

Keki N. Daruwalla was born in Lahore in 1937, and now lives in New Delhi. His works include *Under Orion* (1970), *Apparition in April* (1971) and *Crossing of Rivers* (1976).

Keki Daruwalla's poems are rooted in the Indian landscape which itself leads to an illumination. His poetry is both personal—an aid in coming to terms with his own interior world—and a social gesture. *The Keeper of the Dead* adds to his stature as a commentator on the Indian scene.

* * *

Shadows fall here
like old lime-wash
from sand-papered walls.
The city broods on nothingness.
Forms bulge and snap.
The shadow of a grille
gravels down
like quartz-grit.



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NEW POETRY IN INDIA



THE KEEPER OF
THE DEAD

.

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THE KEEPER OF THE DEAD

Keki N Daruwalla

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I

THE KEEPER OF THE DEAD

*

Hawk

I

I saw the wild hawk-king this morning
riding an ascending wind
as he drilled the sky.
The land beneath him was filmed with salt:
grass-seed, insect, bird—
nothing could thrive here. But he was lost
in the momentum of his own gyre,
a frustrated parricide on the kill.
The fuse of his hate was burning still.

But in the evening he hovered above
the groves, a speck of barbed passion.
Crow, mynah and pigeon roosted here
while parakeets flew raucously by.
And then he ran amok,
a rapist in the harem of the sky.
As he went up with a pigeon
skewered to his heel-talon
he scanned the other birds, marking out their fate,
the ones he would scoop up next,
those black dregs in the cup of his hate!

2

The tamed one is worse, for he is touched by man.
When snared in the woods
his eyelids are sewn with silk
as he is broken to the hood.
He is momentarily blinded, starved.
Then the scar over his vision is perforated.
Morsels of vision are fed to his eyes
as he is unblinded stitch by relenting stitch.

Slowly the world re-forms:
mud walls, trees burgeon.
His eye travels like the eye of the storm.

Discovering his eye
and the earth and sky
with it, he leaps from earth to ether.
Now the sky is his eyrie.
He ferocious floats on splayed wings;
then plummets like a flare,
smoking, and a gust of feathers
proclaims that he has struck.
The tamed one is worse, for he is touched by man.
Hawking is turned to a ritual, the predator's
passion honed to an art;
as they feed the hawk by carving the breast
of the quarry bird and gouging out his heart.

3

They have flushed him out of the tall grasses,
the hare, hunted now
in pairs by mother hawk and son.
They can't kill him in one fell swoop.
But each time the talons cart away
a patch of ripped fur.
He diminishes, one talon-morsel at a time.
He is stunned by the squall of wings above.
His heart is a burning stable
packed with whinnying horses.
His blood writes stories on the scuffed grass!
His movements are a scribble on the page of death.

4

I wouldn't know when I was stolen from the eyrie
I can't remember when I was ensnared.

I only know the leather disc
which blots out the world
and the eyelids which burn with thwarted vision.

Then the perforations, and yet
the blue iris of heaven does not come through.
I can think of a patch of blue sky
when shown a blue slide.

But I am learning how to spot the ones
crying for the right to dream, the right to flesh,
the right to sleep with their own wives—
I have placed them. I am sniffing
the air currents, deciding when to pounce.

I will hover like a black prophecy
weaving its moth-soft cocoon of death.
I shall drive down
with the compulsive thrust of gravity,
trained for havoc,
my eyes focused on them
like the sights of a gun.

During the big drought which is surely going to come
the doves will look up for clouds, and it will rain hawks.

The King Speaks to the Scribe (Third century B.C.)

First Kartikeya, there's no pride involved,
nor humility; understand this. I speak
of atonement, that is, if blood can ever
be wiped away with words. We will engrave
this message on volcanic rock, right here
where the earth still reeks of slaughter.
A hundred thousand courted death, mind you.
The battlefield stank so that heaven
had to hold a cloth to its nose. I trod
this plain, dark and glutinous with gore,
my chariot-wheels squelching in the bloody mire.

Nothing stands now between them and destruction,
neither moat nor bridge nor hut nor door-leaf.
No lighted tapers call them to their village.
It is to them that you will speak, or rather
I will speak through you. So don't enunciate
the law of piety, no aphorisms
which say that good is difficult and sin easy.
And no palaver about two peafowl
and just one antelope roasting in my kitchen
instead of an entire hecatomb as in
my father's days. There may be huts where
they have nothing to burn on the hearth-fires.
Spare me the shame. And no taboos, please,
forbidding the caponing of roosters
or drinking of spirituous liquors,
the castration of bulls and rams and
the branding of horses. So listen with care,
Kartikeya, and I will tell you what to write.

First talk about the sorrows or conquest
and other miseries attendant on
enslavement. In all lands live Brahmins,
anchorites and householders, each enmeshed
in the outer skin of relationships,
that network of duty and herd impulse
through which each charts his particular furrow.
And the sword falls on such people and their
children are blighted, while the affection
of their friends remains undiminished.
Mark that, don't talk merely of rapine and slaughter
but also of separation from loved ones.

And about my sorrow what will you say?
How will you touch that weed-ridden lake-floor
of my despair and keep from drowning?
Say simply that of all the people killed
or captured, if the thousandth part were to
suffer as before, the pain would overwhelm me.
Tell them I have abjured pride, the lowest
can abuse me now and I shall not answer.
Let the dust of humility cover my head.
Even the tribals, dark and bullet-headed,
the blubber-skinned, the ones from whom our demons
and *yakshas* have borrowed their faces,
I invite to my fold. Let them turn from crime
and their aboriginal ways and they will not suffer.

Cut deeper than the cuts of my sword
so that even as moss covers the letters
they are visible. Write whatever
you chance on. Don't look for a white-quartz boulder.
Anything will do, a mass of trap rock
or just a stone sheet. And the language simple,
something the forest folk can understand.

I am not speaking to kings, to Antiyoka
and Maga or Alikasudra. And no
high-flown language. I am not here
to appease gods. Even they must be ignored
for a while and their altar-fires turn cold.
Men don't have enough fuel to burn their dead.

Mind you, Kartikeya, between me and them is blood.
Your words will have to reach across to them
like a tide of black oxen crossing a ford.

Pestilence in Nineteenth-Century Calcutta

'Black fellow die, much',
said the sahib's barber to him
referring to the ghettos
beyond the esplanade
where people writhed
in the groaning callisthenics of cholera.
Bacteria and bacillus throve in the wells,
nestled under the spawnbeds
and killed. The fires burnt higher,
and the dead went up
like fragments of liturgies
lost in a great wind.

The sahib was shocked. This
had never struck him. In this land
of mud and mire, death was everywhere:
the water was heavy with it
like a woman with child,
and you could pick it up from the earth
as you pick up fallen fruit.
But it was the sahibs
who fell like skittles, the Reinharts
De Bussys, Claude Martins,
the Smiths and the Lawrences,
British and French and Dutch,
interred in the same loam,
mourned by the same tolling bells
their remains bristling with like crucifixes.

The climate killed: not so much
the summer sun which spiked them

through their sola topis,
but those vaporous exhalations
of the earth after the rains
which brought on the fevers and the fluxes.
And always it was so sudden.
You lunched with a fellow and by dusk
he was dead, and the tolling from the belfry
was the only way you heard of it.

It was the whites who carried
this fear of death like a slipped disc through their lives
and paid the surgeon one gold mohur
for a visit, one rupee for an ounce of salts,
two for an ounce of bark, paid him
for blood-letting, for being cupped and leeches
and blistered with hot irons
and fed on opium and mercurous chloride.

Twelve years with the John Company
and he had never thought of death
hacking away with its scythe
as it swung past the black ghettos,
where the native spawn petrified
almost before it left the womb.

And then hardly ten days after
the barber had spoken,
he went down the Hooghly
on his winter tour where his Sikh abdar
who had served him during
the *bara hazri*, fell stricken. The next day
our man Friday told him, 'Now disease
come to stomach sahib, now
story finish.' In dysentery
a gut feeling ceases to be

premonitory. That evening the *kanjars*¹
burnt him, guts and all.

The funeral expenses would be his
he said, choking a little, and
ashamed of the tears he held back.
The bill presented on a tray next morning
made him blink. It read,
'Five rupees for roasted Sardar.'

¹ A tribe.

The Revolutionary

It had never come
burning across his skin
like a hot dye.

And yet he shook, a leaf in the wind,
sweated like the floor-plinth of a stalactite
at the mere thought of it,
a lash-burn smoking on his back.

As a schoolboy when hoodlums
had mugged a friend of his
with cycle-chains,
bystanders, when the show was over,
splashed water on his face and not his friend's
for shock had turned to hard ice on his brow.

And now lean and volatile and so intent
that half a life seemed packed in every gesture,
and so young, who would have thought
that death sat on his vulture-shoulders?

This was the time, he thought, this
when dry dusk followed dry dawn
in the second year of the drought;
this was the time,
when tongues were hanging out
like red wounds
that they should strike the match
with all that dry-as-death driftwood
waiting for the spark!
Revolution!
The road of flame!

What hawk would wheel in
with the message tagged to the claws:
'Let shells rain on the Drought-City,
mobilize despair and turn it to murder!
Put the city to torch! Let it not thrive on shame—
our staple diet!'

One morning, posters
grew out of walls like fungus,
the bald head of a statue rolled,
face smeared with tar,
a flame-thrower fell on a police outpost
blinding a recruit in one eye.

They nabbed him at three in the morning,
cozy in his quilt,
and dreaming of his mother,
his unkempt handsomeness
in disarray around him—
and wildly stammering.

Were these the tumbrils rolling,
roles reversed, the bourgeois throng
screaming for blood?
Was that woman standing on the balcony,
rocking in lament, his mother?
And the younger one who couldn't afford to cry
whose face crumpled only in the bathroom—
was that his girl?
They took him to a room where the stones
were as damp as his brow,
where the lash dangled from a rusty peg
and he shivered—from cold or fear or both, I cannot say.

And far into the night, as Orion crashed
groundwards, a shadow
that fell tree-like across his cell,
was that the angel of death
or a lawyer wringing his hands
pleading for bail?

You, Slipping Past

Dog-growls got scribbled
on fever-charts that night
as tossing, I heard the dog
across the blue spine of the road
flanking my house.

Tossing, I dreamt of you,
the insides of your head
rattling like mummy-wheat
in a sarcophagus.

There were big draughty rooms
where emptiness and silence
slurred over each other,
rooms ill-lit with a guttering lambency,
the door-flanges charred
with forgotten fires;
and bulletins trafficking
through passageways
about how the concussed cells
rot tissue by tissue.

The morning paper
sliding under the door
found you dead.

Now I know why dogs kept vigil
at the periphery
of my uneasy dreams.
Your ghost had spidered past
the blue spine of the road.

The Mistress

No one believes me when I say
my mistress is half-caste. Perched
on the genealogical tree somewhere
is a Muslim midwife and a Goan cook.
But she is more mixed than that.
Down the genetic lane, babus
and professors of English
have also made their one-night contributions.

You can make her out the way she speaks;
her consonants bludgeon you;
her argot is rococo, her latest 'slang'
is available in classical dictionaries.
She sounds like a dry sob
stuck in the throat of darkness.

In the mornings her mouth is sour
with dreams which had fermented during the night.
When I sleep by her side
I can almost hear the blister-bubble
grope for a mouth through which to snarl.
My love for her survives from night to night,
even though each time
I have to wrestle with her in bed.

In the streets she is known.
They hiss when she passes.

Despite this she is vain,
flashes her bangles and her tinsel;
wears heels even though her feet
are smeared up to the ankles with henna.

She will not stick to *vindaloo*, but talks
of roasts, pies, pomfrets grilled.
She speaks of contreau and not cashew
arrack which her father once distilled.

No, she is not Anglo-Indian. The Demellos would
bugger me if they got scent of this,
and half my body would turn into a bruise.
She is not Goan, not Syrian Christian.
She is Indian English, the language that I use.

Comet and Dream

He slept in his dug-out like a cement bag,
though with a rifle between his knees
instead of a girl. Obscene his cry,
as the sentry woke him up at four
to show the comet flowering in the sky.

Its effulgence was such that he thought it was a god.
His first instinct was to bow and pray;
the same instinct that turned fire into god
in ancient days when instincts had their way.

He couldn't identify race memories in his system.
He didn't know that Chaldea and Babylon
had taken these fire-omens into account.
Sun-transits and nebulae were Greek to him;
he just saw the massive head like a volcanic mount

roam the skies. Moon-eclipse, comet, could one look
them in the eye? He scratched his memory to find
the relevant taboo, while the sign above
bristled like a fire-quilled porcupine.

Drifting back to sleep he whimpered once:
war was an extension of the exercise,
as dreams turned to grapeshot and eyes to jelly.
A man who hit a mine travelled in all directions;
a bat rained bombs from its vampire belly.

He reached for a woman but found his rifle there,
then back to dreams—those territories of the unfulfilled.
A bren stammered in the backyard of his skull;
a sniper opened up from a flanking hill.

Kohoutek

I have come from the cave of red embers,
 I, of the purple beard.
I have come from the cave
where light boils and scethes like lava
where space is oil-green
and comets roam—
a tribe of torn-out embryos
looking for the mother.

The breasts of my mother
 are fire-rich.
From her nipples come sparks!
My tail bristles like an electric storm.

Heaven would do well to stay away;
a close flyby
 and angels will fall
like a rain of scorched insects.

I carry within me
 fire and frozen water,
passion and ice.
I am the lover, dust and red-ash
stain my dishevelled hair,
as I scour the deserts of space,
 a visible thirst.

Your history is younger
than the tartar on my teeth.

You cannot think of me in human terms.
I have wandered far beyond
 the groves of death.

Hell is merely a socket
between the fire-scales on my back!

I have traversed a million skies;
each sky was an empty eye-pit,
an empty womb.
It is the same search everywhere,
for the eyeball in the eye,
for a new god in each new sky.

I flash like a mad thought
 across the skull of the sky.
I smoulder like a homicidal resolve.

This is the year when you can kill
 and blame the skies.
You can pin the next plague on me
and the next war; abandon the word
and give in to the fever of your glands.
This year you can crucify another Christ
upon my body.

So spatter me with mud
as I fly past,
back to my cave of black prophecies
where new comets are spawned, like passions
from a shoal of fire-bubbles.

Mehar Ali, the Keeper of the Dead

In the year of the fire-serpent,
the prophecy runs
lightning will chop the cumulus
into chunks of meat.
Red rain will fall
as the goddess descends,
her rain-red hair
streaming backwards in the wind,
to cart away the dead
in the folds of her mists.

It is a Tartar cemetery;
they had lost their way across the roof,
past serac country and the ice-falls,
till coming to this cluster of low cliffs
they flopped, savaged
up to their knees by frost.

Two of them survived and had
this catacomb hewn out of limestone cliff;
married *Bhot*¹ women and begot children
who wilted—nine generations scorched
like dying melons on a withered vine.
And now with a face like a patch of fissured bark
and eyes: pools dulled with a film of moss,
Mehar Ali, the keeper of the dead,
remains the last of the living,
his days slowly embering into ash.

His speech is a montone that creaks on
like a cartwheel going over gravel.

¹ Tibetan.

'This is the catafalque where lies
barqandaz,¹ the wolf-slayer.
The two survivors lie here
and these their Tibetan wives.'
A match flares across the vault.
'This miniature on the wall, look at the
faces—each smaller than a match-head—
and the paint-effect, like
hairline-fractures on a cartilage.

It is deliberate, to show the action of frost
as it worked over their visages when they crossed the pass.
The faces were done in old paint which cracks;
the rest was done in vegetable dye.'

The Californian females ask:
'Wolf-slayer? Where did he slay the wolf?'
'Mr Mehar Ali, do you trace
your lineage back to Jenghiz Khan?'
'Its amazing this Muslim cemetery
 in a semi-lama country!
And this local prophecy, do you think
the goddess will ever come?'

There is no response.
In the past year he is known
to have smiled only once
when he mistook a flowering shrub
 for a child
and blessed it.

But when high winds moan,
driving the rain into the catafalque,
and lightning rends the sky,

¹ Man who fires the matchlock.

speech starts fermenting in his mouth
and bursts out

in bee-stung incoherence.

It is then that he communes with the dead,
they say, and his eyes
probe each wraith of mist
for the sky-woman,
her hair flaming red,
as she alights upon the shroud-grey skin
that keeps him whole—
Mehtar Ali, the keeper of the dead!

II
THE UNREST OF DESIRE

The Night of the Jackals

I

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

I park my car eleven blocks away.
People scurry off the roads
as the sky crackles.
I press the buzzer hard
and tap at the glass door
along with the thunder.
Tonight she will be waiting
arched fully backwards
vibrant as new leaf!
She sits there, white cardigan, dark slacks,
laughing, as she knits away
caressing the rug with her bare feet.

The blankets over her children
heave with their regular breathing.
It will go well with her
if I kiss them on their foreheads.
Suddenly
she is in my arms
swarming.

Her nipples and the grass outside
harden together,

tense with coming thunder.
Kissing her on the neck
I nibble the words
as they slur across her skin:
did the thunder frighten you?
Yes, with both the kids asleep
it was eerie, terrifying.
And if the children had been awake
she may not have thought of me
 for another three months!
As if in reply
she presses me harder to herself.
I enter her
the way a boat starved of fresh water
enters a harbour.

2

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

But July, you must come then!
There is a different feel about things—
the earth oozing with black treacle,
fat grubs, white
 as intestinal shreds,
fireflies like bloodcells of the night;

even the hiss of the scythe
in the wet grass
is different!

When I tread the leafmould,
and the soot-black earth
gives way under bare feet
then alone I feel
I have not been carved out
of a patch of dried blood.'
Why not go in the rains then?
'Not in the rains,' she said,
'by no means in the rains!
What will the women say?
The bleached woman has come back
to the green grasses!'

3

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

Next morning she is a coriander leaf
newly plucked,
rain-washed.
A feeling leafs, branches out
like a baby arm
across the webbing that cocoons my ribs;
a feeling softer than skull-membranes.
And I reach over for her
soft and willing and naked
and slowly rhythmic.

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

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

4

In the afternoon I am alone
with beer and salted snacks—
she is busy with the children.
The hail cannonades on the roof-tiles,
and then the wildcat wind.
It is now that the spasm gets her:
cough and sputum
and even a little blood.

'In our village, the wind
is not a beggar,' she says.
'It comes riding on the hooves
of wild horses
or shrilling on the cry of a bird.
Not like an *Agori*,¹ gritty and alone
while children watch
cowering from the windows.'

¹ Sctt, among sadhus, which is not exactly known for its personal
hygiene.

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

5

This, she said, was the well of the goddess—
but if it was the well of the goddess
the rust on this persian-wheel
would have been temple *bhog*¹ by now;
and these hooded oxen
ploughing through eternity,
round the well, circumambulating,
they would have stored merit enough
to be gods in the next birth!

But as a shadow drifted across her brow
she added, which heaven can afford
a million kine-gods?

6

'When the *semul* tree
flowers with embers
that's the time the cough gets me.
It's the flower-dust, I think.'
'Pollen', I corrected her
and read dismay in her eyes.
'How will you ever write, my love!
Poetry is written with
the wrong words, don't you know?'

¹ Sacramental food.

7

The jackals sink their fangs
into the veins of the night.

Their cries herald
the death of the wilderness
the passing of ghosts.

I look for hairline
fractures on the glass panes
as the wail of the jackals,
riding the wind
crackles against the windows.

For a moment I am amazed
that the almond tree
all dressed up in white
does not sway on its black roots
in the wail and the wind
of these vulpine hungers;
but stands there petrified,
a white shadow
etched on the darkness,
its white flowers tattooed
on the body of the night.

8

In March, the women say, 'A spirit
inhabits her.
Don't you see the flush spreading
like bracken fire on her cheeks?'

And I tell them I am not
a vine that starts leafing
only in spring.
Whenever you are near me I flower.

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

.

Love among the Pines

The animal evening moves
like the tiger-wind through the parting of reeds.
The sky is not blue enough today
to catch the pure spiral of your thought.
We walk in the cowdust, my fingers
lost in the spaces between your fingers.
Some wild flowers catch your eye
and I sleepwalk through
some moments of wild talk about
 wild flowers from you.
What makes me whisper
 destiny lies
 in the parting of hair
 in the parting of grasses
 in the parting of thighs?
Dusk explodes into black shrapnel
on the knife-rim of the earth.
What is there in my hand that when it sidles into your blouse
it prowls like an animal that makes you writhe,
turning your nipples into a black sprout of berries?
We sweep pincedles into a stack
(they don't prick at all when vertically spread).
The pinecricket overhead is a shrill monotone.
The moments stacked against each other
turn incandescent with a running flame.
We both know what we are here for:
 beneath your skin
of wild talk you are tense,
beneath the cindering ash of my body
your body is a surprise
for as I fall upon the earth-crust that is you
we spin, we spin, we spin
your feet pointed to the skies.

From the Snows in Ranikhet

(To a friend newly married)

Words, footholds, winds, are trapped in the snow here
a little effort and they can be found.

Just dig through two white feet of silence
till you hit the ground.

Even now the hush is where it was
when the flakes first floated down.

Branches span out in spiked gestures
framed against the skies.

Their skeleton fingers burn with frost.
But vengeance still is Christ's—
each night frost like a murdered stiff
is stretched upon the ice.

But the goddess of the seasons
still chews her cosmic cud.
Her mastication brings forth
green leaf and golden bud.
Fish will erupt from larval beds
and go downstream with the flood.

The earth will speak, it has to. •
Thaw with his unseen plough,
will trek the undercrust, expose
the vast, germinal slough.
Spring with her flaring grass-skirt
will come and take her bow.

It's a pleasant thought that seasons
will in each other blend
while you move along a landscape

of yearning that will end
in the precincts of your bodies
which you'll seed and tear and rend.

And heal with your own bodies;
that is the crux of love:
the falcon-fury of the moment
turns into the dove.
The face as spirit, the face as flesh
blend in the face as love.

You'll be probing for the fire-core
of creation subtly red,
the embryo hatched from your joint flame.
Yet don't forget the dead;
for you'll do a little killing
with every act in bed.

Old terrors that were sung of
even in ancient runes
will die a cell-by-cell death
within your bed and soon
you will explore dead cities
in each house of the moon.

But let us keep it level
and keep singing of desire.
The earth is waiting keenly
to hear your spirit singing,
to hear your bodies singing,
a duet on fire.

The Unrest of Desire

The unrest of desire is lit up with eyes.
Whatever mask you slap upon your face,
however you tear at the soft throat of life
and probe the salt-blood with your insistent tongue
the unrest of desire is revealed by eyes.

However you bury the shadow in the heart
under slabs of concrete and a coil of bone,
however you wall the cave-impulse at the mouth,
it will hammer at the sides and break free,
however you bury the shadow in the heart.

You may etch the shadow on the cavern-wall
and turn your drives into aborigine art:
bison and stag loping in charcoal lines.
You can't erase the burn. It will char your dreams
however you bury the shadow in the heart.

The Parsi Hell

The Parsi hell is insubstantial; a long
stint in the house of falsehood, foul food
and speech turning base on a wailing tongue.

Even the Chinvat Bridge¹ which turns its edge
towards the evil is not an Aztec knife
which cuts through fat, spliced tendon, cartilage.

It is allegorical, a bridge you cannot cross
in your quest for the region of endless lights.
In the *gathas*² there is nothing gross;

just one material reference—the darkness
is so thick you can cut it with a knife.
No other hells confront you in their rancour.

Our hell and heaven have no locus, the scriptures forego
all reference to the damned. The three-fold dark
is hinted at, and a passing mention of the states of woe.

Standing at the dark heart of my dreams,
the small change of guilt turning sweaty in my hands,
I watch my slow surrender at the seams,

the thread showing through frayed edges. Desires
fester in the body's abscessed tabernacles.
Like a fire temple I hoard my inner fires,

¹ This has to be crossed by all the souls after death. It turns into a sword-edge for the unrighteous who are thus unable to cross it.

² Sacred hymns attributed to Zoroaster.

hoard my semen, brown with inbreeding. Genetic rust?
I carry within me the city of faith
desiccated with the salts of lust.

Death hums over the wires: what afflicts the spawn
is rickets, polio, a drug gone rogue. Daughters
walk out on the tribe. The forepaws

of wilderness reach for the heart. Anxieties congregate
and claw at your dreams as they prospect for hell.
You will cross the hump and come to terms with fate

as you wind up naked at the dakhma¹ well.
Burdens vary. Throughout life a man carries his death
even as a woman carries her child.

A Parsi carries his hell.

.

¹ Tower of Silence.

The Son Speaks to the Dead Rake

Half your looks you loaned me for a lifetime
for better or for worse; nostrils that flare
like a double-barrelled gun, rectangular forehead
and a scalp thatched with black, unruly hair.

I want to cut away from the physique's tyranny;
resemblances that delude and flash and waver
in the heat. I must reach your spirit,
or addressing you is like conversing with a mirror.

People spot me from the scaffolding of bone
you've left me. They have walked up and said,
'He was a great man, your father.' Were they referring
to your prowess with the gun, the bottle or in the bed?

Your lights were sharp and clear, the world hadn't buckled
under a load of murky twilights. A slice of sin
was bartered for retribution equal in weight.
Your dreams were undisturbed by that pair of jinns,

conscience and guilt, mythical worms,
from whom you seldom heard.
You kept your dogs and you kept your mistresses,
I find it difficult to even keep my word.

And one day you threw out the nautch girls and the pimp.
Your daughter had married and you were fifty-five.
When you took to the rosary you were still a man.
You shed your passions while they were alive!

No private hells bothered you. You'd have faced them well
those fiery circles, all the wretched seven.

What a life! In your youth the pleasures of the flesh.
In your old age the obsolete joys of heaven!

While we oscillate between the fires of lust and guilt
seeking our refuge in those air-tight, air-
conditioned pharmacies of the heart
where the antidotes to guilt are being prepared.

You all made handbags out of human skin.
Ours turns to acne and yet we agonize!
Evil has lost its grades, it wears a petty grin.
You had Hitler, we have Idi Amin!

Truth was last sighted in a credibility gap,
slouching ahead in his Og¹-overalls.
He hasn't emerged since. We do not know
if a mad hyena has got him by the balls.

A middle-aged rep of the middle class, I hide
my icons in dark corners, those self-made shrines
of our ambitions, smooth with use and handling.
I can't convey to you the meanness of the times

which hands us our achievements already fungus-layered
near those slippery, chimerical altars that we bleed on
for half a lifetime and find the effort wasted.
Negative parasites, despising what we feed on

we couldn't be on worse terms with ourselves,
ground fine in those existential mills above,
working at jobs we do not like.
Living with people we do not love.

¹ Olive green.

Your ego mania I've turned to self-contempt;
your sexual bravura to self-doubt.
I quiver with flab and fatigue, bad reflexes and bad faith.
Yet across my jaded appetites a longing reaches out

for the past and a diseased hunger for the future.
What separates us is this, these two decades of dust.
This is the generation gap, this handshake with the dead
across the ravages of our own respective lusts.

To My Daughter Rookzain

Three years and then again
the uterus flowered.

Lights reeled for her
and then blacked off
as they drew you
from the weedbed of the womb.

Then you cried:
a lung of light
in a dark room
and she came back.

Two vaccine-marks
sprout bulbous on your arm
which lies over my shoulder
halfway across my back,

and as you turn warmer
and heavier in my arms
I know that sleep has caught up with you.

Supple-boned fledgeling
you are all gristle, soft-chalk bone
and spiny shadow,
your looks quick with startled birds.

Snug in a forest of syllables
without which the winds prowls
without which the winds howl
but cannot enter.

May you live for ever
in the house of words.

But if you falter, blind with rain
don't panic, you'll find an arm
brown as bark
and when you reach for the bark
may you find the flowers thereon.

While wandering you may hitchhike
through the strangest lands
but when you rest
have known things around you.

Look fresh, like a rain-washed leaf
with a spray of light on it
and may your breath be spiked
as now, with the tang
of mint and clove and cinnamon.

III
IN THE SHADOW OF
THE IMAMBARA

Aag-Matam (The Fire-Mourning)

Alams¹ held aloft the procession comes
(a thought blisters along the arid skull:
so also shoulder-high, the Imam's enemies
carried his severed head, spiked to a spear.)
Alams held aloft, green sliced with stained topaz—
the green which the arab soul hungers for
spliced with the brown realities of the desert—
the procession emerges from the Imambara.²

The fire-bed is fanned with a reed-mat
and sparks fly as if the wind had scattered
a concourse of glow-worms. Calling on his name
and the grief that was his and the iron claw
of fate that marked him for its quarry,
they stamp barefoot across the fire-stubble.
Even children tread the star-clay of this patch,
cinder and fire ash rising to their knees
as the amplifiers urge them on: 'Lovers
of the Imam.³ Moths to the flame of Husain, come!'

Their thirst is a desert as they take the firewalk,
their eyes are already on Karbala
and heads that rolled and the babe Abdullah.⁴
Duldul, the faithful horse, frothing; the sword
in Husain's uplifted hand like a scythe
and waiting for him the harvest of spears!

¹ Heraldic banners inscribed with Imam Husain's name.

² Building where tazias, replicas of Husain's tomb, are kept.

³ Religious leader.

⁴ Husain's infant son, killed at Karbala.

Sixth Moharram, Lucknow

Between the Imambara and the Rumi Gate
traffic has clotted like an epileptic tongue;
the mourners neither press forward nor recede,
their torsos swaying over rooted legs
like the upper reaches of a windlashed tree.
Behind the veil a woman murmurs to her child,
'The spreading weal across their chest recalls
the omen-red of the Karbala-sun.'

Someone quotes the mother of the Imam
as she bemoaned the lightning-burns of fate:
'Such are the hardships
that have swooped on me, that if
they fell upon the days
they would have turned to nights!'
The breast-beating thuds away, as the
lament rises, 'Hai Husain! Husain! Husain!'
This mourning isn't ritual, it is personal,
this heritage of grief passed by father to son,
this rose bleeding endless through the desert of time.

Before passion such as this
you can only offer humility!
They have awaited Moharram
like a tree aching for leaf!
They long for him to walk
the firebed of their dreams!
And even as the body shrivels like a fig
they wet their lips with your name, Husain!

Apothecary

A solemn mask on a liquored-up face
looks incongruous. Why not rip it off?
That's better! Sit down, man! Smile once again!
You don't have to stand there
and cough discreetly and shuffle about.
You haven't come here to condole! All is well
in my house—thank Allah for it who keeps
the obituary-scribe from the door.

Yes, yes, I understand, the death of a patient
is also a death in our family;
a part of me dies with him.
But this boy from Sarai Khwaja complained
of an ear-ache. I'd not seen him before.
Some ear-drops I gave him and forgot about it
till that ekka stood at my door in the evening.
'He's thrashing around like fish . . . a stomach-ache . . .
he just can't bear it . . .'
'An intestinal knot maybe,' I said, and when
I reached the village he was already dead,
his mother looking at me as if I had knifed him.

For this week past I face an empty room, swatting flies.
All my patients come from Sarai Khwaja,
Sarai Mir, Allahdadpur, Kusum Khor.
Five miles on ox-cart and mule-back they came
but now they shun me as if instead
of powders I dole out cholera and pox!

If a man comes to his lawyer for advice
and is murdered on his way back
will his clients abandon him? Never!

But a Hakim¹ turns leper! They won't even read
the *fatiha*² on my grave!
There is no logic to it, it's just there.
As there is no logic to a child
with an ear-ache in the morning
dying by evening of a stomach ailment.

Faith is all very fine. It is one thing to say, 'All this
is the acquiescence of clay to the will of the Lord',
and drain your philosophy with a nightcap,
and quite another to face a hangover and
an empty clinic in the morning.
My uncle is paralysed—Allah is merciful
or what would he have said to this—
my only patient in fifteen days dead!
What does the pedestrian think of it,
Hakim Rizwan-ul-Haq
son of Irfan-ul-Haq
Hakim-ul-Mulk, Physician Royal to the
Nizam of Hyderabad reduced to this?

I know what you are thinking of:
the cars lined on the kerb outside
patients spilling out into the streets
from that homeo clinic across.
He is a widower and keeps
two good-looking compounders.
He tackles a serious case by ramming home
penicillin in the thigh
and a suppository in the rear.
Homeo clinic you call it!

¹ Physician who practises Indian medicine.

² Funeral prayer.

You said something, did you,
Brother-healer did you say? Hippocrates?
A homeopath keeps two handsome
adolescents as his compounders.
Now where does Hippocrates get into the act?

He promises his clientele prophylactic doses
against typhus, measles, chicken pox, flu.
There isn't a plague in the slimy bogs of hell
which Doctor Chandiram, gold-medallist, can't stave off
with one of those powders of his!

Pardon me, for I got carried away.
We all pad the hook with the bait, Allah downwards.
What is paradise, but a promissory note
found in the holy book itself? And if you probe
under the skin what does it promise us
for being humble and truthful, and turning
towards Kaaba five times a day,
weeping in Moharram¹ and fasting in Ramadan²?
What does it promise us except
that flea-ridden bags that we are
we will end up as splendid corpses?

¹ First month of the Muslim calendar.

² The month in which Muslims fast.

On the Contrariness of Dreams

Our daughter is returning to her in-laws now
the way we return to our Lord
each day with our morning prayer
accepting and accepted. They had squabbled
over some trinkets perhaps—and it is over.
We gave no amethysts or pearls
for her marriage—her face was her dowry!
So I have asked her to forbear and she has understood.

They ask about the size of my litter.
'One daughter, the pride of the zenana.'
What about the son, they say.
Never had one, I answer, and if there is one
he isn't mine! If his mother is within
earshot, she cries 'God forbid' and slumps floorwards,
wailing hysteric as if I had
lashed her posterior with a cactus-arm!

It was all due to that dream
she had on his fifteenth birthday.
She saw hot mists rising from a bath
and her son reading the Holy Book.

I kept telling her, the world
of dreams is treacherous
a framework of subtle snakebone.
But she insisted he must be a Divine,
a Pesh Imam at the Jama Mosque.
The signs were clear—she had this dream
to toy with, her son leading the Idgah¹ prayers
after the rams were slaughtered at Id ul zuha.

¹ Assembling place for Id prayers.

Women must be confined to the zenana
like quail in a wicker basket.
But I listened to her! 'I want to become a pilot',
my son would repeat each day of the year,
each hour of the day. We rammed
Arabic down his throat
till he turned restive like a chained mastiff.
When he couldn't fly, he started tinkering
with cars and autoservice stations.
And one day we found the constable at our door:
Our son had stolen half a dozen scooters!

I went to the *kahin*, the dream-reader
and after he had heard me he asked
'Pardon my question but does your son
commit abominations
and solicit for whores?'
Shocked, I replied, 'No, he simply steals
scooters, thank heaven for it!'

'You are in luck,' he said, 'I expected worse.
Baths seen in dreams are to be abhorred.
Baths are the place where genitals are uncovered,
shunned by the angels as the devil shuns a mosque.
To dream of reading the Book there
points to abominations that will violate
each fiat in the Book!'
He shook his head, 'Things could have been worse.'

So much for dreams, those two-mouthed snakes
that crawl mysterious
across the visual and the para-visual.
Rushaid—you have heard of him—once dreamt
he had urinated in the *mehrab*¹ of a mosque.

¹ A niche in the centre of a wall of a mosque which marks the direction of Mecca.

He woke up terrified but dream-diviners said,
‘A son will be born to you
a great religious scholar!’
And this wife of mine dreams of a Turkish bath,
her only son and the Holy Book
and divines ask me, ‘Does he solicit for whores!’

The Mazars¹ of Amroha (For Nandan and Latika)

The Scorpion Mazar

Just a cluster of domes; and on ledge and parapet
dove-siesta. Even bluebottles, drongoes
failed to bring colour to this heart-grey landscape.
The cold afternoon was hammered out of zinc.

This was no *dargah* where qawwals²
exercised their lungs at night
and royalty came barefoot
asking for son or kingdom.
Just a tree that spiralled out of a grave,
a wall on which Shah Vilayat had 'travelled'
to welcome an incoming anchorite;
and the tombs where people brought dough-lumps
to feed sick cattle after the dough was blessed.

It was the scorpions who were on display here,
their menace for ever frozen.
Whisked out of a matchbox one slid across my palm
with a spider's lichened touch,
like an acrobat walking on his hands.

'Thou shall not sting', were the saint's last words.
Are they scorpions or ascetics, these black ones
these iron-grey ones who have
excised their sting at a command
and denied their passions, as they kept
to themselves each drop of deliberate venom?

¹ Shrine, tomb.

² Professional singers.

Who are the fakirs here?
the ones who sleep
or the ones who crawl?

The Coming of the Sufi

It was winter when he crossed the river.
The cotton tree was in flower and the wind
was full of the dove-grey fluff of the plumed grass.
As he squelched through mud-islands, gull-marked,
and geese and mallard rose—
a screaming island seemed to rise on wings!

He walked through a dawn of marsh-birds
and wastes of plumed grass till he reached
fields spiked with scarecrows, fields of mustard
where nights resounded to the peasant's din
as they shooed boar and porcupine away.

Some miles away from the town he shacked up
in a guava-grove. And disciples gathered
fungus-like around him; and each day they came
to him at dusk after he had turned to the *Kaaba*.
For though the wind showed fangs
Nasiruddin's heart glowed like a lantern.

And one day a disciple of Shah Vilayat
brought him a clay urn full of milk.
And Nasiruddin placed a rose in the milk-urn
and returned it to the *Pir*.¹

The acolytes asked what this sign-talk was about
And he answered, 'The milk-urn was sent to show
the chalice was full!
The town already had a saint!

¹ Holy man.

Where was the room for me in Amroha?
And I placed a rose in the urn
a child-skin rose without thorns.
I would live here like a flower!
Without trespass, without encumbrance!

Nasiruddin Rides a Tiger

The season turned, and the flame of the forest
flowered with embering coals.
The koel cried in the mango-groves
the crickets shrilled through the night.
But the flag of his hopes flew at half-mast.
True, they honoured him, a fisherman
would bow as he passed by; a keeper
of melon-beds would pour the dust he trod
over his bald head, dark as pumpkin gourd.

But where was the ring of disciples
the ecclesiastical debates on vision
and alchemy, being and non-being, the homage
from muezzins, mauvis, the divines?

Nasiruddin chafed; his ambition was obvious
like antennae, probosces. Who knew when
the arm of god, outstretched in blessing, withdrew;
when his visions, an overhang of light, collapsed
and when the brainfires would gutter?

'Bring me a tiger!' he cried, and through his mystic powers
a tiger came. And he mounted it
and said, 'Come! let's go to the casbah!'

The Battle of Curses

And when Shah Vilayat heard that a fakir
was coming to Amroha riding on a tiger—
some upstart sufi who lived with the marsh-birds
some locust-eater thrown up by the night—
he sat astride a wall and cried, 'Move.
Let's go and receive Shah Nasiruddin!'

They met like horsemen tilting in the sun
the thin anchorite on a bounding tiger
the well-fed saint on a moving wall!
Each saw that the other had drunk
heavily from the chalice of the spirit.
Both were afraid their anger may course through
like water over a breached dam.
But it was hot, the landscape was a peroxide blond
and winds sounded like an orchestral wail.

Nasiruddin, smarting, was the first to curse,
'May scorpions prowl around your grave.'
And Shah Vilayat bowed, knowing behind each word
were acres of silence. But he took
the bite out of the curse, saying,
'Yes, but the scorpions will not sting!'

Now it was Shah Vilayat's turn
and he swung the spiked mace of his curse and cried,
'Asses will roll on your grave!'
Stricken, the anchorite replied,
'Yes, but the area will be free from their turd.'

So the scorpion glides along the palm, spider-soft
and if an ass is missing in the surrounding hamlets
the owners know where to find it.

