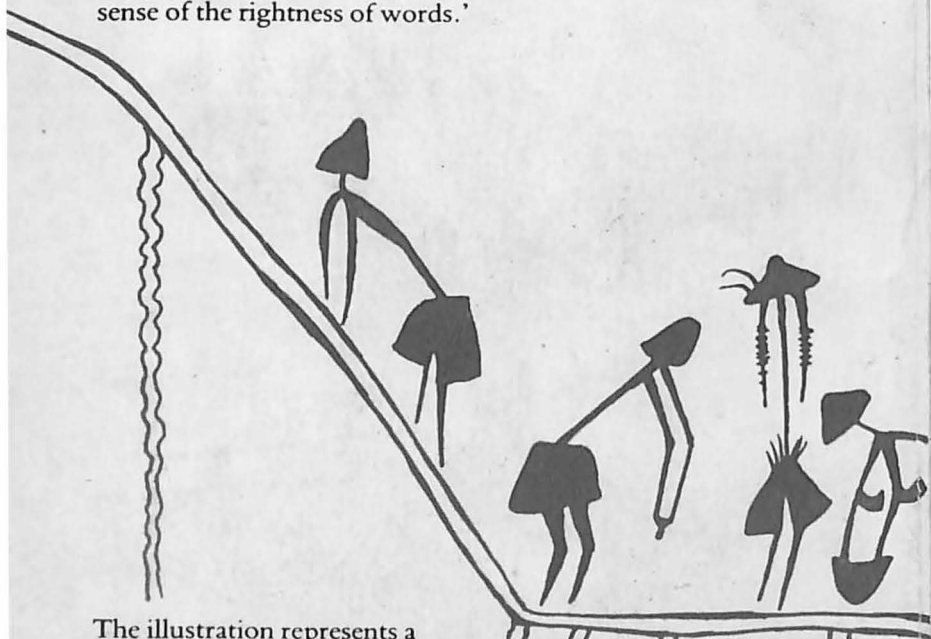


Arvind Krishna Mehrotra was born in Lahore in 1947 and teaches at the university of Allahabad. *Middle Earth* gathers together some of his finest work, hitherto not easily available. Its first two sections draw from *Nine Enclosures* (1976) and *Distance in Statute Miles* (1982), and its third is made up of new and uncollected poems written between 1972-83.

The reader will detect in this book the oscillation of Mehrotra's sensibility between surrealistic frolic and abandon, and a taut, withdrawn, and imagistic pensiveness. A rich cross-section of Indian life—landscape, moods and folklore—is caught within this oscillation.

An earlier reviewer of Mehrotra's poetry (in *Chandrabhāgā*) has said— 'Being a master of the evocative, yet concrete and beautiful image, he possesses also a purity of expression and an unfaltering sense of the rightness of words.'



The illustration represents a prehistoric Indian rock painting of the Mesolithic period. It shows people engaged in cultic activity.



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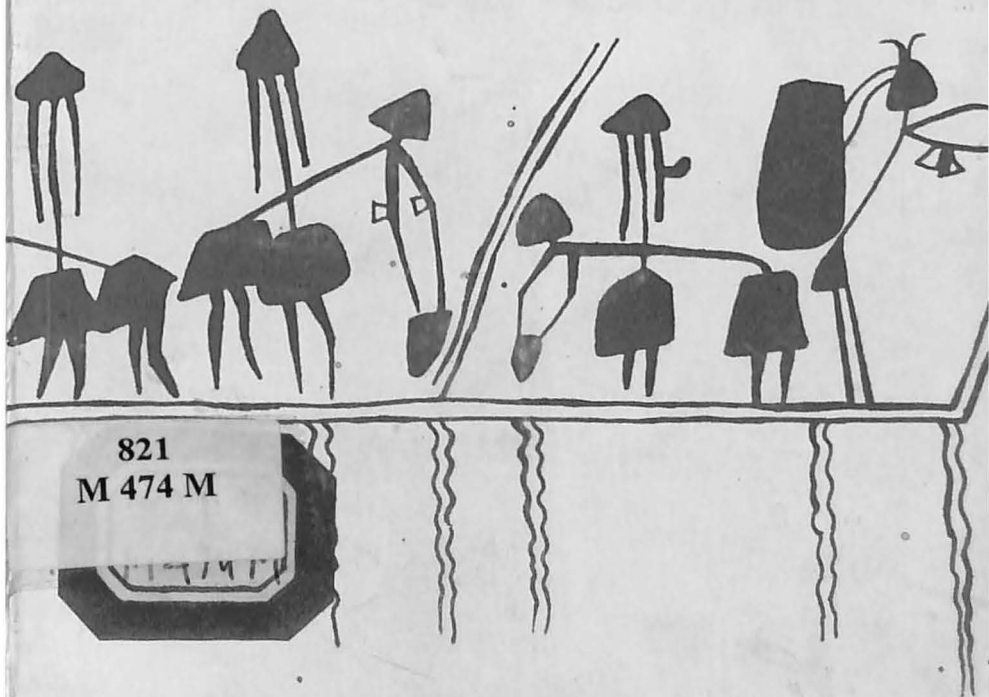
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Three Crowns

Arvind Mehrotra

Middle Earth



NEW POETRY IN INDIA

Middle Earth

THREE CROWNS BOOKS

Poetry

Sarat Chandra: *Heirloom*

Keki Daruwalla: *The Keeper of the Dead*

: *Crossing of Rivers*

Nissim Ezekiel: *Hymns in Darkness*

: *Latter Day Psalms*

Jayanta Mahapatra: *Life Signs*

Arvind Mehrotra: *Middle Earth*

R Parthasarathy: *Rough Passage*

: *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets*

A K Ramanujan: *Selected Poems*

Drama

Manoranjan Das: *The Wild Harvest*

Girish Karnad: *Hayavadana*

: *Tughlaq*

Badal Sircar: *Evam Indrajit*

Vijay Tendulkar: *Silence! The Court is in Session*

Fiction

Cowasjee and Kumar: *Modern Indian Short Stories*

U R Anantha Murthy: *Samskara*

MIDDLE EARTH

ARVIND KRISHNA MEHROTRA

Pray you, lock hand in hand; yourselves in order set;
And twenty glow-worms shall our lanterns be,
To guide our measure round about the tree.—
But stay; I smell a man of middle-earth.
The Merry Wives of Windsor, V. v.

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For
Arun and Adil



DATA ENTERED

CONTENTS

from <i>Nine Enclosures</i> (1976)	
The Sale	3
The Book of Common Places	6
Index of First Lines	13
Genealogy	15
Continuities	17
from <i>Distance In Statute Miles</i> (1982)	
Lies	21
A Letter to a Friend	22
Kite	24
Canticle for my Son	25
January	26
October	27
Engraving of a Bison on Stone	28
Distance in Statute Miles	29
The Studio	30
Where Will the Next One Come From	31
Company Period	32
New And Uncollected Poems (1972-83)	
Classification	35
The Exquisite Corpse	36
Let's Face It	37
House by the Mill	38
Bhojpuri Descant	39
The Telegram	42
The Cotton Tree	43
The Roys	46
New Golden	50
'The World's a Printing House'	51
Location	52
Disjecti Membra Poetae	53
Notes	54

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A.K.M.

From *Nine Enclosures* (1976)

.

THE SALE

I

It's yours for the price, and these
old bits have character too. Today
they may not be available.
Naturally I can't press you
to buy them, and were I not leaving
—You heard the sun choke with an eclipse?—
I would never have thought of selling.
You may take your time though, and
satisfy yourself. This is Europe,
that America, this scarebug Asia,
that groin Africa, an amputated
Australia. These five. I don't have more.
Maybe another egg-laying island remains
in the sea. You remember in my letter
I wrote of forests? They're wrapped
in leaves and carrying them
shouldn't be difficult.
This skull contains the rivers.
About that I'm sorry. Had you come
yesterday I could have given you two.
I'll take another look. Yes, I do
have a mummy somewhere; only last night
the pyramids came'
and knocked at my gate for a long time.

II

Would you mind if I showed you
a few more things now yours?
Be careful, one river is still wet
and slippery; its waters continue to
run like footprints. Well, this is
a brick and we call that string.
This microscope contains the margins
of a poem. I've a map left, drawn
by migrating birds.
Come into the attic.

That's not a doll—it's the photograph
of a brain walking
on sand and in the next one
it wears an oasis-like crown.
I must also show you a tiger-skin
that once hid a palace.
On one roof you'll see
the antelope's horns,
on another the falling wind. These round
things are bangles, that long one
a gun. This cave is the inside
of a boot. And here
carved wheels turn through stone.

III

I wish you had asked me earlier.
The paintings have been bought
by a broken mirror
but I think I can lead you
to a crack in the wall.
I've a skeleton too.
It's full of butterflies
who at dawn will carry away
the crown.
I've also a wheelchair to show you;
it belonged to my uncle
and one day the hook
that hangs from the sky
touched him. If you open the cupboard
you'll see his memory
on the upper shelf and two books
now yours:
Ruskin's Lectures on Art
and *A Short History of English Literature* by Legouis.
I'll take another minute.
Can you climb this ladder?
Well, that's the sun and moon
and with this candle you
work the clouds. I'm sorry I was
short of space

and had to pack the Great Bear
in this clock. Oh them,
let them not worry you.
They're only fisherman and king
who will leave soon as one's bait
is ready and the other's dominion.

THE BOOK OF COMMON PLACES

I

The kiln isn't far from here
And in the east
A little travelling remains.
My companions are a thimble,
A bottle of water,
A first aid kit,
Tobacco,
One page from a logbook,
And five directions
In each hand.

In the square
Two dolls
Are being tried.
I seldom begin a journey
On a Thursday.

II

The eyes don't look
At all well.
They smell like exhausted tea leaves
And drop objects.
Lying in bed, I hear
The rocker
Hit the same spot on the wall
And wonder what the rain feels
When it is measured
In inches.

In the photograph
Everyone wears a striped
Blazer, and tennis racquets
Are crossed like knives
In the foreground.

III

Land
And sea routes,
Trade winds
And cold deserts,
Inscriptions
On tombs and coins,
Settle down
Like particles of salt.
My dreams have the colour
Of early morning.

The old lioness
Stands in the window
And waves
At a Sunday crowd.
A child starts crying.

IV

The white room
Is tied like a bandage
Around me.
This was a quiet
Neighbourhood
Known only to journeymen
And migrant saints
When the inventors
Of steam
Moved in.

Dressed in his cap
And belt
The beggar of the city
Walks down the road
Like a dying planet.

V

In a glass jar
The unnatural foetus
Is preserved
Like a find.

My hand is cursive
And illegible
In winter.
The Pied Piper returns
To his cave
In the hills.

The thief
Admires the house
From outside
And leaves without stepping
On cobbles.

VI

The bat
Came in
Through the window.
I watch it dying
In equal pieces
And don't have the strength
To touch
The formation of its wings.
My voyage
Has just begun.

The little boy
Explains
Why more and more birds
Refuse
To cross the equator.

VII

The widow next door
Lives off her trained
Parrot.
It reads the future
And tells you when
To avoid it.
At night
She dances in the trees

And fills the air
With abuse.

The decorated general
Is alone
In his tent;
The pyres burn
Like new volcanoes.

VIII

From outlying districts
Goldsmith
And tanner
Arrive by boat.
We sit around
Talking of simple
Believable things;
I show them my new pair of ampersands
And notice they're singing
Last year's songs.

The fish
Wishes it were
An illustration
In a book
Of symbols. '

IX

The letter-box
Is the captain of my street
And a good acquaintance
Of the lighthouse.
Once in a while
They get together
And change
The altitude of stars.
The cold current turns red,
The warm current blue.

The soldier, returning
From furlough, checks
His whistle and mug;
His son learns how to count
By watching trains.

X

Five shipwrecks make
One sailor.
I brought home the first pigeon
I shot
And hid it
Under a flowerpot.
A body of ants
Trooped by.
After this incident I took
Interest in limestone quarries.

For three months
The boats
Stay close together
And clouds
Huddle above the Arabian Sea.

XI

My childhood
Wanders off into the family tree,
And the tree gets lost
In the North.
I'm told we followed the tracks
Left by none in particular,
The horse
Was our animal,
And once in the plains
We settled among rivers.

Both prisoner
And guard
Notice
The squirrel's
Transparent leap.

XII

The shadowless tribesmen
Easily picked out the gaps
In the procession
Of mountains;
Then a few ships
Filled with white traders
Swung round the Cape
And sighted the west coast.
They redid the land
From sea to sea.

The numismatist
Calculates
The age of a coin;
The pigeons feed
From an old newspaper.

XIII

The simplest shapes remain
And it's time
To praise
What is left of my city:
Pleaders circling above,
A line of potters come to an end.
These are my incidents.
I depend on the rag-and-bone-man
And know nothing
About architecture.

Yesterday
All the rare lines
In the book
Were traded
For common ones.

XIV

Not even the nine of diamonds
Can match
The queen of spades' cruelty.
The ageing scholar finds
His last book
Buried in the first.
I have one
More superstition,
It has to do
With custard-apples.

The clown removes
His makeup
While the trapezist
Stands
On air.

XV

She is about
To thread the needle
When a yellow butterfly distracts her.
I go upstairs,
Study the map, and move
The field-guns
Near a clump
Of trees.
My toys
Are safe for children.

The artillery
Stops at the door
And turns back;
The ants
Quickly go over the horizon.

INDEX OF FIRST LINES

I

She is snake, she is wind, she is
Leaf, her cry is a knock
On the door and I let her enter.
Her face is like paper
On which something has been written
And erased many times. The door closes.
She sits in that armchair, leans
Forward, and gives me a ring of white hair;
She wants me to keep it
Till she calls again.
It's half-past three in the morning
And I'm still awake; the wedding band
Stops playing for a while; greenness
Returns to the walls.
Old woman, how can I be
Astonished by sunlight when it breaks
So evenly? A condemned building
Cannot lean on its shadow.

II

She enters through a door-
In the kitchen,
I pretend I'm asleep.
She sits at the foot of my bed,
I notice her hands
Resemble her father's. It's past eleven.
The sun has risen despite the rain.
The birds get up
But stay close to their
Nests. Soon it will be dark.
Inside my mouth
I see a farrier's
Anvil.
Old woman, tell me where adamant
Is found. The birds' feet
Are tied, they have chipped voices,
And I've sold my compass
For a clay medallion.

III

She is an elf, she is a wand, she is
A goblin, she comes whenever she pleases.
She no longer taps like the rain,
She stands in the window
Like sunset.
On Sundays
She opens a book of charts
And turns a leaf; I watch
The edges of a continent run
Into the colours of the sea.
Old woman, tell me about the death
Of mercury. Tonight I'll enter
Your mutable country
Where the land doesn't tighten
Over water like a shoe and the moon
Spills all its light
On the sky. I touch my words
And they rise to be near your empty hands.

GENEALOGY

I

I recognize my father's wooden skin,
The sun in the west lights up his bald bones,
I see his face and then his broken pair of shoes,
His voice comes through, an empty sleeve.
Birds merge into the blue like thin strokes.
Each man is an unfinished fiction
And I'm the last survivor of what was a family;
They left in a caravan, none saw them
Slip through the two hands.
The dial spreads on the roof,
Alarms put alarms to sleep,
Led by invisible mules I take a path across
The mountains, my alchemies trailing behind
Like leather-bound nightmares;
There isn't a lost city in sight, the map I had
Preserved drifts apart like the continents it showed.

II

My shadow falls on the sun and the sun
Cannot reach my shadow; near the central home
Of nomad and lean horse I pick up
A wheel, a migratory arrow, a numeral.
The seed is still firm. Dreams
Pitch their tents along the rim.
I climb Sugar Mountain,
My mother walks into the horizon,
Fire breaks out in the nests,
Trees, laden with the pelts of squirrels,
Turn into scarecrows,
The seed sends down another merciless root;
My alembic distills these fairy tales,
Acids, riddles, the danger in flowers;
I must never touch pollen or look
Into a watchmaker's shop at twilight.

III

My journey has been this anchor,
The off-white cliff a sail,
Fowl and dragons play near the shores
My sea-wrecked ancestors left.
I call out to the raven, 'My harem, my black rose,
The clock's slave, keeper of no-man's-land between us.'
And the raven, a tear hung above his massive pupil,
Covers my long hair with petals.
Only once did I twist the monotonous pendulum
To enter the rituals at the bottom of twelve seas,
Unghostlike voices curdled my blood, the colour
Of my scorpion changed from scarlet
To scarlet. I didn't mean to threaten you
Or disturb your peace I know nothing of,
But you who live in fables, branches,
And, somehow, icebergs, tell me, whose seed I carry.

CONTINUITIES

I

This is about the green miraculous trees,
And old clocks on stone towers,
And playgrounds full of light
And dark blue uniforms.
At eight I'm a Boy Scout and make a tent
By stretching a bedsheet over parallel bars
And a fire by burning rose bushes,
I know half-a-dozen knots and drink
Tea from enamel mugs.
I wear khaki drill shorts, note down
The number-plates of cars,
Make a perfect about-turn for the first time.
In September I collect my cousins' books
And find out the dates of the six Mughals
To secretly write the history of India.
I see Napoleon crossing the Alps
On a white horse.

II

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

III

I go to sleep after I hear him
Snore like the school bell;
I'm standing alone in a back alley
And a face I can never recollect is removing
The hubcaps from our dull brown Ford.
The first words I mumble are the names of roads,
Thornhill, Hastings, Lytton;
We live in a small cottage,
I grow up on a guava tree
Wondering where the servants vanish
After dinner, at the magic of the bearded tailor
Who can change the shape of my ancestors.
I bend down from the swaying bridge
And pick up the river
Which once tried to hide me:
The dance of the torn skin
Is for much later.

From *Distance in Statute Miles* (1982)

LIES

My pockets are empty
June, Peeks, and I
Marched together
On Annual Day
June had brown eyes and thin legs
Peeks was my only rival

My pockets
Like two secret chambers
Held tamarind-seeds
Bits of white chalk
And parts of a sling
I had a dream this morning

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

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

A LETTER TO A FRIEND

I set up the house while she waited
In another city, the day of our marriage
Was still far. When she saw the rooms
For the first time she said, 'These
Are worse than bathrooms.'
She found the walls too narrow and wanted
To run away; your mother and my aunt
Were both there when this happened.
Your mother in her enthusiasm
And simple joy
Asked us over for lunch
When she said, 'I know nothing of lunches.'
It was months before things got normal again.
Anyhow, she spent her first days
With the clear sky, a few birds, the little
Interesting things which gather
Around trees; we slept in the afternoon
And awoke when the long sad evening
Was already halfway up the window.
Kitchen smoke, the quiet smell
Of me reading in my chair, the glum
Books that smacked their tails
On the shelves like field-mice, the family
Downstairs quarrelling and crying,
Poisoned the tips of needles in her mind
And she entered an imprisoned kingdom—
A place I wouldn't touch with my bare hands.
Through two short rooms she walked
As if I were out to murder her last secret
And a blackness we all feel took hold of me;
I wanted it to, to protect myself;
Her eyes glistened, scared, scary.
At night insects on wings and feet would come
To relieve the stiff air; we played
Under the sharp moon, made little noise
Since I hardly touched her.
The first caw and the excitement
Of crows as they looked at us in bed from the chimney,

Bees rushed into the room, the sun pulled up,
And the girl next door wrung her underwear;
She knew I admired her ankles even in sleep.
The milkwoman brought her dog with her,
The postman came up the steps and she spent
Hours reading letters from her family,
Then wrote to each one of her brothers and sisters.
The lama would knock and take off his shoes
Before entering; he would hold her hand and talk
Of silence, of living in the mountains
With just enough candles to scatter the dark.
We fetched water in heavy buckets, cooked
In the open, and lying on the hillside
None thought of love.
She made tea by boiling
Water, leaves, milk, and sugar
Together, adding condiments in the end;
When he left, her palms were wet
And I wasn't jealous.
Across the clean flat roofs and narrow road
Is a bare field; a camel once sat there all day,
Thin legs folded under the hump,
Looking at cows walk through trees.
So has it been.
Her blood has got more entangled in its stones,
While I've kept to my lamp, beads, mirrors, jars,
A rug, pictures of purple demons,
Red, black, and white ants, all sorts of fat spiders.
Three years, and I still wonder
What nakedness is, or does.
Sometimes I notice the couple next door.
It's very warm outside,
And the streets are tall and quiet.

KITE

Summer is at hand.
New leaves fill the branches
With sunlight, a red and green kite
Bends into the wind. It is two bits
Of thin paper
Joined in the middle. It opens the sky.
I have three small rooms and a terrace
Where I sit out and read Han-shan
To my newborn son, or make
That kite. My possessions are few.
I'll stay here.

CANTICLE FOR MY SON

The dog barks and the cat mews,
The moon comes out in the sky,
The birds are mostly settled.
I envy your twelve hours
Of uninterrupted dreaming.

I take your small palms in mine
And don't know what
To do with them. Beware, my son,
Of those old clear-headed women
Who never miss a funeral.

.

JANUARY

The gates wide open; chairs on the lawn;
Circular verandahs; the narrow kitchen;
High-ceilinged rooms; arches; alcoves; skylights.
My house luminous; my day burnt to ash.

OCTOBER

Reconsider, first, the oblong of light
Already there when you open
The door to a high-ceilinged room;
Then, halfway up the wall, the alcove
Filled with painted clay toys;
Above it, in the skylight, a white
Moistureless cloud. Yes, the replenished hour
Illuminates the house; light heals the day.

ENGRAVING OF A BISON ON STONE

The land resists
Because it cannot be
Tempted, or broken
In a chamber. It records,
By carefully shuffling the leaves,
The passage of each storm, rain,
And drought. The land yields
In places, deliberately,
Having learnt warfare from the armies
It fed. The land is of one
Piece and hasn't forgotten
Old miracles: the engraving of a bison
On stone, for instance. The land
Turns up like an unexpected
Visitor and gives refuge, it cannot be
Locked or put away. The land
Cannot sign its name, it cannot die
Because it cannot be buried,
It understands the language,
It speaks in dialect.

DISTANCE IN STATUTE MILES

On maps it always takes
The same position: away from the coastline,
Two inches below
The mountain range. But the man
Who is turning the page doesn't know
That it is flat as a blade, more
Vulnerable than a child, inaccessible
By road or air. It is in front of me.
I can see the towers
From my window, I call out
And it responds to its name,
It is easily frightened.
This is a winter afternoon and the sun
Makes unequal rectangles
Of light in each courtyard, by evening
The birds will again be visible.
Far from us, near the river
Which was once leased out to fishermen,
A small East German tractor is sending up smoke.

.

THE STUDIO

You hit us across our small clear heads
When our backs were turned
The sun was in our eyes
The sky unclouded

One day you will lie where we do now
And black ants
Like moving particles of light
Will surround you .

The blue rose is hidden in the garden
You are writing a poem
Seven cells have been robbed of their spirits
And the wasps know their curse

Yaddo, 1972

WHERE WILL THE NEXT ONE COME FROM

The next one will come from the air
It will be an overripe pumpkin
It will be the missing shoe

The next one will climb down
From the tree
When I'm asleep

The next one I will have to sow
For the next one I will have
To walk in the rain

The next one I shall not write
It will rise like bread
It will be the curse coming home



COMPANY PERIOD

Of Zayn-ul-din, 'an artist of Patna',
Little is known except that he painted
Around 1780 a few Indian subjects
For Lady Impey.
Trained in the Mughal workshops,
He adapted himself to the needs
Of the period: English paper and watercolour
Technique. Lady Impey's interest
In native artists was partly 'scientific',
So when she left for home she possessed
A portrait of herself in her Bengal
Drawing-room, and a complete set
Of the flora and fauna as well.
Zayn-ul-din's cheetah was in it.
The cheetah is shown in profile: hind legs
Curved, a triple band on the tail, small
Overlapping spots on the neck. A fresh pug mark
In the bottom left corner: Zayn-ul-din's signature.

New and Uncollected Poems (1972–83)



CLASSIFICATION

Are trees vertebrate? Spikenards are.
Some bones soft as pistils
Are trampled on by wood-ants;
I was crushed by the bone I sat on.
Clever bone, you're one of these:
I returned from a voyage
With a bone in my mouth,
Under a glass-bell it spread wings
And dropped two talons;
The white bone is the queen bone;
The more complex bones have a mind
And die of seizure,
They're buried by headless poppets.

1972

.

THE EXQUISITE CORPSE

Smoke makes faces, ladders burn
Children who don't love me
Are lifted by hyenas

Once a year I inventory my cellar
The old woman's alone in her shoe
Georgie Porgie's a pimply beau

A cluster of bamboo walking-sticks
Force open my father's chest
The goat is dead, long live the baa

1972

LET'S FACE IT

The lower classes, my dear, are indestructible.
Buff sunsets gather dust in mustard fields
And if the rains fail this hat-tree will die.

1975

*

HOUSE BY THE MILL

A woman addresses the nation,
 What big ears she
Has. The fabulous Red Riding-Hoods
 In gladed wood
Burn flare-ups, but freedom's too prudent
 To risk its skin.
O house by the mill we're trapped in.

26 June, 1975

BHOJPURI DESCANT

I

Piss after dinner,
Sleep on your left side:
You'll never fall sick.

II

If landlords are saints,
Pestles are bowstrings.

III

Witty landlords,
Wheezy thieves:
Lynch them.

IV

A servant who knows
The secrets of the house,
A pretty wife,
Spetched clothes,
A wicked king:
They need careful handling.

V

A shoe that pinches,
A sharp-tongued wife,
The first-born a daughter,
An unproductive farm,
A duncish brother:
They cause endless grief.

VI

A brown she-elephant,
A bald wife,
Rain in winter:
Signs of luck.

VII

Three oxen, two wives:
Death's at your doorstep.

VIII

A spendthrift son,
A cross-eyed buffalo,
A moody ox:
Get rid of them at once.

IX

An ox with six teeth
Will quickly change hands,
An ox with seven
Will butt its owner,
An ox with nine
Will rush in nine directions
And won't spare even the family priest.

X

To inspect the teeth
Of a skewbald ox
Is a waste of time.

XI

The thin-tailed ox
With reindeer's piss
Brings prosperity.

XII

The blue-flanked ox
With purple horns
Can't be wrong.

XIII

One plough is death,
Two's survival,
Three's good business,
Four's a kingdom.

XIV

A wise farmer does his own tilling,
The one less wise walks beside his team,
But the farmer who goes looking for tillmen
Forfeits his seed.

XV

A small ploughshare
Tickles the field.

XVI

A kite's screech from atop a ruin:
Sign of rain.

XVII

A chameleon
Scrambles up the bole
Tail-first:
Expect a flood.

XVIII

Clouds throughout the day,
A clear sky at night:
Famine.

XIX

The clouds from the west are misers.

After Ghāgha

THE TELEGRAM

The wick sputters and this
Chirp is from the hopper
In my mind. The floor is
Cold. I dip my toes in
It. Someone pushes me
From behind and my whoo-
Pee plunges into the
Deep end's icy water.
He's running towards the
Bottle-green shore, waving
His arms, his ship anchored
In his mind's inlet, his
Cabined keyboard ablaze.

for A.J.

THE COTTON TREE

I
A badminton-net away
From each
Other and bang
In front of
The half-dilapidated
Single-
Storied forties house,
Two
Great Indian cotton trees.
Nothing is
Alive in this
Abstract
Distance from X
To Y
Except their brittle
Shade.
Moth-like sun-patches
Alight
On each hurrying
Arm, nape,
And nose-tip
Even as shadows,
Stepping straight out of
Lime-washed
Walls, chase them
Away.
A lingering nip
In the
Air; March 'eighty-
Two;
Summer's first lap.

II

A boy walking
Ahead of
Us, carrying a
Pail in
One hand, an eyeless
Taxidermed
Calf in the other,
Divides his
Attention between kites
Fighting
In the sky and a pair of
Taw-eyed
Buffaloes under his
Charge. From 37
Paternoster Row, James
Duncan
Published in MDCCCXXX
A thirty-volume
Description of someone's
Travels
Round the globe; silverfish
Have made
A meal of it; eating away
The kerns,
Leaving the shanks
Of letters alone.
I sometimes wonder
If all
The leaves that ever fell
Are not
Inside this page.

III

They did not fall
But drifted
Upwards through the
Valved
Air. Overnight the trees
Stood
Upside down, their
Branches
Lit with comets'
Misty
Tails. On land
The wind
Smelt of hot
Cross buns.
Our route didn't change,
Though sometimes
When a duststorm blew
We covered
Just half the distance.
Single crows
Darted across the flat
Sky
Towards unfallen nests.
The trees
Were a
Settlement;
They're pieces now
Of uncased
Machinery, kept
On
A clocksmith's table.

THE ROYS

We've rented a flat in Ghosh Buildings, Albert Road,
And the Roys live across the street. Mr Roy,
General Merchant, dresses in white
Drill trousers, long-sleeved cotton shirts,
And looks like a friendly barn-owl.
His sons are in school with me. Ganesh,
The eldest, has a gleaming forehead,
A shelled-egg complexion, a small
Equilateral mouth; he belongs to a mystical
Group of philatelists. Together with Shaporjee,
The tallow-white Parsi next door, and Roger Dutt,
The school's aromatic geography teacher, he goes up
In a hot-air balloon and, on the leeward
Side of a Stanley Gibbons catalogue, comes down
Near a turret in Helvetia or Magyar,
Stamp-sized snowflake-like countries
Whose names dissolve like jujubes on my tongue.
We play french cricket, seven-tiles, I-spy, and Injuns.
Our tomahawks are butter knives, our crow
Feathers are real, and riding out from behind
Plaza Talkies we ambush the cowboys of Civil Lines.
Ganesh doesn't join our games. The future,
He seems to say, is not a doodle on the back
Of an envelope but a scarp to be climbed
Alone. He attends a WUS meeting in Stockholm
And opens a restaurant in the heart of town.
I go there in early youth for Jamaican coffee,
In early middle age to use its toilet.
Without getting up from the cash desk he shakes my
hand,
'How's the English Department?' he asks, 'How's
Rajamani? Is Mishra a professor now? Is it true?
What are things coming to.' While I listen to him
My piss travels down the left trouser leg
Into my sock, and then my restless son drags me
Towards a shoe store and buys his first pair of
Naughty Boys. Seen from the road,
Mr Roy's shop is a P & O liner anchored in midstream.

Inside, it's an abandoned coal pit. A film
Of darkness wraps the merchandise; a section of the far
Wall conceals the mouth of a cave, leading
To an underground spring; the air, dry and silvery
At the entrance, is moist and sea-green, furry
To the touch; the display cases, embedded
In the floor, are stuffed with a galleon's treasure;
Finned toffees peer at customers through glass jars.
Every afternoon Mr Roy goes home for his
Siesta and Ramesh, his second son, still wearing
A crumpled school uniform, takes over the town's
Flagship. At 3 p.m. the roads melt, becoming
Impassable, and canvas-backed chicks
Protect shop-fronts against heatstroke.
For the next two hours the sun, stationed above
A traffic island, lays siege to the town, and the only
Movement is of leaves falling
So slowly that midway through their descent their colours
Change. The two waxen shop-assistants
Melt in their sticks, Ramesh sits beside
The cash box with an open sesame
Look in his eye, and I have the well
All to myself. Looking up its bejewelled
Shaft, I make out, in the small
Light coming in through the well-mouth,
Bottles of ketchup, flying cigarillos,
Death feigning penknives, tooth powders, inexpensive
Dragon china dinner sets, sapphire-blue packets
Of detergent, wooden trays holding skeins
Of thread, jade-coloured boxes of hosiery, rolled-gold
Trinkets, mouth-watering dark tan shoe polish, creams,
And hula hoops. Driven by two ceiling fans,
The freighter moves. Land drops from sight.
Though binoculars are trained on the earth's dip,
The eye is monopolized by after images of land:
I hold a negative against the light,
And now I'm received into the negative I'm holding.
At 5 p.m. the spell is broken. The sun
Calls it a day and goes down and Mr Roy comes
To clear away the jungle that has grown around his shop and I

Run out with a stolen packet of razor blades.
 Where stealing's easy, hiding stolen goods is tough.
 A pink stamp issued on Elizabeth's Coronation
 Cannot be traced to a cigarette tin buried among
 Clothes, but what do I do with an album that has
 The owner's name rubber stamped
 All over it? I give lessons to five-year-old Suresh
 In the pleasures of stealing.
 For each first-day cover he brings, I press
 My View-Master against his mongoloid eye
 And let him look through it once. Then one day, while we're
 Having lunch, I see a policeman framed in the door.
 The food in my mouth hardens into a lump
 Of plaster of Paris. Afterwards, I lose my voice
 And so does everyone around me. Believe me when I say
 That nothing's more sad than a tropical evening,
 When auctioneers buy dead advocates' libraries
 And there's all the time in the world and nowhere to go.
 Anil, their cousin, takes out his autograph-book.
 'Just in case,' he says, 'you become famous.'
 He has said this to every boy in school.
 'Do you think,' he asks me, 'I can get Peeks's
 Grandfather's autograph?' Peeks's grandfather is a retired
 Chief Justice and gets his pension in sterling.
 Anil squints at a marble
 In the hollow of his palm
 But can't make out if it's an oblong. His sister, hairy
 As a sloth bear, sits in the verandah, absorbed
 In our game. Her mind, too, is half her age.
 Through broken tiles in the roof
 Sunbeams let themselves down and she screams
 Before they strike her. She vanishes
 Inside a blackbeetle and crawls on my skin;
 I smell the bouquet of my spittled thumb
 And it works like hartshorn. Charlie Hyde, nicknamed
 Bony Arse, is the only other person
 To so affect me. We go our different ways and sometimes
 We cross Albert Road together or meet outside
 A chemist's. Anil has a tabletop head and bulging

Irisless eyes. He nods; I nod. It's like watching
From a distance two men one doesn't know
Recognize each other. Anil sets himself up
As a dealer in office equipment
And then as a distributor for Number Ten cigarettes.
He fails at both jobs and is given shock therapy.

NEW GOLDEN

The mirror in front
Of me holds the mirror
Behind me. Lightly
Bearded, thirtyish,
Standing between
Them, removing his coffee-
Brown shirt; then his right
Arm held above his
Head for Lalloo
Of New Golden
To approach
It, which he, stropped
Razor in hand, does
From the side; then
The left pit. 'Thrice Sardar
Pressed the tiger and
It jammed each time.
Close, wasn't it?'

'THE WORLD'S A PRINTING HOUSE'

There's a mountain in my mind,
I must be true to it.
There's a mountain in
My mind and I
Must read it
Line by
Line

Or it will disappear: cone
Of light or natal space,
Call it what you will,
I must be true
To it. Clouds
Sweep its
Base,

Terraces cut into its
Summit, windows into
Its slopes through which pours
The mountain-side:
The mountain
In my
Mind,

Grazing on itself, and its
Own reflection. Inversed
Peak, clapperless great
Tom, some unfelt
Entirely
Visioned
Thing,

Fading across the rent veil.
Like a compositor's
Radiant font, in my
Mind a mountain;
I must be
True to
It.

LOCATION

Close to midnight the honk honk
Of a speeding jeep rattles
The message sent over a
Cyclist's two-band; near the lo-
Co shed dogs bait an idling
Diesel, now they regroup and
Bark again when the goods has
Passed; at the bottom of page
276 of studies
In medieval perspective,
Robertson writes, 'No one thought
In terms of psychology
In the fourteenth century
Any more than he thought in
Terms of differential
Calculus.' Couldn't agree,
Couldn't disagree with the
Thesis and stopped reading, in
My hands I held this poem.

DISJECTI MEMBRA POETAE

The east wind and
A lizard rampant
Spell rain,
Pencils
Stab dictionaries
In the dark,
Frigate-birds
Put rings
Round the moon,
The smell
Of ink and
The shape of
Wyoming,
Colours like
Burma green,
Words like
Slough, off-rhymes,
Translations,
Dead metaphors,
Things,
The flywheels and
Sprockets,
The gristle
Of poems,
Tossed in sleep's
Fountain,
Garnered in nests,
Recalled
In holograph,
At places
Smudged, late for
Assemblage.

NOTES

INDEX OF FIRST LINES

Adamant: 'Name of an alleged rock or mineral' (O.E.D.).
The death of mercury: 'In the *Kubjika Tantra*, Shiva speaks of mercury as his generating principle and lauds its efficiency when it has been 'fixed' (i.e. dead) six times. . . . In alchemical terms, to 'fix' or to 'kill' mercury is tantamount to attaining to the *cittavrttinirodha* (suppression of conscious states), which is the ultimate aim of yoga.' Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible: The Origins and Structures of Alchemy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 133.

COMPANY PERIOD

The details are from Stuart Cary Welch, *A Flower from Every Meadow* (New York: The Asia Society, 1973).

HOUSE BY THE MILL

The version of 'Little Red Riding-Hood' I have in mind ends with, 'So saying, that wicked wolf sprang on Little Red Riding-Hood and ate her up.' Charles Perrault, *Fairy Tales* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1957), p. 24.

NEW GOLDEN

Tiger: trigger.

'THE WORLD'S A PRINTING HOUSE'

Francis Quarles, *Divine Fancies* (1632), IV, iii.

LOCATION

'No one thought in terms . . . differential calculus.'

D.W. Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspective* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 276.

