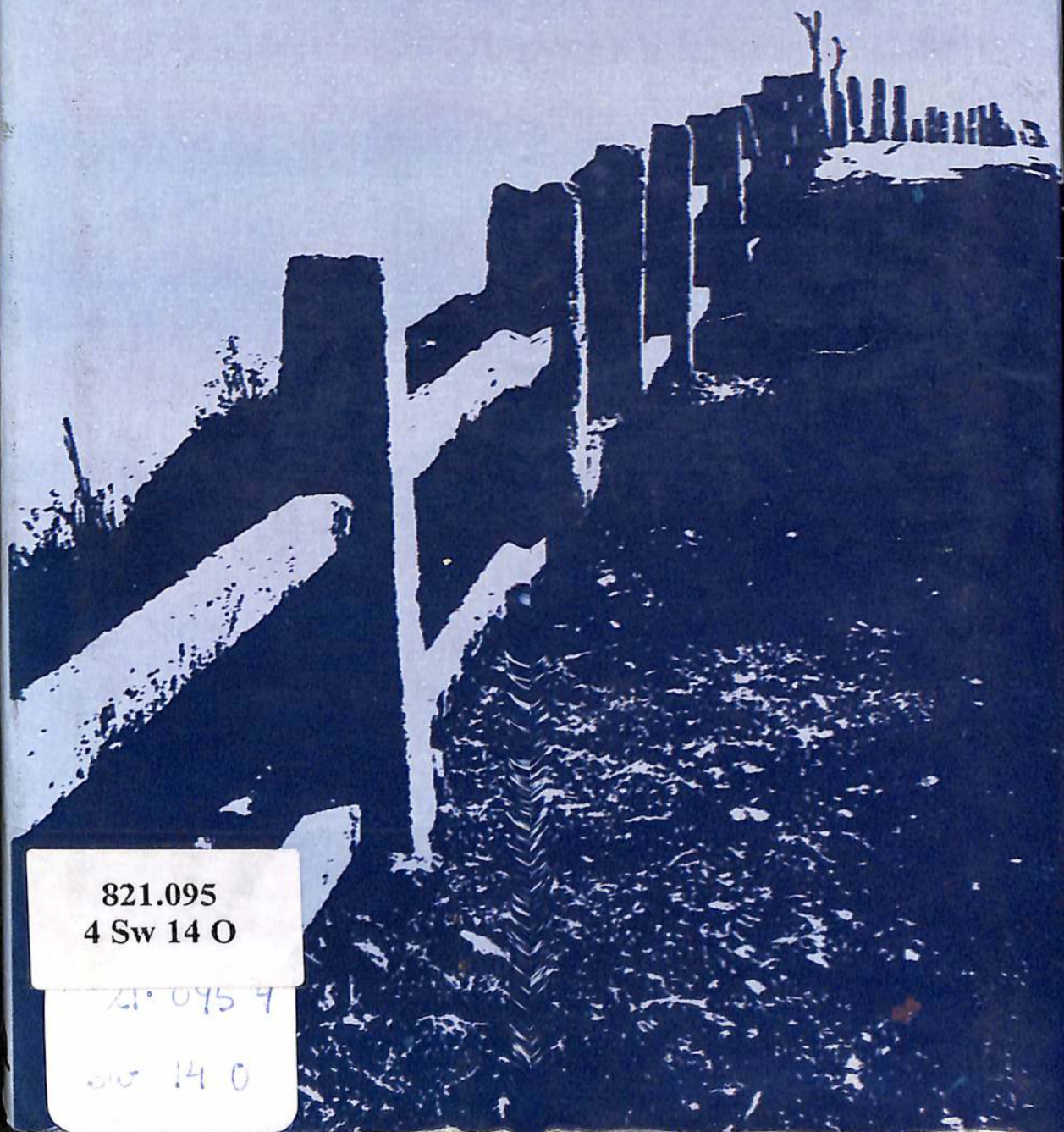


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# Once Back Home

RABINDRA K SWAIN

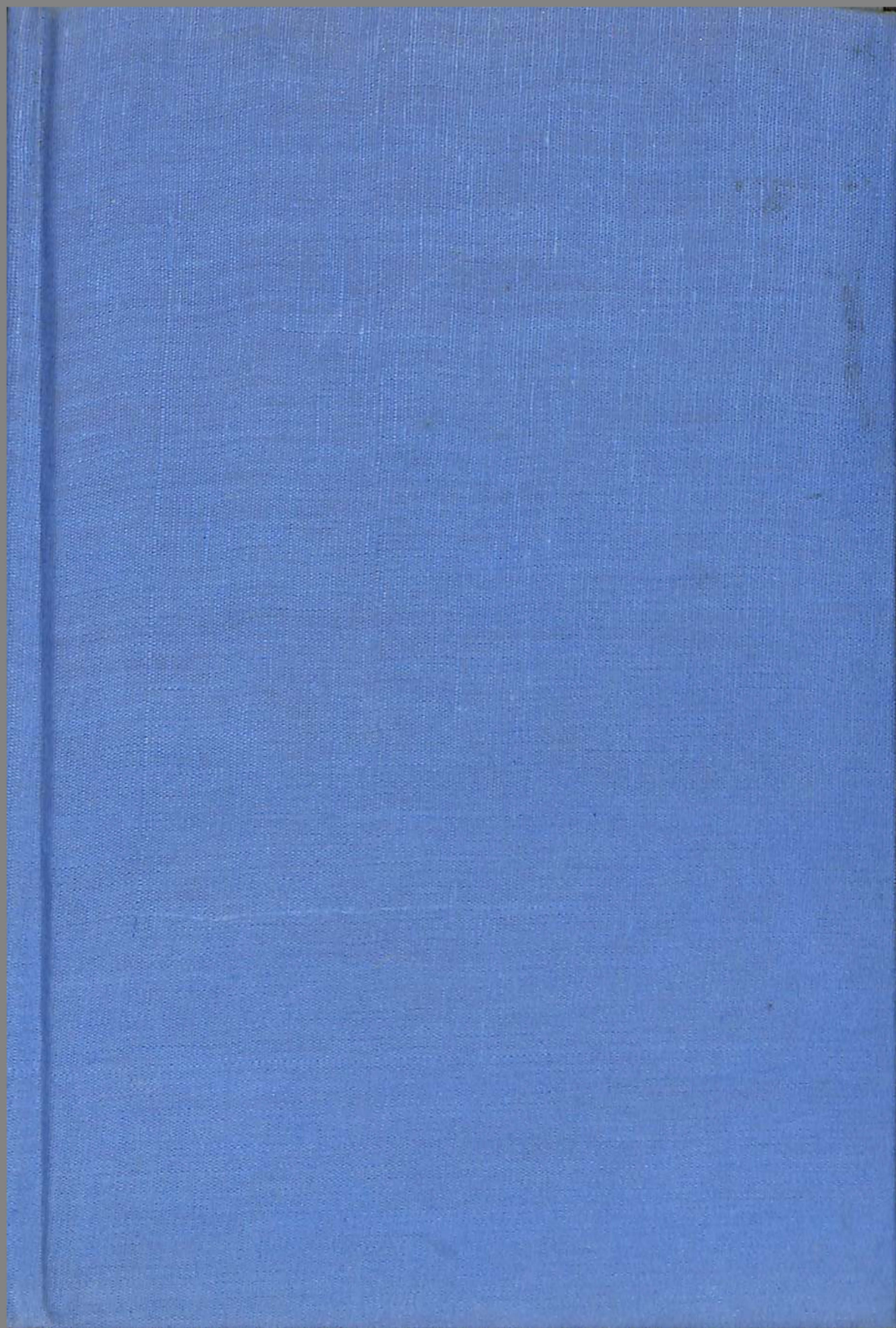


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# ONCE BACK HOME

RABINDRA K SWAIN



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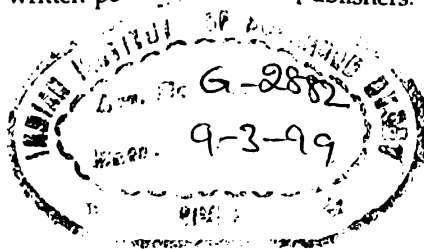
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"Son To Mother"  
"Just Like That"

*The Independent* : "Rumours of Rain"

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*New Quest* "This Is No Place For You To  
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## MORNING TEA AT MANU'S PLACE

Manu does not play games  
with words. He sculpts  
them in the way Tarkovsky does  
and he believes with Cezanne that  
with each work an artist  
risks his life. Standing close  
to him one can overhear the words  
being hammered against his bone's anvil.  
And, so, it is only his bones  
that clap if you hear him laugh  
when told of this artefact.  
The bull raging in the dark  
of his mind comes charging  
against the anthill of your kind  
of apprehending his reality.  
But when he speaks he is so mild,  
with such a contagious smile:  
you see, Rabi, your moon-faced  
words, or God knows what,  
crawl like your baby  
to tuck her face in your sleeve  
as you have wished them to be  
and grow there, on their own,  
over the time, as in a reader's mind.

## STALKS OF LOTUS

It is ridiculous to raise a fence  
around the steps, but that's it.  
Raising a prayer from the graves  
of lips or a flower from the bud  
of a slit belief is how  
it relates itself to life,  
true or fictional. Admit,  
in the fence you have a plinth  
deeper than an azure despair.  
You have made your steps auxiliary  
with the gravels of slow hurt.  
Each step, into bone's corridor.  
Traces of light stale at each end  
of the tunnel. What's dark  
if it is seen, and life ?  
What is a fence if it is not  
like a palm feeling for another  
on the float of a last breath  
that suddenly turns its face north  
and blank, imparting to it the substance  
of a lung to close upon  
the night enveloping its lawn—  
lotus stalks from the navel  
of mud, or of a dwarfish god ?

## THEY TOO ARE CALLING

The smell of crackers and rubbers  
assails the sighs held tightly  
in the concise form of a house, unlit  
since you have been in doubt  
of its occupants' whereabouts.  
The children shout, a few cry,  
your luxuriating in pain  
withholds the moments of explosion  
and sinking of the roads under the tall deodars.  
One profits nothing from the Bhubaneswar nights.

This Diwali night you will be awake.  
It will keep playing with your fingers  
closing in vain to clasp the emptiness,  
while the ghee-wicks on the window-sills  
burning by itself for sometime  
will have been extinguishing.  
Maybe, it will send you sleep-walking.

Wherever you go they will ask you the path  
leading to the forgetting of the past;  
every corner will hide a *thing* for you  
as your mother used to say and do  
when you returned home from  
the playground or from the school.



Here you learnt first what it is  
to keep the oil-lamp burning  
through the epileptic nights.  
They will not reveal to you  
how they came to be the ones  
to ignore your steps and voice  
and how they can slip coolly without wishing.  
In vain you pace the space  
of black top mutterings in sleep  
for they are made of  
the bones of your longings.  
And they too are calling,  
like this night.

## FALLING INTO PLACE

Too long you have been deep in it,  
your legs clogged in the slime  
of its flitting outskirts.  
No neon glares here on the skins  
glued to the afforested sleep.  
Rain-skimmed dust lies next  
to the road rushing to the door  
of the shut house of your imagination.  
Neighbours are clouds on distant horizons.  
They never miss you thinning into whispers.  
You only peel off the onion layers  
of a son's growing into the father  
of a daughter. Even this hide-out  
has no core, no border; only a transparency  
across the distance between the two eyes,  
a distance that traverses itself  
like an upset sunset.  
Once you are a father, you know  
the paths will have voice  
and the birds silence,  
and your shouting at your wife,  
everything will fall into place  
with the first incomprehensible words  
issuing from your daughter's mouth.

## FRESH WATER FISH

There you have gone wrong,  
there too loud and strong and  
above all you have given up  
your mother tongue, they say.  
How do you justify yourself?  
Your roots are not in the air,  
as you would make them believe.  
Winds blow from those directions only  
as they should. How do you acquire  
alluvial earth for your feet ?  
Won't your feet sink in its mire?  
You put your lotus-leaf feet  
on water surface and declare,  
this is how you stand in your world  
and soothe yourself with the reflection  
that goes rippling and playing  
like fish in the fresh water  
at the very estuary of your mind.

## THAT SECRETIVE, HIS WORLD

The beginning of the day  
it was. A boy of twenty-six  
was on the way home  
down from MDR 16. At the village's  
entrance, the cemetery, sad looking  
pulled down by the bones, the sort  
of face his mother can not bear to see.

His journey, always  
the return one.

As the temple bell rings from behind  
the cemetery, he keeps to his self's edge  
and lets the pious womenfolk pass by  
with the cane baskets in their hands;  
the baskets always full of flowers and belief,  
the temples always facing east.

As for himself,  
the tight sandal strap  
won't let his peasant feet come out.  
He manages with a bow and promises himself  
to turn up next morning  
at the temple door  
with his heart's full expanse  
of a baby lily at dawn  
and with his parents' prayer for him,  
acquiescent now.

Once home,  
he is assured of the assylum  
from the wrath of his stars  
and another autumn  
to be involved with  
while the immense fingers of rain  
go on caressing the green paddy field  
on the plain.

## A MORNING WALK

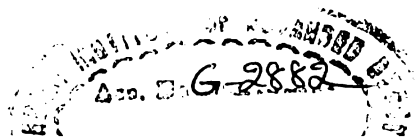
A man on the wrong side of his forties  
and in a blue T-shirt hurriedly walking  
with the sheer confidence of one  
who knows where does the road lead him to,  
a young couple swept away  
in the cauliflower-shaped clouds  
of their love-making the last night  
and a father in wait for the school bus  
yawning by the roadside with his third child  
tell for sure, this morning has a definite past.  
Or, nearly similar ones. Say, today  
is thursday and an old widow sprinkles  
cow-dung-mixed water on her courtyard.  
Seeing her bare hands rendering the world  
superfluous, you wonder if this morning  
could ever be yours. The road grows faceless  
as the day begins to get liquidated  
into the clang of milk cans, the cycle-bells,  
the dragging of slippers and the blaring  
of the tape recorders. Steadfastly people burst  
into the day as do the stars into an evening sky.  
This morning tends to promise you a past  
you could have a decade ago  
when you had not availed of a precocious sleep  
flushed with a lack of threatening dreams.  
You get down from the road  
and walk towards a ground, newly cleared,  
only to be lodged with the bricks  
of multi-storeyed buildings tomorrow,  
only to be the burial grounds  
of children's bones of contention :



Khokho, Kabadi and cricket balls.  
Your bowed head and slow steps  
are taken in by the designs  
of snails on the nail-deep wet sands.  
As you keen over them, the sound  
of a jet enters your horizon,  
fascinated as you have always been  
by it, you look up, this time  
from your heart with no one around  
to catch you watch, into the sky.  
Long after the jet has left,  
and you have not turned your eyes yet,  
a realisation faintly dawns upon you  
and assumes its character in slow proportions:  
this is the loveliest morning you ever remember.

## THIS KARTIKA PURNIMA

Thus, on a fullmoon night in November  
the wind was gentle at the beginning.  
Everyone felt home,  
the oldest one young.  
She was in her travails  
and we kept vigil all night long  
while the moon was seeking its full form.  
Early in the morning  
everyone would take a cold dip  
and wash a year's sin,  
would, once more, imitate  
his ancestors' maritime whim  
setting adrift paper boats on branched waters.  
The hand that mocks its immitation  
enjoys to imagine  
how the wand has lost its magic.  
Late at night  
as all went to sleep  
the wind was exactly as it should be.  
Before the morning  
paper boats on puddles, ponds,  
canals and rivers,  
placed on them betels and candles  
burnt or put out.  
In the morning a daughter  
was born to us but not just  
to our expectations.



## AT YOUR RETURN

You returned, like rain in winter,  
after we thought we bade you farewell.  
At your return, our mouths forgot their prime  
function.

We kept staring at our cold feet  
as we were reminded of everything  
we wanted to forget: the familiar faces  
that have grown stranger over the years,  
the joyful youths who are now terrible to look at.  
The fence of the house beside mine  
has grown thicker with hedge and bougainvillaeas.  
I am afraid to look the other house's way.  
I do not know if that has been occupied now  
or still it smoulders with the muted cries  
of the girl raped and asphyxiated by her own friends.  
Her fate, like that of dark, truncated valley,  
laughs at the behind of our rough-edged anxieties  
that vulnerably lie open like our plains.  
Now, for us, your return  
is as much a threat of squelching in fate  
as a reassurance to live with each violent jerk  
and to get the dark of our souls acquainted  
with the world of the owls and to prepare us  
to receive all of your kinds  
in a language of all the eternal returns  
that beckons all the lost sailors back to their shores  
and all the rampaging soldiery back to the folds of  
buds.

## ALL THE WAY

Except for some ponds of lily,  
mostly buds, mostly maroon or green,  
all the way it was the paddy field  
yellowing to the farmers' yearly pride.  
They sat on the ridges like storks,  
their gaze praising the God's bounty.  
You float past them as would  
the harmless clouds in this winter.  
The sun was setting over the drying  
river, Kathajodi. You could not bring  
yourself upon the sad look of mudflats.  
Only the river in full excites you  
and if it is a fullmoon night  
you are nothing but a boat swirling  
upon a vortex, eager to be swallowed.  
Before the moon was up in the sky  
you left the bank only to be unnerved  
with the sight of the dead body of an  
old woman roped on a chair and carried  
amid deafening drumbeat and ululations,  
her head violently dangling in the air.  
The lilies, now some in full bloom,  
could hardly put down your dread and gloom.  
Entering your alley and finally the house,  
as you looked back, your gaping eyes caught  
all the way you had covered  
littered with fried paddies  
and coins of small denominations.

## GRASPING MOON et al

(After visiting Regional Art Exhibition 1990 at  
Rashtriya Lalit Kala Akademi, Bhubaneswar)

The rain water passes over the sewers.  
The lightning still flashes its outline

rhythmically revealing the stranded clouds  
formed into pools. They are in wait, as though,

for your slender breath to be dissolved.  
When the rain first danced on the street

you watched it holding your breath. It's  
since then been waiting to be released

from the sting of blue—engulfing two  
babies grasping moon, lotus buds et al,

a pair of shoes and a walking stick on a desolate road,  
a voice alive yet with the wrinkles mounting on  
forehead,

the pains of those, huge like rhinos',  
nobly glued to terracotta or hewn wood

make you forget all the little woes  
you fervently need and acquire to move

your greed amid the hush of tar and trees  
to come to terms with the world in which you live.

## THE WAY BACK HOME

Go away, disappear  
as the fateline from my palms.  
The city I live in smacks  
of an absence of smoke billowing up  
from the low-thatched roof-tops.  
Do not smell of guilt  
to have left me as the silt  
of all our mothers' unfulfilment.  
Do not tremble  
watching me sit under the banyan tree,  
my hands trying to disentangle me  
from its roots. And don't you worry  
to have dropped me behind. Pick up  
your favourites. Decide your place.  
Let me go my way and ask everyone  
I meet every street  
their names, their well-being and how  
inextricably they are entwined round my steps.  
If they answer, it must be in your voice  
and if they fail to, then, they must  
be the shadows of your desires.  
Then I will collect my steps  
and remove your face from every  
compound walls, from every hoardings  
in this city of the deserting birds  
and yet, I will make sure, I have sown  
the seeds of mustard to burst into gold  
when I am home.



## SON'S EARTH

Come tear as the tear of a mother  
whose only child, a son, has been battered before her ;  
come tear with the strength of the last drop  
and go flooding the distance  
between the son and the father;  
come tear as an answer to the subterfuge of blood.

You shed your tear ceremoniously, son;  
let each drop of it promise an explosion  
of seeds and thunder; each drop the lamentation  
over the murders you have committed down to these  
years:  
your conscience, your instinct, your urge.

What city is this if it has not  
briefed you on its rhapsodic convulsions ?  
As a nightmare, you inhabit it.  
Each time it has subverted your poerty  
you have gone past its lanes and by-lanes  
as tear spilling over the shrunken eyes and shrivelled  
doubts  
to outlive synthetic dark and dubious droughts.

Come tear  
when the mother is no longer a mother but only a  
body  
hanging dead from the taut rope of her relief;  
her tear turned pearl on her cheeks  
as the last sign of the clairvoyant life  
she had lived on the earth of her son's belief.

## DIWALI AT HOME

This room  
where I write this poem  
is of D 4/2, Rental Colony.  
Here it is one door opening not to let things  
overflow.  
Here another to overturn the pot.

Here I pick up the thread  
that I failed and dropped in my village.  
That was then  
the new moon night of Diwali.

Entering the village  
across the cemetery by the mangrove,  
my steps could not relate themselves  
to her dark.  
I stumbled upon that path  
which was once studded  
with the stones and sticks that I threw at  
those ripe mangoes challenging my hands.

Once I was with her festival of light  
I forgot the dark I came across  
and all that I sought  
to write.  
That night,  
as we put out the raised, lit bundles  
of jute-cane in earth,  
we prayed for light  
on the way back home for our forefathers

as they had come with their eyes shut.  
While the members of my family were content  
with their long awaited sleep  
I kept vigil  
and the dawn filled my hands with  
an orange of a sun,  
its core empty.

My village, I find, now fails me.  
Once with her, my love is confused.  
I fail to know where I belong to.  
The smell of the ripe  
paddy field, of the drying hyacinth  
in pond, of the just upturned sod  
baffles me like a child  
who is asked to take one for his choice  
from a host of equally lovable toys.

It has been a fortnight  
since I went home.

Unless  
I am back to this room  
I cannot know  
where my fountainhead is  
and where my estuary.

This river  
defies any flow.

The solidity of this room  
concretizes my need,  
gives me the properties of water.

Even the Diwali, her rites  
not of fire and water, but  
of light and dark  
seeks in me a distance  
for intensity  
and to raise around it  
not walls but cliffs  
out of the corners of the eyes.

My words are flattened and levelled  
to the ground  
as this room has made of me  
with its windows looking out to the hills.  
Daily my eyes scale its height.  
Daily my hand raises the pen  
only to be disdained.

Always those hills have dwarfed my words  
as this room has dwarfed my being;  
my words always seeking hoods over them,  
the words that make  
as much passage for my evanescence  
as traps for my steps.

## SWIMMING ACROSS THE VILLAGE POND

The swimming across the village pond was so lucid  
it was almost like a bird drifting in the sky  
with its folded wings.

Again and again I go back to its banks  
to reassure myself that it's not a recurring dream  
and that really I swam across it not once  
but many, many times when I was a child.

And that childhood, I remember, is not far off.  
It is only there behind me  
like a page turned back on the wall calendar.

But once on its bank, I get more confused  
if an innocuous snake sails from beneath the hyacinth  
or a dry, lone banyan leaf  
perched on still water gets violently rocked  
as the naked children splash into it and disappear for  
a while.

If at this noon in the approaching summer I can not  
make sure  
that I also once belonged to the world  
under the surface of the pond, I will never be able to  
do so  
when I walk back on its surface like a water bug.

## THE END OF SUMMER

It was the festival of fertility;  
the end of summer. The earth  
was in her period. She wouldn't  
be ploughed or let anything be chopped  
that ever belongs to her.

The entire womenfolk  
lay in their festive silence;  
menfolk hibernating, as if,  
in the corners of their houses  
for the rain playing over there

with the red lady bugs in the grass  
to come to their adorned doors and bathe  
the ploughshares, smeared with turmeric,  
poised for worship.  
The soil seemed to prepare itself

and the unfelt bodies of the girls  
in rope-swings swooped down the earth  
with the innocence of baby hawks.  
The mothers, thrilled looking at them,  
are scared at the next, thinking

of the years lying ahead of them  
folded in their sari-ends. The fathers  
are oblivious to anything but the earth  
to soften with rain and the plough-blades to gleam  
in the furrows where their seeds are to lie.



## RUMOURS OF RAIN

Because there are only rumours of rain,  
because the unanimous prayers of the rock-hardened  
hills  
do not pierce the ears of the sky,  
the gods are a lie, and barrier-free is my mature  
illusion  
that there must be a monsoon somewhere around us  
to be born.

The acres of our expectation have been parched since  
long though,  
though the crops promise no signs of juice in them till  
now,  
there seems to be no end to the peacock-dance  
of the naked children to the eager appearance  
of false clouds in the corners of our tear-swollen eyes.

Where is that river to well up at our beckonings,  
to reach out to our feet and irrigate the fallow fields ?  
Waiting is no king of words to those sun-burnt  
shoulders  
who have learnt to live with the absence of things.  
What is there under the sun must show up by itself,

or perish before we come to know of it. Our belief  
intensified like boredom must open into purple  
passions  
of motion and what must flow must have the  
properties of water;  
water like blood inside the veins, and veins as canals,  
in the same fields where lies an aroma of absent  
monsoons.

## THE LAST WINTER

The last winter was just  
a gust of cold wind.  
Like a shivering running down the spine.  
Like a lightning delirious to be extinct.  
We could not get ourselves wherefrom  
to start with. Even we could not smell  
it on the grass. Even it did not promise  
the spring we stand facing.  
One feels so feverish with the breeze !  
The children keep to the doors  
and the lovers on the road are a rare sight.  
It is only the park which is crowded.  
They are only the parents, extremely panicky.  
If the girls are about  
they move like a shoal of fish.  
The leaders in the public meetings  
too soon cut short their speech.  
Even in the dead of night the young  
couples skip up orgasms, as does  
my bird-watcher friend at the outskirt  
of the city in cocking up his ears  
for the call-notes. Even the birds are  
restive on the grass or in their nests, yet  
wierdly silent. Suddenly  
the man shut up in his room  
hears his pen stop scratching.  
He leans back on the chair  
and throws his hands down in resignation  
while the rim of the vacancy before his eyes  
starts glowing fluorescent with blood.

## ANOTHER WAR IS OVER

It would be a year we stayed out,  
made no pact  
or impact on what we wished to  
but could not do  
or moved further east  
towards which all our rivers run  
or temples face.

Only we have imagined our steps  
to move with the dignity  
of a whale, or at least  
strikingly similar: sudden  
break of silence, a long breath  
and resuming mistakes.

It is difficult to inhabit a place always  
or to live with anyone else,  
but painful to keep pace with steps.

At the back of the buildings  
the sussurant afforestation plants  
where you love to enter with the comfort  
of kicking idly a select chip  
only to awake to a sunburst of realisation  
of a war being already over.

## SON TO MOTHER

Today I raise this prayer for you.  
It will ferry you across the Brahmaputra.  
Don't you ask yourself there  
how long does it take to lose sanity  
standing erect on the border lines, Pradeep.

For you have severed everything that is yours  
and left just a streak of memory : mother.  
You forget that you owe her a drop of tear.  
Her wailing songs have no match here.  
She now confuses salt in water  
with the gains the world has ever stood for.

She now sits at the feet of a dilapidated wall,  
hiding the cracks in it with the fronds of her palms.  
Her look plucks flowers from the stones.  
Her fingers draw an India map on earth  
and she vaguely points at her son's place.  
She raises a fistful of dust  
and curses her fate.

Of all the things, Pradeep,  
why should she suffer all over again  
when the mothers of the poets have already suffered ?  
Unredeemably sad sons as we are,  
drifting on a sea of childhood, full of unsung lullabies,  
I wish I could console her not to cry any more,  
but I too have left my own mother behind.

## THE MAN WITH THE SICKLE

The man with the sickle  
bending over his paddy field  
has had many fullmoons missed.

This one seems to taunt him  
"how long ?" and tickles over  
the shoulders in his sleep.

The sons living in the cities  
are deciding for themselves  
the course of Devi Lals and V. P. Singhs

and scoffing at Biju Patnaik's  
waiving the loans to farmers  
and his flamboyant "son of the soil" image.

The man gathers himself in the evenings  
and listens to the country music: " how many  
pieces of bones are you made of ?"

and in the end, relates to the menfolk  
of his sons' new-found happiness  
though he cannot comprehend, he admits,

their many moves. Yet, he assures them,  
when he dies, he will certainly be cremated  
in ghee and sandalwood, followed by a sumptuous  
feast.

## A ROOM ONLY HATCHES TINY SCHEMES

The room fills it up with itself.  
You could as well have not been here  
drawing on sleep its verdant contour  
while your baby repeats what you dread  
most; falling back, her head hitting  
the hard floor of your remorse fate;  
her eyes, still wet after a prolonged cry,  
prodding at you to be wiped dry.  
On TV the war-disabled babies, Gorbachev  
looking at himself unbelievably  
and the familiar rancour inside the core  
tell, no skin is ever autumnally placid.  
Your going out wears a look  
as if the room you were in has just  
hatched in your figure its eggs of discomfort.  
(The room usually shapes its being  
living in it for a long time.)  
Outside it is an open season though,  
you have no place, not even the ones  
you imagined to grow the flowers of self—  
the only thing you ever seem to know.  
You forget its name and when and how  
you came to be yourself that now takes  
you under the beige of its drifting shade  
or hides you when you stand before  
the mirror as its faceless mercury,  
or has defaced you as a stamp, illegibly.

## THESE HANDS OF MINE

These hands of mine  
can wield a knife of the bleeding look  
sharpened against the strop of stone  
with which this city I live in is built  
as deftly as they can  
strike the hammer of a blacksmith  
or whirl the creaking wheel of a decrepit potter  
who often stumbles upon his unmoulded mud.

These hands by choice is a whirlwind  
bringing together hearts distant like stars  
in a fullmoon-bathed night  
and putting upon that mountain of delight  
a garland woven out of the smell of incense  
in the temples and the smile of an autistic child.

These hands nipping off the side shoots  
from the chrysanthemums  
and extending themselves as the hands of the clock  
to the old and the broken, as stalks of lotuses  
to the hands of the blind  
can tell for sure the footprints on our conceited talks  
of a man from that of a monster;

these hands, suffering, suffer grandly  
in sometimes quietly slipping away  
to angle the fishes of legends  
at one bend of the river of our forgetting.

Though these hands are cool in collecting  
feathers of pigeons, or chips or dews of sadness  
spilled from the excited voices in the Assemblies  
or the banana skins or the rotten potatoes  
from the road, or from its unnoticed corner  
an abandoned baby, illegitimately born,

yet they also know that  
they are the forsaken ones, belonging as they  
do to the son of the Lord Jagannath  
who does not have one for Himself  
and is mute in watching with wide open eyes  
the huge stones falling from His temple walls.



## THE HAND THAT CORROBORATES

No need to ask what he is doing here, still  
for always he is with the stones and copper plates  
and chisel in his hands;  
he is the one with his place  
always in the conquered zones.

Yes, someone was needed to record the hieroglyphs  
of one's slow coming to terms  
with one's shrunk jaws of territorial self  
laid asphalt against the Eastern Ghats  
and a sleep-walking race ;

someone was again needed by his counterpart  
to superimpose his seismic move of triumph  
from the sands of Toshali as far as to  
the alluvial silts over the deltas  
of the river Vaitarani and Suvarnarekha  
with the blue of the Bay of Bengal stinging  
the Odra's black-berry eyes ;  
they were "tall, and black in colour, war-mongerers",  
fond of concubinal love

and somewhere in the yawning gaps  
of blood-thirst and penance and silence  
slipped in the name of a kingdom, Kalinga  
and since then it has been stuck  
on the palimpsest of our tongues.

Since then only flood water deposits,  
receding of seas, sailing over to Java and Sumatra  
trading with spices;  
vines of women sucking at the barely

juicy leaves of waiting; their men to come back  
with the insomnia and sea-sickness.

Left behind are the bald mountains with epileptic fits  
and on them inscriptions wounded  
by the sharp-edged rain of history  
as the neuralgic historians go on skipping  
the corroded hieroglyphs  
and reading into them their private anxieties.

And as for us, we fail to catch the mountain winds  
and blame instead those hands petrified  
moving in dark on the inner walls of the caves,  
the hands that brought the first grammar,  
the first corruption, the first distortion,  
the first corroboration to neatly cover them all.

## MY MORNING BEGINS

At the end, my morning begins:  
at the end of the unfrequented streets,  
at the end of the wee hour dreams  
at the end of the butcher's knife pushed upto the hilt,  
at the end of the practice of a raaga that comes  
floating  
like the incessant sobbing of a child  
whose mother has chosen to identify herself with the  
night.  
Soon I move deeper into my hide, like a crocodile.  
I am bit afraid to look the rising sun's way.  
All along I bear my beginning without a step ahead.  
The day sits on my shoulders like a parrot  
to be taught a lesson or two.  
I have no songs to pass on.  
How little I know of myself and of the days !  
The day has nothing to do with me ;  
we scandalise each other so well !  
The day snaps my ignorance of its being a witness  
to a massacre; the day is now a knife  
of the urchins' hungry looks plunging  
into the red of a watermelon. At the end  
the hurt watermelon rolls like a skull or a globe  
with my day stuffed inside it like the heart of a  
monkey  
who has gone for a ride on the crocodile's back  
to meet his friend's hospitable wife.

## EACH ONE'S HAPPINESS

*for Chirashree*

Only yesterday my childhood friend got married.  
His concealed happiness revealed itself  
intermittently like lightnings  
once the parched earth got doused with the first rain  
and there was the feeling of getting wet, everywhere.  
His happiness brought me to yours, Chirashree.  
Just the day before yesterday Bhaskar and myself  
talked of your poem, "I Came With All the Happiness"  
and I expressed my wonder, how could you say  
the earth has so much of longevity and smell  
the vast stretch of rice-fields bursting with  
the fragrance of its juice when not a single day  
passes that does not invite slaps on our faces  
and today itself the Chief Minister got beaten up.  
We are upset, nonetheless. And how could a lusting  
tongue  
or some million-year-old fullmoon night drive you  
naked on the isolated field of your virginity?  
I envy your glee in seeing every other thing—  
your village, as if you only have one, a river  
on its fringe rocked again with a virgin wind,  
a forlorn lover banking upon a needless future—  
as here I envy the smiling photograph of Derek  
Walcott, his chin resting over the fist, one eye closed  
on his *Collected Poems 1948-1984*. Here before  
I can move further, the low-voiced talk of the girls  
going to the school by my house seep through the  
walls  
and, then, my ears as coolly as do the feelings of  
deja vu

when I am with myself with a cup of tea or amid  
the crowds of memories. This water-flower in full  
bloom

beside the well, I think I have seen it already  
in my last night's dream, yet can't be sure,  
as I dare not say that I have seen you somewhere  
before, Chirashree, or the poem you have written  
would perhaps have been written by me sometime.  
Because I dare not face you with my dark soul  
that unconvincingly looks at everything for what  
they have become, wishing there were other ways and  
forms

for them to take, I just write this poem, instead of  
the one I had in mind, which all along its journey  
will tar the whole of the country road  
idly leading to your evershifting door.

## STEPPING OUT

It was difficult to step out though,  
you had to  
because you also believe in a day

when a letter arrives you never imagined,  
when friends are like those stones  
past all use and worship  
and family, soon a hang-up.

Your evening seeks the streets  
to be strewn with night jasmines  
while the night to have borne its zeal  
is locked up in the pockets of those ill-

fated like you heaped over the cards  
or waiting for things not really their due.

The butterflies of your dazed look  
pinned up over the walls of your room,  
table, TV and your wife's face and body;  
you wonder, how one comes out of one's pit.

You slough your worry  
as a snake does its skin  
on the earth of its forgetting  
and proceeds into another being ;  
in your case, it's again the street.

At the end, you find,  
you have been a long distance runner  
between an escalating rage  
and its slow, painful giving way to sadness.

## JUST LIKE THAT

Just like that. Four hundred  
and ninety in number, just for  
one man's craving for profit  
who prepared country liquour  
with cheap industrial spirit.  
Carrions for flies and the curious  
eyes. For the journalists  
and for the well-meaning men  
in politics. A few days back  
a tiger strayed into the city  
from the Chandaka forest  
across the river Mahanadi  
and roamed the lanes of Cuttack,  
just like that, casually  
as would any human being.  
And people seemed to be more  
in amusement than in fright.  
The tiger was caught like that;  
no need of any tranquiliser or trap.  
And yet the man who sold  
two hundred more bottles  
of BELU 100 overnight  
moves like any other free,  
righteous citizen;  
no need to play hide-and-seek  
with the clouds in the vigilants' eyes.

## BY THE WAY

*for Adil Jussawalla*

I wish I could begin these lines  
with "By the Way", dear Adil,  
yes, that casually with an ease  
even in passing that I had  
this afternoon when a flock of storks  
suddenly taking off from  
the afforested casuarinas  
revealed them to be without leaves.

It is the same ease  
that takes to wings  
and unfurls the dark within the seeds,  
the same one that brings down  
the waves from their panicky heights  
to the feet of the prancing child.

And I wish all the birds  
to get rid of their fear for us  
and build nests within  
our hands' reach  
so that I could show my daughter  
how the eggs laid there  
have the yolk of her future.  
(I won't let her touch them.  
She will grow with the habit  
of not laying her hands  
on anything that relates to  
or resembles the eggs.)



I wish my days  
were my own. Counting  
my losses, I find, I've none.  
But how could I disown  
the TV headline: five bomb blasts  
in five different trains today itself.

This leprosy has no fingers  
to point at what could have  
been its object of wrath. For,  
every shrine demands a new  
palimpsest and every being  
another height to demolish  
and another thirst to quench.

Yet how much we need it !  
Yet had we as much ease  
in yielding as in receiving  
as my daughter shows when she  
demands to see the fullmoon  
even in the new moon night,  
we could perhaps have lullabies  
in our souls to make every  
crying children asleep.

## OUR MISERABLE FATE

Your moon is not mine.  
I lost it when I was a child.  
What I remember, at best, is  
perhaps it has remained stuck up  
to the throat of the paddy field.  
Of that crescent moon, only its motif  
resembles that of today's monsoon:  
its brief appearance on our land.  
Of its expectation, the harvest  
is meagre. Now we barter our child  
for rice. And the dry fields clamour  
to be furrowed by the ploughshares  
of a deep concern; its veins  
to be the irrigating canals  
not of rich strata of quartzite.  
Now only the dark of the leaves  
of the rain-trees asleep in night,  
intermittent lightnings  
of dry wit in rhetorics  
and all filial roots buried nose-deep;  
now only the wrath of a hope  
raging against an absence  
of a field of green grass once  
studded with red, velvety lady bugs.

## HOME, NORWESTER

This is the first norwester  
like the ones years before  
coming long before the spell of summer is over.  
It reached us before it was telecast.  
Living by the sea we have come to feel  
storm is no good a plaything on street.  
It carried us home.  
But home for some of us is no longer the same.  
Home is growing its genitals of terror and fear  
at the hands that still play the same old game  
we no longer trust,  
the hands that shiver at the preening  
of the homebound birds from the east.  
With our trusts placed elsewhere  
the home finds itself on the street  
and whatever is to reach its inhabitants,  
pollens or dagger, or faults in the rock  
of filial relations, are withheld on the threshold.  
The silence, the sentry.  
Inside, the indoor plants of sadness, verily one's own,  
as the home is, though it has acquired the voice  
of a baby sleeping with his mother's nipple  
in his mouth, content and full .  
And those, like us, who have been  
deprived of the home are like those wild flowers  
trying to push their fragrance close towards the shut  
doors.  
And the home trails behind the norwester, bemused  
fidgiting to ask as to next where it should move.

## THIS EVENING, THIS WINTER

Under the pale moon, your city  
this evening. Groans everywhere  
silent as in the throats  
of flowers this winter.

It's a pity we could not make it  
and now I sleep with  
the shapes of shadows  
and death of memories.

Now it is so difficult  
to hide in the body, and  
no less it is, having lost  
innocence, to commit suicide.

## LOSING SECRETS

This is the life  
I am intended to lead:  
not to know suffering  
yet to go on being irked  
with the trivialities.

God, why don't you bare  
me and leave me on the middle  
of the street, ludicrously  
like a husband who has lost  
all his secrets to his wife.

## FATHER'S GLEE

No longer do you question,  
listening to her lisp,  
what you have been up to  
or, what there is in the dark  
of the shut eyes, afraid though you are  
of your own steps, always.  
Another season is about here and mango blossoms  
have already begun to strike your baby's imagination.  
Walking past your familiar lane  
you were suddenly baffled as to when  
you overcame the embarrassment, like the fence  
you have built around your steps, of  
not fidgeting at the crossroad  
of your just need and desire.  
Her smile revealing the dimples impels  
you not to prod at your old favourites,  
though you know nothing can be as surreptitious  
as this winter sunset.  
A leaf off the tree brushes your temple.  
You smile to yourself to have been privileged.  
And this season, you realise, seems to have a way  
with the fathers of your kind who are like fields  
lying open and low in contentment, yet  
secretive and slow in exuding warmth.

## THE TATTOOED CEMETERY

The cemetery, tattooed  
with careful digging, a clear ground of absence

A two-acre land away  
a temple yard daubed with birds' turd

fallen flowers, a threshold  
you have never crossed

At your hand the grasses  
over what you have lost

have not been so green  
Hands quiver to touch their quality

Beneath the sneaked solitude  
a lush stem stirs

an extraordinary sense of being cagey  
about a beach sprawling within

Only a cold uncertainty down the gullet  
denudes the trembling inside the seeds

in your body and as you begin to weed  
the pond in your mind, clean the dust

of the temple road, the sanity of gods  
overrides you, scattering the ash

of an unreal body in flames  
immense in not bending to the godly wind

The vultures of an end  
the pigeons of the endless beginnings

If someone is at the gate  
the other at the back of one's behind

If here is an half-burnt log  
there a cotyledon on a levelled grave;

a two-acre away, the odour  
of what you have not done at all



## BLOOD CORRESPONDENCE

The other day she gave birth to a child  
that had developed no genital.  
With its death, mother's measuring of blood  
loses count like the prayers she daily offered.  
The would-have-been-father stands like a scarecrow  
on his unjustly consolidated field, thinking how  
his brothers drew lines on blood  
and grabbed their shares like lions or vultures.  
He is uncertain whether to plough  
the offered land or shed blood.

## WHY DON'T YOU SAY SORRY

Why don't you say sorry  
when you feel like saying something  
but fail fairly largely  
and you do not know for certain why ?  
Do you think

for you there will be a time  
to crack your words like nuts  
against the stones of their obstinacy  
in not creeping into the skin  
of your unreachable hands ?

They will always be smiling at you  
as at the moon a child would do  
innocently,unable to follow  
your intended ridicule  
at nowhere,like a prayer.

While they will be prancing about  
on the raised altar of your earth,  
as to your wont  
you will be frantically searching  
the answers from their questions

and confusing your lot with their deeds  
at each reach of night and break of day  
forked like two quivering lips about to say  
sorry, if there is not a gaseous restraint  
holding the waters of your heart's open tight.

## I STAND ON ONE FOOT

History, you were denied to me.  
I never walked into a crowd  
shouting the slogan others shouted elsewhere:  
"Quit India".

I never knew the mass hysteria ;  
never did the massive land weigh on me  
like blood conquered by leukaemia.

Three preceded me,  
and nobody asked me why  
I was being born at this time  
of laying one's face down.

My doors are my borders.

I have failed like a dahlia  
coming too late in winter.

You there rusting canons pointing north  
before the blasted forts of our impeccable looking  
back,  
you, clod of earth , removed from beneath my feet,  
look, how on one leg I stand on your torso  
and with the other one in air.

I don't think you' ll ever wake up  
from your stupor, if I touch you now  
with these fingers of mine,  
for you only know how to be stirred  
with a sudden curve in the course of the wind.

# THIS IS NO PLACE FOR YOU TO BE BURIED IN

*for Jayanta Mahapatra*

This is no place for you to be buried in.  
Here you can only stand as before a gate  
like the shadow of your question to ask in;  
and the gate still unopening. Here sands are  
not tight in their structure with its close proximity  
to the brink of now buried river and even waves  
are not even in touching your feet on the shore  
while you go on standing as the last sign over  
a cemetery yet to be inhabited by the silence  
of the dead and the alive, alike; their sadness  
missing among the trees. Once here  
you will never question why the living ones  
rush to the place of the dead always, as if  
they have missed there something in their last visit.  
This is Konarka, not Cuttack, and here waves  
are panicky like children banished from their  
innocence.

This is no place for your burial.  
Here there are only sands and sands  
dragging your feet without any commitment;  
no assurances left behind like in rain the last  
isolated gulmohurs in the Bhubaneswar street.  
In the place of a river, puddles of water,  
a sea receded three kilometres into its unrealised  
depths of sorrow and the tale of tales untold  
for the last six centuries except that  
a ruinous structure of stone with filigree work  
proclaims itself as the Temple of Konarka.

Do you call it history, a lap of rest, a nest  
for all wandering birds to retreat, at last ?  
Here silence caresses the sands like casual winds  
to protect a nation in need of assuring seeds.  
Living here would make you believe that  
the dead forget their people altogether,  
that the dead need to be buried among their people,  
in their yards in order to be remembered.  
This is the place where life is the form  
in which death hides as the content  
of the happiness of a poem into the innards of which  
you have always tried to push yourself as a kitsch.

## SLANTING RAYS

You keep staring at the road  
and your eyes meet only those feet,  
the familiar ones, that drift past  
your house, chasing their own shadows.  
You have been a long time with it  
without ever thinking of bringing out  
your tortoise legs. Your hands swoop  
on the gulmohur of your summer being,  
yet do not seem to encounter  
even the light tapping of rain  
that goes on raging along the road.  
Once it's over, the road is like a tongue  
about to say something with its vapours,  
tall and slender, that billow up  
and then peter out in the air .  
A banana leaf unfurled this morning  
gets its first rent. The same chilly air  
seems to tell that the concerns of the road  
are only bare ones. Like, it eludes you  
onto it and then makes you feel  
that you are in no hallucination  
of swimming upstream to reach an estuary  
but what you stared at so long was only  
the prolongation of a mercurial moment.  
or the infinite stretch of the ball pen  
lowering upon the paper, portentous  
like the slanting rays of a sunset in one torrent.

## THE RUIN CASTS ITS PALE SHADOW AT SUNSET

Only some patchworks of cement and concrete  
done under the Endowment Act of 1905  
hold tight the disinterested gray stones.

An undisturbed hunger of seven centuries  
has already been mortar beneath the stones'  
stoic endurance of the assaults of the receding sea.

The sun over the Bay of Bengal fails to touch  
the stones' filigreed-lust lying sacrosanct  
under the settled dust. Only a stretch of silent sands

from the shallow sea to the Sun Temple at a distance.  
The scattered stones of a people's glory,  
the blue eyes stinging the stone wall and the mute  
prayer

hinting at nowhere around the temple yard,  
the bustle of picnic spots, the imported cars at the  
main gate  
and the faceless women lining on once God's path

will, sooner or later, disperse, leaving the stones  
to reek of an extinct race, a royal violence of grace  
and a sculptor-son's elegant refusal to give way to  
fate.

Late at night the god wakes from the stupor of his  
absence,  
caresses the stones to feel the human blood and sweat.  
If it pleases him, sometimes he crawls to the pedestal,  
sadly  
and measures the distance now barging in between  
him and the sea.



# MY DEATH IS A NECESSITY

## I

This poem whistling  
like the one coming across a cemetery —  
a lineage of stones.  
They didn't rise upto their expectations.  
Still I hear them addressing  
to a gathering of the deaf.

## II

This poem waiting  
for a mother-bird  
to be born.  
It's upto them  
to identify  
whose progeny it is.

## III

I am the wind knocking at everyone's door.  
Their puzzled cries  
build into my poem :  
my veins and arteries  
the tributaries of their fear.

IV

They explode soon  
as they begin to bud.  
Never have they seen  
the end of their children's game.

V

My poems ashamed,  
seeking eyes  
to hide in as tear.

VI

They can only build  
upto  
the summit.  
The crowning slab is mine.  
From there, I need to talk to the sea.  
My death is a necessity.

## THE COURSE IT TAKES

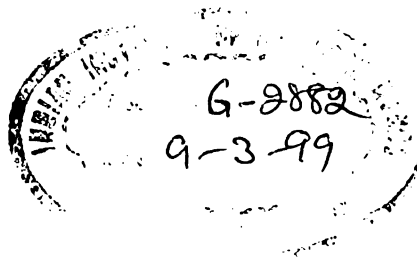
Now if I think  
I think of things not mine  
and I do not know of it  
at the time it's happening.  
I have come to it  
drifting as a sub-continent.  
I cannot wrest myself free from it:  
a dry leaf, perched on a stream  
and desperately seeking a naive bend  
I am yet to know where I am heading.  
But this much I know: this thing wafting me  
has already made me its victim.  
No longer can I ask, nor answer, questions.  
This thing runs into its kind  
of untrammelled water and wind.  
This thing now quickens its steps  
to touch the head of its shadow,  
now walks ahead of me  
playing with water;  
its mouth a dark suture.

With a sharp awareness of our everyday "things", Rabindra K Swain has created poems of real originality. The poems are filled with a sense of immediacy, as with one's initial awareness of loss, and we are able to see our own losses in terms greater than before. A poem like "Stalks of Lotus" which appeared in *Critical Quarterly* shows us *how* to see :

You have made your steps auxiliary  
with the gravels of slow hurt.  
Each step, into bone's corridor.  
Traces of light stale at each end  
of the tunnel. What's dark,  
if it is seen, and life ?

Rabindra K Swain's poems help to keep our day-to-day tensions alive.

*Jayanta Mahapatra*





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