles from lac  
some wretch working salt out of the earth  
and a scavenger who made a living  
carting unclaimed corpses  
    in his bullock cart

there is nothing much to distinguish  
one lathi blow from another  
the same inverted back, the same arc through the air  
the curve consummated on the cowering body  
and beneath the raining blows  
    a swarm of limbs  
    twisting like tentacles

They sewed them up in gunny-sacks alive  
but here providence, scurvy till now  
    could still intervene  
half the village could be hindu, half muslim  
enough cause for a riot !  
with half the village shouting  
    “death by fire !”  
and the other half  
    “death by burial !”

riot

*RUMINATIONS — I*

I can smell violence in the air  
like the lash of coming rain  
— mass hatreds drifting grey across the moon

It hovers brooding, poised like a cobra  
as I go prodding rat-holes  
and sounding caverns  
looking for a fang that darts  
a hood that sways  
and eyes that squirt a reptile hate  
I watch my wounds but they don't turn green  
Cross-bones I look for you !  
Death I am looking  
for that bald bone-head of yours !

But it's in flesh and flesh-tissue  
that my destiny lies  
and slowly corruption takes a hold.  
Over from the Mortuary  
comes the corpse-drift  
(Death is so soft, put it ten days in a well  
and it turns pulpy)  
Rosewater, incense-sticks, flowers  
— the relatives have done their bit  
The drift as it comes to us now  
is aroma / stench / nausea  
jostling each other !  
In the Morgue-verandah another queues up  
her nose sliced off, her lung punctured  
(It is a three-word story  
infidelity — irate husband)

Man is so pliant, adaptable. Bury him  
and he is steadfast as the earth



Burn him and he will ride the flames  
Throw him to the birds and he will  
surrender flesh like an ascetic

Rain comes clamouring down  
a blind sheet of water  
Once the blur lifts  
colours deepen, the hedge smiles  
the leaf loses its coat of dust  
the scum spills over from the pool.  
I look around for a cleansed feeling  
the kind you experience  
walking in a temple  
after a river-bath  
I cannot find it  
I have misplaced it somewhere  
in the caverns of my past

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*RUMINATION — II*

If only it had come  
surging in the loins  
I would have kicked it  
(kicking myself in the process)  
and after a frenzy of self-flagellation  
mastered it through sheer cussedness

But this sudden flush, this yearning  
cannot be sweated out  
Suddenly memory hatches eyes  
expressions flow down the river of her face  
and the river of her body  
Expressions not merely in the eyes  
but in the fingers, in the feet  
in the movement of an arm  
Gestures become words, words gestures  
the turning of her head, that smile  
even those words of her  
become adjuncts to her body

Memory comes, smelling strangely of her  
Suddenly I find the very tang  
the mood, the very darkness  
of her roots snaking towards me

In the bedroom I still insist  
on kohl, eye-pencil, flesh  
The one I mate with now  
is like an afternoon loaded with sun  
— open mouth perpetuating laughter  
open thighs perpetuating sex  
She sleeps — she always does sleep  
after the act, this new one

My head cupped in my hands, I rest  
star-gazing through the window  
looking back over the summers for her  
Sleep would be futile, I know  
for I cannot dream away  
    this posthumous passion

*RAILROAD REVERIES**during a cold wave*

My limbs remind the crippled that I am whole  
My coat, my scarf, remind the poor I am warm  
My love reminds the starved ones I am loved  
am I a louse ?

I prod the fire-coals, rake the shadows  
the headlight as it beats cyclopean  
blinds the rail track  
scares the shadows

A greasy doubt shares my bed  
its edge astounds me in the morning

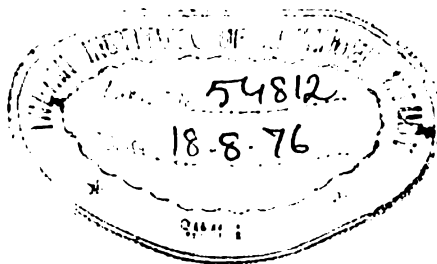
Assurance is a premise  
                    of a bygone birth  
that cannot carry me to root  
On either side they wait  
eyes that have not seen  
even scarecrow dreams  
A girl huddling into herself  
searching for a warmth which is not there  
wind and beggars whining  
as a windscape is humanised by stragglers  
Arthritic fingers holding tight to a tea tumbler  
insides fluttering at the steaming contact

A landscape of distance  
of meaningless milestones  
                    crouching on the flanks  
swallowed in the dust and the express-smoke  
The sad-eyed bitch upon the platform  
kicked about by urchins doesn't squeal  
head drooping, eyes bored, she walks away

The blind boy with his begging can  
senses my stone-eyes, my hostility  
impersonal and anonymous  
directed more against the weight of time  
    age piled on age  
        layers of black slag  
            frozen to an iron shadow

But anger is a strategam that fails  
as I toy with a sweaty coin,  
blind, copper symbol of my remorse  
But the boy has passed me  
It would lack dignity  
chasing him now  
to foist a coin on him  
    Instead I watch  
the mica in the dust here  
the wind that whips it turns telluric  
abstract and brittle  
like a crumbling theory

Tomorrow I detrain  
A bed-bug and a greasy doubt  
share my berth  
I have to live with them till morning





## A WRITERS WORKSHOP REDBIRD BOOK

Saffronbird / transcreation

Greybird / criticism

Greenbird / fiction

Bluebird / drama

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### CORRECTIONS

p. 29 line 13 : for "were" read "where"

p. 29 line 24 : for "limps" read "limbs"

p. 43 lines 17 & 22 : for "lamps" read "lambs"

p. 45 line 18 : put inverted commas after "impalpable"

p. 46 line 17 : for "tramped" read "tamped"

p. 63 line 28 : for "rhymes" read "rhythms"

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## WRITERS WORKSHOP

WRITERS WORKSHOP was founded in 1958. It consists of a group of writers who agree in principle that English has proved its ability, as a language, to play a creative role in Indian literature, through original writing and transcreation. Its task is that of defining and substantiating the role by discussion and diffusion of creative writing and transcreation from India and other countries.

Discussions are held on Sunday mornings at 162/92 Lake Gardens, Calcutta 45, India, and diffusion done through a series of books issued under the WORKSHOP imprint. A complete, descriptive check-list of more than 200 publications is available on request.

The WORKSHOP is non-profit and non-political; it consists of writers sympathetic to the ideals and principles embodied in creative writing: it is concerned with practice not theorising, helpful criticism not iconoclasm.

The WORKSHOP publishes a bi-monthly journal, The Miscellany, devoted to creative writing. It is not a house journal; as a rule it gives preference to experimental work by young and unpublished writers, its two chief criteria for selection being high imaginative awareness and mature technique. Established writers appear in its pages if their work meets those standards.

One can become a member or an Associate by written application to the Secretary, which requires the support of two members and approval by majority on committee. Members are writers with published work to their credit. To be an Associate requires agreement with the aims and objects of WRITERS WORKSHOP, active interest in creative writing, and a willingness to lend practical assistance to WORKSHOP activities. Subscription to The Miscellany automatically confers Associate membership. Further details are available from the Secretary, P. Lal, at the WORKSHOP address: 162/92 Lake Gardens, Calcutta 45.

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