

A Three Crowns Book

Nissim Ezekiel was born in Bombay in 1924, and was educated at Wilson College, Bombay where he is currently Reader in American Literature at the University. His works include *A Time to Change* (1952), *Sixty Poems* (1953), *The Third* (1959), *The Unfinished Man* (1960), *The Exact Name* (1965), *Three Plays* (1969) and *Snakeskin and Other Poems* (1974), translations from the Marathi of Indira Sant.

Hymns in Darkness is his first book of poems in twelve years. His poetry is both the instrument and the outcome of his attempt as a man to come to terms with himself. One finds in the poems the imprint of a keen, analytical mind trying to explore and communicate feelings of loss and deprivation. A situation is examined with ironic detachment in the hope that it would offer release, though this seldom happens.

*

Confiscate my passport, Lord,
I don't want to go abroad.
Let me find my song,
where I belong.

from The Egoist's Prayers



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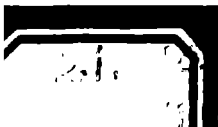


Three Crowns

Nissim Ezekiel

Hymns in Darkness

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Hymns in Darkness

NISSIM EZEKIEL

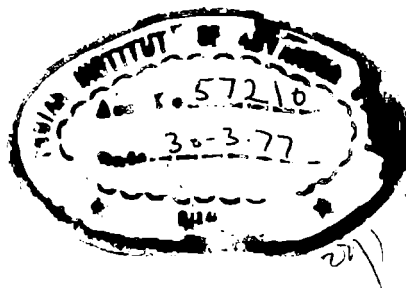
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For

KEKU AND KHORSHED GANDHY

FOREWORD

The poems in this selection are not arranged chronologically. The poem placed first and the 'Hymns in Darkness' at the end of the book were written in the last quarter of 1974. The only other poems of that year, 'The Egoist's Prayers', and the 'Passion Poems', written in April 1975, have been exhibited on posters. To this group naturally belong the 'Poster Poems', exhibited in August 1973 and written during the previous twelve months or so. All these constitute the last section of the book, though I have not provided any formal divisions.

Of 'The Egoist's Prayers' I said in a catalogue note that in searching for a suitable poetic form which could be used on posters, I had arrived at a number of starting points from Vedic hymns to American Indian songs and Zen fables. In a similar catalogue note for 'Passion Poems', I mentioned their derivation from Sanskrit love poetry in English translation (by Ingalls).

'Background, Casually', third in the order of poems here, was commissioned by the Commonwealth Arts Festival Committee, and composed in 1965. Of my 'Very Indian Poems in Indian English', of which there are eight, I have included two examples: 'Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.' and 'The Railway Clerk'. The first was written in 1967 soon after I began the series, and the other in 1972.

Only two poems in this selection use rhyme. The rest are in free verse, except for the 'Hymns' which are obviously based on a different principle of composition. I need not define that principle here, but I hope no one will refer to them as 'prose poetry'. In addition to 'The Truth about the Floods', which is technically a found poem, 'Rural Suite' is almost entirely derived from a personal letter addressed to me. I did not visit the village described nor make the experience which is its substance.

Bombay,
26 July 1976

Nissim Ezekiel

CONTENTS

Subject of Change	9
Cry	10
Background, Casually	11
Island	14
The Couple	15
The Railway Clerk	17
The Truth about the Floods	19
On Bellasis Road	22
Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.	23
Guru	25
Distance	26
Entertainment	27
For Satish Gujral	28
Poem of the Separation	29
Rural Suite	31
London	33
How the English Lessons Ended	35
Ganga	37
Tone Poem	38
Advice to a Painter	40
Tribute to the <i>Upanishads</i>	41
The Room	42
Mind	43
Poster Poems	44
The Egoist's Prayers	48
Passion Poems	50
Hymns in Darkness	53

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Some of the poems in this book first appeared in *Adam* (London), *Ariel* (Leeds), *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, *Kamadhenu* (U.S.A.), *Quest*, *The Statesman*, *Vagartha*, *Verse and Voice* (The Poetry Book Society, London, 1965), *London Magazine*, *Outposts* (U.K.), and *The Voice of the Indian Poets* (United Writers, Calcutta, 1975). Acknowledgements are due to the editors.

SUBJECT OF CHANGE

The evening walk proved not to be
Along the shore of memory.
I edged towards a different light:
The fevers of a future night.

That I was on the move, foresaw
The fury of my inner law,
Consoled me as I looked around
And felt, for all, the shaking ground.

Not a stone in the edifice,
Well-loved, is likely to suffice.
Everything calls for a new place
A different rage behind my face.

The sea is calm, a flight of birds
Fills the sky with a million words.
A gentle wind blows them away:
Evil enough unto the day.

The people walk, and eat. The waves
Rise and fall like nightmare graves
That cannot hold their dead. The sky
Is smaller than this open eye.

CRY 

Breathe
My breath
And let me
Breathe yours,
Bodies
Savouring
Phenomena,
Sifting
Passion
To the fine
Point
Of penetration,
Luminous
Obscene
Noumena,
Breath
Of my
Breath of my
Being.

BACKGROUND, CASUALLY

I

A poet-rascal-clown was born,
The frightened child who would not eat
Or sleep, a boy of meagre bone.
He never learnt to fly a kite,
His borrowed top refused to spin.

I went to Roman Catholic school,
A mugging Jew among the wolves.
They told me I had killed the Christ,
That year I won the scripture prize.
A Muslim sportsman boxed my ears.

I grew in terror of the strong
But undernourished Hindu lads,
Their prepositions always wrong,
Repelled me by passivity.
One noisy day I used a knife.

At home on Friday nights the prayers
Were said. My morals had declined.
I heard of Yoga and of Zen.
Could I, perhaps, be rabbi-saint?
The more I searched, the less I found.

Twenty-two: time to go abroad.
First, the decision, then a friend
To pay the fare. Philosophy,
Poverty and Poetry, three
Companions shared my basement room.

The London seasons passed me by.
 I lay in bed two years alone,
 And then a Woman came to tell
 My willing ears I was the Son
 Of Man. I knew that I had failed

In everything, a bitter thought.
 So, in an English cargo-ship
 Taking French guns and mortar shells
 To Indo-China, scrubbed the decks,
 And learned to laugh again at home.

How to feel it home, was the point.
 Some reading had been done, but what
 Had I observed, except my own
 Exasperation? All Hindus are
 Like that, my father used to say,

When someone talked too loudly, or
 Knocked at the door like the Devil.
 They hawked and spat. They sprawled around.
 I prepared for the worst. Married,
 Changed jobs, and saw myself a fool.

The song of my experience sung,
 I knew that all was yet to sing.
 My ancestors, among the castes,
 Were aliens crushing seed¹ for bread
 (The hooded bullock made his rounds).

¹Bene Israel tradition has it that their ancestors took to oil pressing soon after arrival in India. Hence *Shanwar teli*, Saturday oil-pressers, i.e. who did not work on Saturdays.

One among them fought and taught,
 A Major bearing British arms.
 He told my father sad stories
 Of the Boer War. I dreamed that
 Fierce men had bound my feet and hands.

The later dreams were all of words.
 I did not know that words betray
 But let the poems come, and lost
 That grip on things the worldly prize.
 I would not suffer that again.

I look about me now, and try
 To formulate a plainer view:
 The wise survive and serve—to play
 The fool, to cash in on
 The inner and the outer storms.

The Indian landscape sears my eyes.
 I have become a part of it
 To be observed by foreigners.
 They say that I am singular,
 Their letters overstate the case.

I have made my commitments now.
 This is one: to stay where I am,
 As others choose to give themselves
 In some remote and backward place.
 My backward place is where I am.

ISLAND

Unsuitable for song as well as sense
the island flowers into slums
and skyscrapers, reflecting
precisely the growth of my mind.
I am here to find my way in it.

Sometimes I cry for help
but mostly keep my own counsel.
I hear distorted echoes
of my own ambiguous voice
and of dragons claiming to be human.

Bright and tempting breezes
flow across the island,
separating past from future;
then the air is still again
as I sleep the sleep of ignorance.

How delight the soul with absolute
sense of salvation, how
hold to a single willed direction?
I cannot leave the island,
I was born here and belong.

Even now a host of miracles
hurries me to daily business,
minding the ways of the island
as a good native should,
taking calm and clamour in my stride.

THE COUPLE

Indolence and arrogance
were rooted in her primal will,
a woman to fear, not to love,
yet he made love to her
(who can say he loved her?)
and damn the consequences.

You're a wonderful woman, he said,
and she laughed happily,
having heard it before from many men
all trapped in the desire
to see her naked
and to know how she surrendered
who was so hard and vain.
In that moment of mutual deception,
she was truly quite beautiful
and almost lovable.
She did it prettily enough,
demonstrating
with childlike glee
a trick or two.

As for him—
he knew he was lying,
but then how else
could he hope to win her?
The flattery and the bold advances
were necessary after all,
the minimum politics of survival and success.
And how charmingly she took it all!
What could a man do?
Her false love became infused
with truest love
only in making love.

To love her was impossible,
to abandon her unthinkable.
He had to make love to her,
a charade of passion and possession
in which some truth was found in her.

THE RAILWAY CLERK

It isn't my fault.
I do what I'm told
but still I am blamed.
This year, my leave application
was twice refused.
Every day there is so much work
and I don't get overtime.
My wife is always asking for more money.
Money, money, where to get money?
My job is such, no one is giving bribe,
while other clerks are in fortunate position,
and no promotion even because I am not graduate.

I wish I was bird.

I am never neglecting my responsibility,
I am discharging it properly,
I am doing my duty,
but who is appreciating?
Nobody, I am telling you.

My desk is too small,
the fan is not repaired for two months,
three months.
I am living far off in Borivli,
my children are neglecting studies,
how long this can go on?

Once a week, I see film
and then I am happy, but not otherwise.
Also, I have good friends,
that is only consolation.
Sometimes we are meeting here or there
and having long chat.
We are discussing country's problems.
Some are thinking of foreign
but due to circumstances, I cannot think.
My wife's mother is confined to bed
and I am only support.

THE TRUTH ABOUT THE FLOODS

(A found poem based on a report by V. K. Dixit in
The Indian Express, Bombay, 25 September, 1967.)

For a visitor
to the flood-affected areas
of Balasore, Mayurbhanj and Cuttack
in North Bihar and Orissa,
it is a job to get at the truth.

Meet any official,
he will claim his district,
sub-division or block
is the 'worst-hit',
and pass on a hand-out
with statistics of relief-work.

The village of Mandaspur,
nine miles from Balasore district—
the granary of Orissa.
Early morning.
After eight days of floods,
paddy-fields with knee-deep water.
A villager speaks:
'I have eleven children.
Two I have left to the mercy of God.
The rest are begging, somewhere.'

I went to the village
to find out the truth.
All the houses had collapsed.
Many were washed away.
The men, women and children
were silent.
They gazed at the sky.

I had walked two miles
in muddy water '
to reach the village,
but the villagers would not tell me anything
until I convinced them I wasn't a government official.

'The floods were sudden.
The entire village was asleep.
We heard a roaring sound
and were engulfed.
We took shelter on tree-tops.'

A relief party came at last.
Five students
with a transistor,
a tin of biscuits,
a camera.

The villagers ran to them.
They slapped their bellies
and whined:
'I have not eaten for three days.'
'My husband has been washed away.'
'My parents have abandoned me.'
'My son is dying.'
'I cannot find my daughter.'

'Don't make a noise,'
said the students,
'sit down in a circle.'
The villagers sat down in a circle.
They did not say another word.
The transistor was on,
the biscuits were distributed,
the camera clicked.
Then the students left
humming the tune
of a popular Hindi film song.

I moved on
and arrived at a swollen tributary.
The boatman wouldn't ferry me across
till I told him I wasn't a government official.

I arrived at Arda
but the villagers wouldn't talk to me
till I told them I wasn't a government official.

At Badapal
I heard the children
wail with hunger.
An atmosphere of despair
pervaded the village.
I asked the men to help me
organize relief,
but they turned their backs on me
till I told them I wasn't a government official.

The district authorities
at Balasore
admitted they had failed,
but they claimed they could not have done better.
Nature, they said,
had conspired against them.
'Write the truth,' they said,
'in your report.'

And so I did.

ON BELLASIS ROAD

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

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

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

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

I see her image now
as through a telescope,
without a single
desperate moral
to keep it in focus,
remote and close-up.
Of what use then to see and think?
I cannot even say I care or do not care,
perhaps it is a kind of despair.

GOODBYE PARTY FOR MISS PUSHPA T. S.

Friends,
our dear sister
is departing for foreign
in two three days,
and
we are meeting today
to wish her bon voyage.

You are all knowing, friends,
what sweetness is in Miss Pushpa.
I don't mean only external sweetness
but internal sweetness.
Miss Pushpa is smiling and smiling
even for no reason
but simply because she is feeling.

Miss Pushpa is coming
from very high family.
Her father was renowned advocate
in Bulsar or Surat,
I am not remembering now which place.

Surat? Ah, yes,
once only I stayed in Surat
with family members
of my uncle's very old friend,
his wife was cooking nicely...
that was long time ago.

Coming back to Miss Pushpa
she is most popular lady
with men also and ladies also.

Whenever I asked her to do anything,
she was saying, 'Just now only
I will do it.' That is showing
good spirit. I am always
appreciating the good spirit.
Pushpa Miss is never saying no.
Whatever I or anybody is asking
she is always saying yes,
and today she is going
to improve her prospect
and we are wishing her bon voyage.

Now I ask other speakers to speak
and afterwards Miss Pushpa
will do summing up.

GURU

The saint, we are told,
once lived a life of sin—
nothing spectacular, of course,
just the usual things.
We smile, we are not surprised.
Unlikely though it seem,
we too one day
may grow up like him,
dropping our follies
like old clothes or creeds.

But then we learn
the saint is still a faithless friend,
obstinate in argument,
ungrateful for favours done,
hard with servants and the poor,
discourteous to disciples, especially men,
condescending, even rude
to visitors (except the foreigners)
and overscrupulous in checking
the accounts of the *ashram*.¹
He is also rather fat.

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

¹ Hermitage, religious retreat.

DISTANCE

iv

Illusion, with the darker root I know,
Makes me bristle with my paltry words.

I see myself enhanced and also small.
You look into the distance, or down, in doubt

Which you deny at my interpretation.
'That's not what I mean, not that at all.'

I wait for understanding; love is our fiction.
The crux of the matter is the sexual dream.

The closer you come, the further you move.
I can only observe the hallucination.

I try to make it simpler, more direct.
You're perched upon your fear like a bird

That has flown from a long distance,
A mere prologue to a longer flight.

ENTERTAINMENT

The monkey-show is on:
patient girl on haunches
holds the strings,
a baby in her arms.
Two tiny monkeys
in red and purple pantaloons
prepare to dance.
Crowd collects,
forms a circle.
Naked to the waist,
the Master of Ceremonies
drums frenzy, cracks whip,
calls the tricks
to earn applause and copper coins.
The circle thickens as the plot thickens,
children laugh, the untouchable women
smooth their hair. A coolie
grins at me, his white teeth
gleam in the sunlight.
Only the monkeys are sad,
and suddenly
the baby begins to cry.
Anticipating time for payment,
the crowd dissolves.
Some, in shame, part
with the smallest coin they have.
The show moves on.

FOR SATISH GUJRAL

The deaf artist
who has never heard a human voice
articulate the language
of his choice
declares with passion
his drunken creed.
I mean no disrespect.
What does one do
whose loss
and liability
loom as large as this?

Deaf artists all,
all of us who martyr the meaning
in the flux
to lonely
and heated visions whoring
after truth.
Mea culpa. Punish me.
It is the task
of love
and imagination
to hear what can't be heard
when everybody speaks.

POEM OF THE SEPARATION

To judge by memory alone,
our love was happy
when the bombs burst in Kashmir;
my life had burst
and merged in yours.

The war did not matter
though we tried to care,
the season, time and place
rejected their usual names.
One day you said,
'Suddenly, I feel
grown up.' The price was only
a thousand kisses.

Any man may be a whirlwind,
any woman lightning,
but buses take us to our meeting,
trains to our destination.
In these, and in cafes,
on beaches
and on benches in the park,
our music was made.

I ask you to pause
and to hear it again,
but you sweep ahead to hear
another music.
It's true we cannot live on echoes.

Ten thousand miles away,
you become a shower of letters,
a photograph, a newspaper cutting
underlined, with pencilled comments,
and a smell at night.

In the squalid, crude
city of my birth and rebirth,
you were a new way
of laughing at the truth.
I want you back
with the rough happiness you lightly wear,
supported by your shoulders,
breasts and thighs.

But you ask to break it up.
Your latest letter says:
'I am enclosing
Ramanujan's translation
of a Kannada religious poem:
"The Lord is playing
with streamers of fire."
I want to play with fire.
Let me get burnt.'

RURAL SUITE

gr

Over a hill or two
covered with cashew-nut trees,
across a narrow and precarious ridge
to a part of the river
I had never seen,
a village youth conducted us
in a wash of evening light and decay.

He merged into the landscape
as we could never be,
his bare skin, except
for the usual cloth,
stretching tightly over lean limbs.

It was like walking
with an animal.
Only his smile
made him human.

Returning home
I hear the thin strumming
of a one-stringed instrument:
it means the *bhikshuks*¹ are at it again.

It's a summer vocation with some people here:
They've finished their ploughing and sowing,
there's nothing for them to do now
except wait for the harvest.
So they go around
strumming and singing.

¹Religious mendicants.

Because of the superstition
rampant in these villages,
they're royally treated—
may well be God, testing his people—
and carry away huge quantities of rice,
chillies, fruit and nuts.
It's a shameless exploitation
of the people's ignorance.
It's not even as if they need the food:
most of them are wealthy farmers
from the neighbouring villages
with a taste for hoarding gold.

Nothing changes here: not even
the cliché that nothing changes here.
Today I journeyed down a slow stream,
the punt—a primæval specimen,
replica of the prototype
going back a thousand
or a hundred thousand years.
The coconut palms that line the banks
seem as far as the stars.

Note : This poem is derived from a letter.

LONDON

That basement room
remains a true place
in my chronology.
Cold and bare, it held
a real turbulence
in check, for growth
that could be almost
measured with the seasons.
Of the two friends
who, at different times,
shared it, one became
withdrawn for twenty years
and paid the price
for marriage and a job,
both without the prospect
of passion's compensations.
The other trained himself
'for a great career'
along a single track,
taught me how to blaze away
despite my inner knots:
smudged and mixed-up roles
never quite subdued
to time and circumstance.
Sometimes I think I'm still
in that basement room,
a permanent and proud
metaphor of struggle

for and against the same
creative, self-destructive self.

I want to leave that room,
the paraphernalia,
the fuss, the clutter,
the whole bag of tricks,
and go into something
so public and anonymous,
one would be unseen
like God's love, obscured by life.

HOW THE ENGLISH LESSONS ENDED

My Muslim neighbour's daughter,
getting on to nineteen
but not yet matriculate,
wears a *burkha*¹ when she leaves for school
a hundred yards away.

They've tried and tried
to get her married off,
but three successive years
the girl has failed in English.
Each time the father railed,

the mother fainted, fasted and abused,
then they thought of me, the English teacher
just next door. A little help
is all she needs, if you don't mind,
you know we are neighbours long long time.

I agree we are neighbours long long time.
Send the girl along, I'll see
what I can do. She comes, sheds her *burkha*:
tall, thin, dark, with shifting eyes,
small face and heavy clouds of hair.

She's very serious—for ten minutes,
then she smiles, and smiles some more.
In half an hour she giggles, I learn,
giggling is what she's really good at,
with plenty of practice, not at home.

Friendly with my daughter
who's getting on to sixteen
and about to matriculate—
we haven't tried to get *her* married off—
she takes her home one day

¹ Garment worn by orthodox Muslim women which covers them completely from head to foot, hiding even the face.

and shows her pictures
in a certain kind of book.
My daughter tells my wife
who tells my mother
who tells me. I laugh it off.

She comes again, and suddenly
she knows I know. The English lessons
end abruptly. I've learnt enough, she claims.
She's learnt enough to say she's learnt enough.
The father rails, the mother fasts and abuses

but she will not return.
They probably decide I made advances,
and almost hint as much
to my poor mother, who's outraged.
There's gratitude for you, she says,

That girl will never get a husband !

A month later she was married.
Now she doesn't need that picture-book.

GANGA

We pride ourselves
on generosity
to servants. The woman
who washes up, suspected
of prostitution,
is not dismissed.

She always gets
a cup of tea
preserved for her
from the previous evening,
and a *chapati*,¹ stale
but in good condition.

Once a year, an old
sari, and a blouse
for which we could
easily exchange a plate
or a cup and saucer.
Besides, she borrows
small coins for *pan*²
or a sweet for her child.

She brings a smell with her
and leaves it behind her,
but we are used to it.
These people never learn.

adequate

¹ Small round of unleavened bread, baked on a griddle.

² Astringent mixture of areca-nut, lime, tobacco, etc.
wrapped in betel leaf for chewing.

TONE POEM

Your breasts are small,
tender
like your feelings.

This is Pooh's world;
you love
the Pooh in me

and in others.
You smile
at dirty jokes.

You buy useless
odd things
from new boutiques

with messages:
'Don't make
a fool of me,

I'm one already.'
You write
long, mad letters

celebrating
our creedless
eccentricities.

You are gentle,
your gestures
do not disturb
the air. I feel
I am
not in pursuit

of anything
except
animal faith
with the mysteries
of love
dissolved in it.

ADVICE TO A PAINTER

'Sir, I must take to painting seriously
and give expression to my feelings
in colour.' Those are your very words.
So I reply, 'Yes, my dear, do that.
I shall be watching from the wings.'

Your name is Edna Lobo. Once
you were my student in Goa, that's how we met.
I lectured to you on Whitman and Thoreau.
Now you teach at Saligao, your native place,
which I visit twice a year.

These are the facts. Now for the feelings.
Better than embroidery, than gossip
in the staff-room, is painting seriously,
my dear, and letting down your hair.
Don't be as modest as the maid

who shut her window tight
before she changed her mind;
but don't forget to change your style
every year or two, it's the only way
to keep up with the times.

Buy lots of paint, I'll send you some from here.
Plan a trip abroad, all the artists do.
Plan publicity, all the artists do.
A woman has her hopes and dreams.
Announce yours to *Live's Weekly* and feel fulfilled.

Do not be satisfied with the world
that God created. Create your own.
Be voracious with your eyes and appetites:
the will to see, the passion in the act of love
or learning lead to brighter prospects
in landscape, still life, nude, abstract,
and also higher prices.

TRIBUTE TO THE *UPANISHADS*

To feel that one is Somebody
is to drive oneself
in a kind of hearse —
the destination is obvious.
I don't want to be
the skin of the fruit
or the flesh
or even the seed,
which only grows into another
wholesome fruit.
The secret locked within the seed
becomes my need, and so
I shrink to the nothingness
within the seed.
At first it is cold,
I shiver there,
later comes a touch of truth,
a ferment in the darkness,
finally a teasing light.
For the present, this is enough,
that I am free
to be the Self in me,
which is not Somebody—
not, at any rate,
the mortal me,
but the Eye of the eye
that is trying to see.

No body

THE ROOM

To live in this room
without a fever or exaggeration
proves beyond my means,
my ready cash of doctrine
and deliberation. The door
is always open
but I cannot leave.
I mock myself here
as if my very existence
is presumption. One cannot stare for long
at nothing, or contemplate a view
where only obstacles reflect
the view within. I have to name anew
the things I see.
There are too many contradictions and books,
too much love and not enough love,
the attempt to dance
without learning to walk.
Arranged and rearranged,
the room is always the same.
Its shadows shift about restlessly
and fall into different patterns:
the light is unsteady, thin and flat.
Yet some events are to happen here
not of moods only but of visions.
For this the room is not yet ready.

MIND

Warily, as is my way, I came
Upon my own mind thinking.
It moved with all it knew, but truly
It was sinking, sinking.

Come on, mind, I said, the time is now
To demonstrate upbringing.
How could that beast of burden know
The art of swinging.

Mind, you are well-fed but hardly trained
To hear a strict calling.
You slouch and slither in a half-sleep
Towards your falling.

Is this then your way to oblivion?
Sad artificer, clinging
Too long to the same static vision
For a timely springing.

Misled by norms, the light of reason,
Your passionate waiting
Crumbles, while the tough mad creators
Press forward in creating.

POSTER POEMS

1

My father talked too loudly
and too much,
but just before he died
his voice became soft and sad
as though whispering secrets
he had learnt too late.
He drew me close to him
and spoke his truths to me.
I felt the breath of his love
but could not hear a word.

2

Subconsciously
we all pray
that what is great in others
may be great in us.
It takes the various shapes
of envy, hovering
over conversation,
that daily violation of human love.

3

'Do not employ attractive servants.'

Chu Po-Lo

Let all the servants in the world be attractive.
Let them have bright faces and clean clothes.
Let them have fine figures and sweet voices.
Let the masters divorce their wives
and marry the servants.

4

Crocodile tears
 are unknown to crocodiles.
 The lion's wrath
 is small compared to mine.
 The lamb is not as innocent
 as lovers in the act of love.
 No sluggard learns from the ant.
 Life is not as simple
 as morality.

5

I've never been a refugee
 except of the spirit,
 a loved and troubled country
 which is my home and enemy.

6

Contemplate
 your own hand—
 it holds the secrets
 of nature and of art,
 also of the self
 nakedly expressed
 in bone, flesh and form,
 flowing line
 and flexibility.

7

Straight in the eye
 is the way of love,
 hate, respect, contempt.
 The half-truths look away,
 remote as the horizon.

8

The Eterial Ego Speaks

Suppose I were a shooting star,
 I would want to be seen.
 That would be my only meaning.
 What is there, after all,
 in shooting across the sky
 and being burnt up?
 But being *seen*!
 That would be another thing.

9

THE NEUTRAL

A

With, among, but never of
 nor aloof,
 not critic, not dissenter,
 flattened out, evaporated,
 inconspicuous, merely a man
 visible as dot or smudge
 in some badly printed
 newspaper photograph
 of mass meeting or procession
 joined for the sake of a believing friend.

B

I signed the manifesto.
 I paid the subscription.
 I worked on the committee.
 I attended the party.
 It made no difference.
 The common language
 hid my absence.

C

Customer
in the shop of the world,
tourist from another planet,
citizen of past and future,
deceiving with appearances,
passing as a human being.

D

Making love to many women
as to the same woman,
playing father, uncle, son, nephew,
brother, cousin, x-in-law,
changing jobs, roles, gods,
virtues, vices, points of view,
courageous-cowardly and callous-sensitive
between the doubtful words and silences.

E

Yoga, Zen, Kabbala,
St John of the Cross, Pelmanism,
Plotinus, Sell Your Way to Success,
Kierkegaard, Pascal,
Think and Grow Rich,
The Four Quartets.
And How to Change Yourself in Ten Days.

THE EGOIST'S PRAYERS

1

Kick me around
a bit more, O Lord.
I see at last
there's no other way
for me to learn
your simplest truths.

2

The vices I've always had
I still have.
The virtues I've never had
I still do not have.
From this Human Way of Life
Who can rescue Man
If not his Maker?
Do thy duty, Lord.

3

No, Lord,
not the fruit of action
is my motive.
But do you really mind
half a bite of it?
It tastes so sweet,
and I'm so hungry.

4

Do not choose me, O Lord,
 to carry out thy purposes.
 I'm quite worthy, of course,
 but I have my own purposes.
 You have plenty of volunteers
 to choose from, Lord.
 Why pick on me, the selfish one?

O well, if you insist,
 I'll do your will.
 Please try to make it coincide with mine.

5

Let me be, O Lord,
 the Camel of the Higher Income Group
 who passes smoothly through
 the eye of that needle.

6

The price of wisdom
 is too high,
 but folly is expensive too.
 Strike a bargain with me, Lord.
 I'm not a man of ample means.

7

Confiscate my passport, Lord,
 I don't want to go abroad.
 Let me find my song
 where I belong.

PASSION POEMS

1

SUMMER

Too warm
for love-making.
Not too warm
for caressing.
We're cool after bathing
together.

2

MONSOON

You arrived
with sari clinging
to your breasts and hips.
I put a kiss upon your lips.
No part of you
could hide
as you dried.

3

THE SANSKRIT POETS

How freely they mention
breasts and buttocks.
They are my poetic ancestors.
Why am I so inhibited?

4

ON GIVING REASONS

She gave me
six good reasons
for saying No,
and then
for no reason at all
dropped all her reasons
with her clothes.

5

NAMES

I remember
nothing
except that she
uttered my name
over and over again
and I,
hers.

6

A MARRIAGE

Krishna's tricks
are not for him
nor Radha's wiles
for her.
They have a different truth
within a kingdom of their own.

I envy them.

7

THE COUPLE

His love is small,
a flickering lamp,
while hers lights up
the universe. How on earth
are they to see each other
in its normal darkness?
Only the gods
can help them now.

8

THE LOSS

I have lost my reason—
let it go.
Did I create this woman,
untameable and yet
willing to be tamed?
Only Shiva, meditating,
could be immovable
in her moving presence.
As for me,
I hardly meditate at all.

9

QUARREL

All night I talked to you,
a troubled dream
of many words
and not a single kiss.
Let us not quarrel again,
so I may never dream
in arguments alone.

- Vedic translation in
free verse

HYMNS IN DARKNESS

1

He knows how to speak of humility,
without humility.

He has exchanged the wisdom of youthfulness
for the follies of maturity.

What is lost is certain, what is gained
of dubious value.

Self-esteem stunts his growth. He has not learnt
how to be nobody.

All his truths are outside him,
and mock his activity.

The noise of the city is matched
by the noise in his spirit.

2

Self-deception is a fact of being. How, then, to
be undeceived?

He has found too many secrets that will not work,
too many keys that unlock no locks.

He lives in the world of desires and devices. It
is colourful and full of poetry.

For every truth in his possession, he has a
falsehood to go with it.

He speaks with his own voice. He listens
with the third ear. He sees
with the eye
in the centre of his forehead.

each thought is an
... 53 or slither -

It's all of little use.
He's still a puny self
hoping to manipulate the universe and all
its manifest powers for his own advancement,
advantages.

Again and again, he loses the war of motives,
self-deceived.

3

He has seen the signs
but not been faithful to them.

Where is the fixed star of his seeking?
It multiplies like a candle
in the eyes of a drunkard.

He looks at the nakedness of truth
in the spirit of a Peeping Tom.

Changing his name would be no help.
He is the man
full of his name.

4

The difficult way is the subject of his theories. }
The easy way is his choice.

He has played at being disciple.
He has played at being guru.

To his wife an impossible husband.
To his children less than loving.

Now he calls it destiny.
He names the circumstances.

A life is a symbolic pattern.
He's this life.
He's the interpretation.

5

So much light in total darkness!
So much courage given, beside the abyss!

Why was he forgiven,
helped,
comforted?

Whose the voice of truth
that spoke through the imperfect words?

He has lost faith in himself
and found faith at last.

How far a man may travel
in the wrong direction!

Now he is snug
in his hindsight wisdom.

His follies are familiar,
accepted
like old friends.

Incapable of quarrelling with them,
he maintains the old
stale
unredeemable relationships.

A single decision
is better than a hundred thoughts.

To hell with all directions, old and new.

For the

There's only this:

a tarred road
under a mild sun
after rain,
glowing;

wet, green leaves
patterned flat
on the pavement
around dog-shit;

one ragged slipper
near an open gutter,
three crows
pecking away at it.

And breasts, thighs, buttocks
swinging
now towards
now away from him.

full stop for

He is now at the sources of it.

Self-love, vanity throw a sickly light on his gods.

He prays for power and stamina, to make it.

The prayers are answered. The gods are kind.

His house is built on rock.

It shakes in the wind.

All around it the land is laid waste.

He sits alone and looks out of the window.

He contemplates the sources of his life.

9

That which has to be is being had here.

Don't, she says, don't,
conniving all the same.

Short of tearing her clothes
he's using all his force.

Soon, he's had what he wanted,
soft, warm and round.

Wasn't it Blake who said *casualty*
that the nakedness of woman is the work of God?

If only he could love the bitch!

There's one thing to be said for hell: *evens*
it's a pretty lively place.
A man could be happy there.

10

A man, it's often been said,
is simply a man.

He's not a middle-aged man.
He's not an old man.

hy He's not a married man.
He's not a man with children.

He's not a professor or a journalist.
He's not a foolish man or a wise man.

He's not tall and handsome
or small and crabbed-looking.

end He's simply a man,
and his speech is human.

The rest is important
to understand that speech.

11

The Enemy is God
as the Unchanging One.

All forms of God
and the God in all forms.

The absentee landlord,
the official of all officials.

The oppressor who worships God
and the oppressed who worship God

are victims of the Enemy.
They rot in families, in castes,

in communities, in clubs,
in political parties.

They stay stable. They stay still.
Their hands continue to keep down the young.

12

Don't curse the darkness
since you're told not to,
but don't be in a hurry
to light a candle either.

*darkness of
life*

The darkness has its secrets
which light does not know.

It's a kind of perfection,
while every light
distorts the truth.

synecdochical pep-talk

I met a man once
who had wasted half his life,
partly in exile from himself,
partly in a prison of his own making.

An energetic man, an active man.
I liked his spirit
and saw no hope for him.

Yet, he had the common touch;
he could, for instance, work with his hands.

To others, all attentive.
To his own needs, indifferent.

A tireless social human being,
destined always
to know defeat
like a twin-brother.

I saw him cheerful
in the universal darkness
as I stood grimly
in my little light.

He said:
'In a single day
I'm forced to listen
to a dozen film songs,
to see
a score of beggars,
to touch
uncounted strangers,
to smell
unsmellable smells,
to taste
my bitter native city.'

He said:
'I'm forced by the five senses
to fear the five senses.'

I heard him out
in black wordlessness.

15

Present at the creation
of the universe,
I would perhaps have proceeded
differently.
But if the destruction
is in our lifetime,
the mushroom cloud
is as good a way
as any I can think of,
and more aesthetic.

16

In the presence of death,
remember, do not console yourself;
there's only death here,
only life.

You are master
neither of death nor of life.

Belief will not save you,
nor unbelief.

All you have
is the sense of reality,
unfathomable
as it yields its secrets
slowly
one
by
one.

