

Imtiaz Dharker was born in Lahore, raised in Britain, and now lives in India. An MA in English Literature, and philosophy, she scripts and directs audio-visuals, and till recently edited the poetry section of a magazine. An exhibition of her drawings, also entitled 'Purdah', was held in Bombay.

Cover illustration: Drawing by Imtiaz Dharker



Library

IIAS, Shimla

821 Im 8 P



00075634

SBN 19 562291 X



PRICE


40/-



*Three Crowns*

# *Purdah*

Imtiaz Dharker



821  
Im 8 P

In  
821  
Im 8p

NEW POETRY IN INDIA

1. A. 1

009

PURDAH  
and other poems

### THREE CROWNS BOOKS

- Arnold Apple : *Son of Guyana*  
G. S. Sharat Chandra : *Heirloom*  
John Pepper Clark : *Ozidi*  
John Pepper Clark : *Three Plays*  
Covasjee & Kumar : *Modern Indian Short Stories*  
Keki Daruwalla : *The Keeper of the Dead*  
Keki Daruwalla : *Crossing of Rivers*  
Manoranjan Das : *Wild Harvest*  
J. C. de Graft : *Through a Film Darkly*  
J. C. de Graft : *Sons and Daughters*  
R. Sarif Easmon : *Dear Parent and Ogre*  
Obi B. Egbuna : *Daughters of the Sun & Other Stories*  
Nissim Ezekiel : *Hymns in Darkness*  
Nissim Ezekiel : *Latter-Day Psalms*  
Patrick Fernando : *Selected Poems*  
Girish Karnad : *Hayavadana*  
Girish Karnad : *Tughlaq*  
Ashok Mahajan : *Goan Vignettes and Other Poems*  
Jayanta Mahapatra : *Life Signs*  
Howard McNaughton : *Contemporary New Zealand Plays*  
Arvind Mehrotra : *Middle Earth*  
U. R. Anantha Murthy : *Samskara : A Rite for a Dead Man*  
✓ Kalim Omar (ed.) : *Wordfall : Three Pakistani Poets*  
Sonny Oti : *Evangelist Jeremiah*  
R. Parthasarathy (ed.) : *Ten Twentieth-Century Indian Poets*  
R. Parthasarathy : *Rough Passage*  
A. K. Ramanujan : *Second Sight*  
A. K. Ramanujan : *Selected Poems*  
Raja Rao : *The Policeman and the Rose*  
Ola Rotimi : *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*  
Ola Rotimi : *Kurunmi : An Historical Tragedy*  
Ola Rotimi : *The Gods Are Not to Blame*  
Badal Sircar : *Evam Indrajit*  
Wole Soyinka : *Kongi's Harvest*  
Wole Soyinka : *The Road*  
Wole Soyinka : *The Lion and the Jewel*  
Wole Soyinka : *A Dance of the Forests*  
Vijay Tendulkar : *Silence! The Court Is in Session*  
D. O. Umobuarie : *Black Justice*  
Nirmal Verma : *Maya Darpan and Other Stories*  
Joris Wartemberg : *The Corpse's Comedy*

PURDAH  
and other poems

Imtiaz Dharker

DELHI  
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS  
BOMBAY CALCUTTA MADRAS  
1989

*Oxford University Press, Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6DP*

New York Toronto

Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi

Petaling Jaya Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo

Nairobi Dar es Salaam

Melbourne Auckland

and associates in

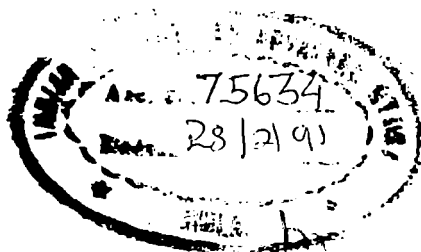
Berlin Ibadan

© Oxford University Press 1989

First published 1989

Second impression 1989

SBN 0 19 562291 X



821  
Im 8 P

 Library

IAS, Shimla

821 Im 8 P



00075634

Phototypeset in Garamond by Spantech Publishers Pvt Ltd  
5/58 Old Rajendra Nagar, Shankar Road, New Delhi 110060  
printed by Pramodh P. Kapur at Raj Bandhu Industrial Co., New Delhi 110064  
and published by S. K. Mookerjee, Oxford University Press  
YMCA Library Building, Jai Singh Road, New Delhi 110001

# CONTENTS

## PURDAH

Purdah I	3
Purdah II	5
Grace	11
Prayer	13
Sacrifice	14

## THE HAUNTED HOUSE

Pariah	17
White Carnation	19
The Haunted House	21
Going Home	23

## THE CHILD SINGS

The Child Sings	31
A Woman's Place	32
Zarina's Mother	35
Blessing	37
Another Woman	38
Choice	40

## BORDERLINES : BATTLEFIELDS I

Outline	45
Battle-line	46
No-man's Land	50
Stone	53

## BORDERLINES : BATTLEFIELDS II

Exile	57
The Word	58
The Mask	59
Image	60
An Officer's Death	61
The Rope	62



100

101

102

PURDAH

11  
12

13

14

15

16

## Purdah I

One day they said  
she was old enough to learn some shame.  
She found it came quite naturally.

Purdah is a kind of safety.  
The body finds a place to hide.  
The cloth fans out against the skin  
much like the earth that falls  
on coffins after they put the dead men in.

People she has known  
stand up, sit down as they have always done.  
But they make different angles  
in the light, their eyes aslant,  
a little sly.

She half-remembers things  
from someone else's life,  
perhaps from yours, or mine—  
carefully carrying what we do not own:  
between the thighs, a sense of sin.

We sit still, letting the cloth grow  
a little closer to our skin.  
A light filters inward  
through our bodies' walls.  
Voices speak inside us,  
echoing in the spaces we have just left.

She stands 'outside herself,  
sometimes in all four corners of a room.  
Wherever she goes, she is always  
inching past herself,  
as if she were a clod of earth,  
and the roots as well,  
scratching for a hold  
between the first and second rib.

Passing constantly out of her own hands  
into the corner of someone else's eyes . . .  
while doors keep opening  
inward and again  
inward.

## Purdah II

The call breaks its back  
across the tenements. 'Allah-u-Akbar' . . .  
Your mind throws black shadows  
on marble cooled by centuries of dead.  
A familiar script racks the walls.  
The pages of the Koran  
turn, smooth as old bones  
in your prodigal hands.  
In the tin box of your memory  
a coin of comfort rattles  
against the strangeness of a foreign land.

\* \* \*

Years of sun were concentrated  
into Maulvi's fat dark finger  
hustling across the page,  
nudging words into your head;  
words unsoiled by sense,  
pure rhythm on the tongue.

The body, rocked in time  
with twenty others, was lulled  
into thinking it had found a home.

\* \* \*

The new Hajji, just fifteen,  
had cheeks quite pink with knowledge  
and eyes a startling blue.  
He snapped a flower off his garland  
and looked at you.  
There was nothing holy in his look.  
Hands that had prayed at Mecca  
dropped a sly flower on your Book.

You had been chosen.  
Your dreams were full of him for days.  
Making pilgrimages to his cheeks,  
you were scorched,  
long before the judgement,  
by the blaze.

Your breasts, still tiny, grew an inch.

\* \* \*

The cracked voice calls again.  
A change of place and time.  
Much of the colour drains away.  
The brightest shades are in your dreams,  
a picture-book, a strip of film.  
The rest forget to sing.

Evelyn, the medium from Brighton,  
said, 'I see you quite different in my head,  
not dressed in this cold blue.  
I see your mother bringing you  
a stretch of brilliant fabric, red.  
Yes, crimson red, patterned through  
with golden thread.'

There she goes, your mother,  
still plotting at your wedding  
long after she is dead

\* \* \*

They have all been sold and bought,  
the girls I knew,  
unwilling virgins who had been taught,  
especially in this strangers' land, to bind  
their brightness tightly round,  
whatever they might wear,  
in the purdah of the mind.

They veiled their eyes  
with heavy lids.  
They hid their breasts,  
but not the fullness of their lips.

The men you knew  
were in your history, striding proud  
with heavy feet across a fertile land.

A horde of dead men  
held up your head,  
above the mean temptations  
of those alien hands.  
You answered to your race.

Night after virtuous night.  
You performed for them.  
They warmed your bed.

\* \* \*



A coin of comfort in the mosque  
clatters down the years of loss.

\* \* \*

You never met those men  
with burnt-out eyes, blood  
dripping from their beards.  
You remember the sun  
pouring out of Maulvi's hands.  
It was to save the child  
the lamb was sacrificed;  
to save the man,  
the scourge and stones. God was justice.  
Justice could be dread.

But woman. Woman,  
you have learnt  
that when God comes  
you hide your head.

There are so many of me.  
I have met them, meet them every day,  
recognise their shadows on the streets.  
I know their past and future  
in the cautious way they place their feet.  
I can see behind their veils,  
and before they speak  
I know their tongues, thick  
with the burr of Birmingham  
or Leeds.

\* \* \*

Break cover.  
Break cover and let us see  
the ghosts of the girls with tell-tale lips.  
We'll blindfold the spies. Tell me  
what you did when the new moon  
sliced you out of purdah,  
your body shimmering through the lies.

\* \* \*

Saleema of the swan neck  
and tragic eyes, knew from films  
that the heroine was always pure,  
untouched; nevertheless  
poured out her breasts to fill the cup  
of his white hands  
(the mad old artist with the pigeon chest)  
and marvelled at her own strange wickedness.

\* \* \*

Bought and sold, and worse,  
grown old. She married back home,  
as good girls do,  
in a flurry of red, the cousin—  
hers or mine, I cannot know—  
had annual babies, then rebelled at last.

At last a sign, behind the veil,  
of life;  
found another man, became another wife,  
and sank, sank into the mould  
of her mother's flesh  
and mind, begging approval from the rest.

Her neck is bowed as if she wears a hood.  
Eyes still tragic, when you meet her  
on the high street,  
and watchful as any creature  
that lifts its head and sniffs the air  
only to scent its own small trail of blood.

• \* \* \*

Naseem, you ran away  
and your mother burned with shame.  
Whatever we did,  
the trail was the same;  
the tear-stained mother, the gossip aunts  
looking for shoots to smother  
inside all our cracks.  
The table is laden at Moharram  
and you are remembered  
among the dead. No going back.  
The prayer's said.

And there you are with your English boy  
who was going to set you free,  
trying to smile and be accepted,  
always on your knees.

\* \* \*

There you are, I can see you all now  
in the tenements up north.  
In or out of purdah. Tied, or bound.

Shaking your box to hear  
how freedom rattles . . .  
one coin, one sound.

## Grace

It is not often  
that you come across a place  
where you are sure to find  
some kind of peace.  
The masjid at least, you think.  
The grace of light through marble,  
a space where fear is filtered out.  
Perhaps a patch of ground  
where you can at last lay down  
your own name, and take another on—  
a bright mantle  
that will fold itself around you:  
God the Compassionate, the Merciful.

A wash of marble at your feet.  
The man at the door turns  
to speak. You look for wisdom,  
thinking that is what old men are for.

He does not look at you.  
Instead, 'A woman comes  
with her eyes concealed.  
She trails the month behind her.  
We are defiled'.

He rolls his reason on his tongue  
and spits it out.  
You know again the drought  
the blazing eye of faith  
can bring about.

‘Allah-u-Akbar.’  
You say the words to reassure yourself.  
Your mouth clears.  
God the Compassionate, the Merciful,  
created man from clots of blood.

‘Bismillah.’  
You taste it on your tongue.  
Salt, sweet.

A clearing in the heart.

## Prayer

The place is full of worshippers.  
You can tell by the sandals  
piled outside, the owners' prints  
worn into leather, rubber, plastic,  
a picture clearer than their faces  
put together, with some originality,  
brows and eyes, the slant  
of cheek to chin.

What prayer are they whispering?  
Each one has left a mark,  
the perfect pattern of a need,  
sole and heel and toe  
in dark curved patches,  
heels worn down,  
thongs ragged, mended many times.  
So many shuffling hopes,  
pounded into print,  
as clear as the pages of holy books,  
illuminated with the glint  
of gold around the lettering.

What are they whispering?  
Outside, in the sun,  
such a quiet crowd  
of shoes, thrown together  
like a thousand prayers  
washing against the walls of God.

## Sacrifice

A year of fortune lies  
across my neck.  
It is promised. It will come,  
ripening in its season  
under a scheming sun. Sweet  
juice will burst through skin  
and stain my breast.  
There will be no rest  
from harvesting.

The blessed touch again  
will warm the flesh,  
with the season, into fullness  
when my year of fortune comes.

I can feel the promise  
glinting at my throat.  
On the edge of the knife  
(Prepare the lamb, the goat), sweet  
song will burst through skin,  
sliced, quite perfectly,  
between each remembered sin  
and sacrifice,  
a saviour thrusting in.

## THE HAUNTED HOUSE





## Pariah

My shoulders hunch against the cold,  
and even more, against their eyes.  
It's not that they despise me,  
rather that what they see  
is inconvenient: I make  
an untidy shape  
on their street, a scribble leaked  
out of a colonial notebook,  
somehow indiscreet.

In the winter my breath confronts me  
like another enemy,  
and the night swoops  
snarling at my ears.

My back bends to their voices,  
my hands on the ticket,  
on the counter, on the thread.  
When I must speak to them,  
their words take and tie my tongue.  
I rarely raise my head.

Their looks are whiplashes.  
Perhaps I have transgressed.  
But what do they know  
of sin and judgement, and  
true righteousness?

The skin is a safe boundary  
that holds my landscape in,  
carried tight against my chest.  
Every day I gain  
ground: I may live their lies,  
but my feet will walk again  
on good red soil  
through fields of cane  
and sunlight delicately laced with flies.

The future leaves a trace  
upon the past, and so  
I leave my face with them.

In the evening I cleanse my mouth.  
There is no help but Allah  
and the rituals:  
wash the hands to the elbows,  
a fluttering of fingertips,  
a kind of peace.

The handkerchief tied in corners  
on my head, I am prepared.  
Over the right shoulder,  
flick a prayer.

There  
it is—the whiplash  
of a familiar pain,  
and from my back, the surge  
of wings.

## White Carnation

### *Voice I*

It didn't matter to me that she was black—  
I took her on my lap  
along with the white carnations I had bought  
for the front window, and the two  
tins of food for the cat.

She was shy, most of them are.  
Quiet little thing, didn't want to talk.  
The huge eyes they all have,  
accusing you of things  
you know you haven't done.

My knees are too old now  
to take the weight of children.  
The arthritis is bad, but worse  
in winter. A tropical July,  
this year, with the smell of tar  
melting off the roads, and yes,  
the scent of strange oils in her hair,  
spices rising off her skin. The bus too full,  
heat pressing in.

So I must say it was a relief  
when she slid off my knees. I called  
her back, and gave her a carnation  
to make up for all the things  
I know I hadn't done.

*Voice II*

The bus was a roaring tiger, bellyful  
of goats that bleated past me  
down the passageway.

At times I am the tiger.  
At times the goat.  
Usually I smile, to reassure them.

\* \* \*

My mother said where  
did you get that flower you're late.  
Got herself a boyfriend, white, my brother said.

\* \* \*

Later at the mirror  
I pinned her carnation in my hair,  
where it hung, fragrant and crumpled as her skin.

\* \* \*

## The Haunted House

'Kick the can! Kick the can!  
Run!' But don't go near  
the haunted house.

Watch you don't, but if you do  
slide your back up against the wall,  
with your gums chattering in your socks,  
you can feel it all . . .

There are dead women's fingers squirming  
out the floor, there are cut-off heads  
rolling on the ground, nine hissing arms  
wave themselves around, and jelly eyes  
are oozing out the door.

'Kick the can! Run!'  
When the evenings darkened  
and you hid out late  
with a clatter from the cans  
and your sputtering fears,  
through the tenements, down the alleys  
that squinted through your eyes  
and past your years . . .

The haunted house could get you,  
so that's where you went  
because you wanted to be got.  
Didn't you, didn't you.

\* \* \*

There was nothing like the terror  
that you never fought,  
that crawled up your legs  
when you pressed against the wall  
where the dead women groaned;  
and at last your breath  
grating past your ears  
set you apart from the tenement stones.

When you'd stumbled past the coal-bunker  
and the leering drunk  
and the bodies strangely wagging in the close,  
past all the usual shapes of night,  
you chose to come  
to the place where you stood still  
and separate . . .

a haunted child  
knocking at a door.

## Going Home

I'll go. But let me close the windows  
or the tunnel will come in.  
The train nuzzles down the track  
that leads back home.  
New landscapes spread their legs.

Behind me, with the dregs  
of rains, crows clatter in for pickings.  
They've made a feast of my going.

On the platform I  
could have squatted on patient haunches  
among the waiting women  
who rake the day with their eyes,  
rake the years for a hope of home  
as crows comb through the sky.

\* \* \*

Fields turn familiar now.  
They tug at you between telegraph fingers  
that warn you not to stray  
from the approved track.  
So now you know you're back.

Beyond your tidy groove  
the hills arch wanton to the sky.  
Even crows rise  
into a flight of rain.



Your mind pulls into its station.  
Your past climbs in,  
puts down its luggage  
and looks you in the eyes.

. \* \* \*

Sometimes there were watermelons  
split wide and wedding red,  
fragrant,  
laughing at the greymouse english day.

\* \* \*

At twelve  
'Not a mark on her,  
she'll never have an awkward stage'  
his wrinkled white hand slipped down her back.

Mummy put me in purdah  
or he'll see the hair sprout in my lap.  
Mummy put me in purdah quick  
or he'll see.

\* \* \*

On the first day of the thirty  
days of fasting, the other children  
hid beneath the darkest leaves  
to eat  
soft bread white as their teeth;  
giggling with guilt, breath quickening  
on a furtive wing of heat.

The bread might have been  
a thigh or breast in her mind  
gorging on the pride  
of first blood warm between her legs.

\* \* \*

Her mind rewinds  
the ghazals and punjabi songs.  
The camera behind her eyes  
watches as she trails  
slow-motion chiffon veils; dancing,  
she is the heroine  
of films that come from home.  
The reels spill out bright fields of maize  
and a broad, singing man  
who flirts with her  
through the dingy town.

\* \* \*

It was easy to hate, from the tenements,  
the ones in the house on the hill.  
'They'll come to no good,  
daughters higher-educated, mixing  
with "belaiti" boys. They'll regret it.'

Yes, they will.  
Their heads come rolling down the hill.

\* \* \*

Making love. Going home.  
Both start with open arms  
and a festival spills out.  
Your name is scattered,  
shattered brightness blinds you  
winding round the black holes of your eyes.  
Fatelines crack open till the sky  
looks through.  
Why did you leave?  
Why did you come back?  
You try to fill the crevices with smiles.  
Get down on your knees.  
There must be some tenderness  
in the splinters of a violent act.

\* \* \*

The house lit up.  
The door thrown open.  
Your dead mother waiting  
at the top of the stairs.

\* \* \*

I have caged myself inside a stranger's head.

But if you were to open  
wide the door, I would not go.  
Lovers and forsaken fathers know  
the flood will well in them,  
find the sun, and dry  
to simple stone.

So even when I've tried the world  
and found it wanting  
tell me  
how can I come home?

\* \* \*

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60  
61  
62  
63  
64  
65  
66  
67  
68  
69  
70  
71  
72  
73  
74  
75  
76  
77  
78  
79  
80  
81  
82  
83  
84  
85  
86  
87  
88  
89  
90  
91  
92  
93  
94  
95  
96  
97  
98  
99  
100

## THE CHILD SINGS

## A Woman's Place

i

Mouths must be watched, especially  
if you're a woman. A smile  
should be stifled with the sari-end.  
No one must see your serenity cracked,  
even with delight.

If occasionally you need to scream, do it  
alone but in front of a mirror  
where you can see the strange shape the mouth makes  
before you wipe it off.

How can I touch you through  
the strangeness of your skin?

All you see is these marks scrawled on paper,  
crawled out of the mind's mud,  
blinking at the light, mole-blunt  
my words.

Can you feel my tongue? There, tunnelling  
through the usual mountain of things unsaid;  
or the earth's skin splitting  
under this your's drought of love?

I pray that I can take your face  
just once again between my hands, love,  
and smash gouge tear.  
Or will it hurt you more  
if, very gently, I lay bare  
your fear of the skull that lurks  
inside your head?

Here I am again, all contact lost. Scratch,  
scratch at paper, hoping to draw blood.



So far from me, and further.  
Our distance is elastic. It grows  
upon itself, stretches beyond imagination  
till you spring back  
through sheer error, the whiplash sting  
across the face  
reminding us how close we are.  
Fear, you tell me, is a woman's place.

## Zarina's Mother

It's not that Zarina's mother is callous—  
more that she is preoccupied.  
There are so many things to do—  
just living is hard enough, when you  
have four children,  
a drunken husband, and a clawing  
hunger tearing you inside.

'Yes, I know what it is she's got.  
The doctor told me. Not tomorrow.  
not next week, but one day  
ten years from now  
the disease will flare inside her.'

She stops,  
searching for the words to say.  
In a place loud with voices  
this passes for silence.  
Crows rasp, a conversation passed  
from throat to throat  
and back again.  
Beyond the piece of tin  
that serves as a door  
a pot clatters, a bucket rattles,  
a radio plays  
songs of love and restlessness.  
All this overlays  
the sound of water spilled,  
sudden squealing children  
bathing in the sun.

4 In this place, everything speaks.  
The difficulty is, having spoken,  
to be understood.  
She lifts her hand  
to make a leper's claw.

Zarina looks on, curiously,  
then turns away to watch  
the other children play.  
Six years old.  
Still raw, but on the way  
to meet her future  
ten years or more.  
Not today.

## Blessing

The skin cracks like a pod.  
There never is enough water.

Imagine the drip of it,  
the small splash, echo  
in a tin mug,  
the voice of a kindly god.

Sometimes, the sudden rush  
of fortune. The municipal pipe bursts,  
silver crashes to the ground  
and the flow has found  
a roar of tongues. From the huts,  
a congregation: every man woman  
child for streets around  
butts in, with pots,  
brass, copper, aluminium,  
plastic buckets,  
frantic hands,

and naked children  
screaming in the liquid sun,  
their highlights polished to perfection,  
flashing light,  
as the blessing sings  
over their small bones.

## Another Woman

This morning she bought green 'methi'  
in the market, choosing the freshest bunch;  
picked up a white radish,  
imagined the crunch it would make  
between her teeth, the sweet sharp taste,  
then put it aside, thinking it  
an extravagance; counted her coins  
out carefully, tied them, a small bundle  
into her sari at the waist;  
came home, faced her mother-in-law's  
dark looks, took  
the leaves and chopped them,  
her hands stained yellow from the juice;  
cut an onion, fine, and cooked  
the whole thing in the pot  
(salt and cumin seeds thrown in)  
over the stove,  
shielding her face from the heat.

The usual words came and beat  
their wings against her: the money spent,  
curses heaped upon her parents,  
who had sent her out  
to darken other people's doors.

She crouched, as usual, on the floor  
beside the stove,  
When the man came home  
she did not look into his face  
nor raise her head; but bent  
her back a little more.  
Nothing gave her the right  
to speak.

She watched the flame hiss up  
and beat against the cheap old pot,  
a wing of brightness  
against its blackened cheek.

This was the house she had been sent to,  
the man she had been bound to,  
the future she had been born into.

So when the kerosene was thrown  
(just a moment of surprise,  
a brilliant spark)  
it was the only choice  
that she had ever known.

Another torch, blazing in the dark.

Another woman.

We shield our faces from the heat.

## Choice

### i

I may raise my child in this man's house  
or that man's love,  
warm her on this one's smile, wean  
her to that one's wit,  
praise or blame at a chosen moment,  
in a considered way, say  
yes or no, true, false, tomorrow  
not today . . .

Finally, who will she be  
when the choices are made,  
when the choosers are dead,  
and of the men I love, the teeth are left  
chattering with me underground?  
just the sum of me  
and this or that  
other?

Who can she be but, helplessly,  
herself?

Some day your head won't find my lap  
so easily. Trust is a habit you'll soon break.

Once, stroking a kitten's head  
through a haze of fur, I was afraid  
of my own hand big and strong and quivering  
with the urge to crush.  
Here, in the neck's strong curve, the cradling arm,  
love leers close to violence.

Your head too fragile, child,  
under a mist of hair.  
Home is this space in my lap, till the body reforms,  
tissues stretch, flesh turns firm.  
Your kitten-bones will harden,  
grow away from me, till you and I are sure  
we are both safe.



I spent years hiding from your face,  
the weight of your arms, warmth  
of your breath. Through feverish nights,  
dreaming of you, the watchdogs of virtue  
and obedience crouched on my chest. 'Shake  
them off,' I told myself, and did. Wallowed  
in small perversities, celebrated as they came  
of age, matured to sins.

I call this freedom now,  
watch the word cavort luxuriously, strut  
my independence across whole continents  
of sheets. But turning from the grasp  
of arms, the rasp of breath,  
to look through darkened windows at the night,  
Mother, I find you staring back at me.

When did my body agree  
to wear your face?

## BORDERLINES : BATTLEFIELDS I



## Outline

A solid figure struggles out of rock.  
The sculptor's chisel  
chose to stop  
at just this moment, leaving  
the body locked  
in a great struggle, trembling  
on the fine edge between  
being trapped, and being free.

\* \* \*

The artist tries, time after time,  
to trap the human body  
in a fine outline;  
and finds himself, instead, cut loose,  
floating free through the spaces  
of the wheeling mind.

## Battle-line

Did you expect dignity?

All you see is bodies  
crumpled carelessly, and thrown  
away.

The arms and legs are never arranged  
heroically.

It's the same with lovers  
after the battle-lines are drawn:  
combatants thrown  
into something they have not  
had time to understand.  
And in the end, just  
a reflex turning away  
when there is nothing, really,  
left to say;

when the body becomes a territory  
shifting across uneasy sheets;

when you retreat behind  
the borderline of skin.

Turning, turning,  
barbed wire sinking in.

\* \* \*

These two countries lie  
hunched against each other  
distrustful lovers  
who have fought bitterly  
and turned their backs;  
but in sleep, drifted slowly  
in, moulding themselves  
around the cracks  
to fit together,  
whole again; at peace.

Forgetful of hostilities  
until, in the quiet dawn,  
the next attack.

\* \* \*

Checkpoint:  
The place in the throat  
where words are halted,  
, not allowed to pass,  
where questions form  
, and are not asked.

Checkpoint:  
The space on the skin  
that the other cannot touch;  
where you are the guard  
at every post  
holding a deadly host  
of secrets in.

Checkpoint:  
Another country. You.  
Your skin the bright, sharp line  
that I must travel to.

\* \* \*

I watch his back,  
and from my distance map  
its breadth and strength.

His muscles tense.  
His body tightens  
into a posture of defence.

He goes out, comes in.  
His movements are angles  
sharp enough to slice my skin.

He cuts across the room—  
his territory. I watch  
the cautious way he turns his head.

He throws back the sheet. At last  
his eyes meet mine.

Together,  
we have reached the battle-line.

\* \* \*

Having come home,  
all you can do is leave.

Spaces become too small.  
Doors and windows begin  
to hold your breath.  
Floors shift underfoot, you bruise yourself  
against a sudden wall.

You come into a room;  
strangers haggle over trivial things—  
a grey hair curls in a comb.  
Someone tugs sadly at your sleeve.

But no one screams.

\* \* \*

Because, leaving home,  
you call yourself free.

Because, behind you,  
barbed wire grows  
where you once  
had planted a tree.



## No-man's Land

A bleak view.  
A stretch of empty beach  
where we once sat;  
like chalk across  
a blackboard sky, the seagulls screech

A chill creeps across the sand.  
'Is there no way back?' you ask.  
I take the words for what they are:  
a half-meant signal sent  
from no-man's land . . .

We are countries out of reach.

\* \* \*

Places washed by sea:  
places that men may trample,  
stamp across with heavy feet,  
batter with their bombs  
and bullets, shatter  
in staccato sound,  
still go free.

The victor is behind them,  
the gentle wash across the sand,  
a rhythm they cannot change,  
soothing away their furrows  
from the forehead of the earth  
with a mother's light, relentless hand.

\* \* \*

It is the women who know  
you can take in  
the invader, time after time,  
and still be whole.

Whether they enter  
with loaded guns, or  
kind words, you are quite intact.

The fact is, each one  
has a borderline  
that cannot be erased.

Every borderline becomes a battlefield.  
And every night an act of faith.

\* \* \*

Here it is again, the border.  
Nothing but a piece of ragged land.  
Still, some hand has picked you up  
on yet another white-hot night  
and put you here  
(a casual move, part of no great plan)  
to stumble across scrub on clumsy feet  
surprised, each time, that the demarcation  
should be so insignificant.

Under a blazing eye  
your shadow shifts, shrinks  
back against you.  
You stand like some forgotten stone,  
leaning into a hazed horizon,  
and wait, again,  
for a veil to lift,  
certain there is someone you must meet  
before it is too late:

the one who never comes.  
The face beyond the borderline.

\* \* \*

## Stone

It won't be long before  
you reach that place  
where flesh dies gently,  
creeping round the bone,  
where wisdom lodges in the cracks  
that were your eyes.  
Without desire, lust, pain,  
your face a great, wild landscape  
beaten into stone.

Your history is a trapdoor  
that you must struggle through  
blinking from the darkness  
into a shower of light.

\* \* \*

## BORDERLINES : BATTLEFIELDS II



## Exile

A parrot knifes  
through the sky's bright skin,  
a sting of green.  
It takes so little  
to make the mind bleed  
into another country,  
  
a past that you agreed  
to leave behind.



## The Word

It is pure power,  
not in the throat or on the page  
but sliding, coiling and uncoiling  
in the minds of men  
and women, lifting itself to creep  
out of their eyes. It slithers  
everywhere, over the shoulder,  
right or left  
prepared to heal or wound,  
give birth to a whole nest  
of hungry thoughts. This way is madness,  
this may change the world, this  
tame a thousand beasts, or make monsters  
of a million sheep.

And I the keeper, with my  
small signs and codes. How long  
will it obey my trivial commands? I,  
wary of this thing  
hissing in its box. A quivering of hands.  
It is waiting to be fed,  
let loose, one day,  
when its moment comes,  
upon a world unready  
to be stung from sleep.

## The Mask

We live with a passion  
to destroy, to take and crush and tear,  
because for us no one is innocent  
and almost innocence is all too rare.  
Within each one of us, the scaled beast  
lurks, snarling through the cage  
of rib on rib, careful construct,  
reason and pure sense  
that declares us human, and serves,  
for now at least, to shield us  
from our own consuming rage.

From this, there is no escape.  
Power is not always fanged,  
smeared with the blood of the lamb.  
More often it wears a simpering mask.  
More often it looks like us.  
Look at us, in that dark mirror.

Our face beginning to take shape.

## Image

The picture is complete.  
Benign authority strikes a pose,  
head up, just the right  
suggestion of a smile,  
a hint of power around the shoulders,  
and the mass of the neck.

The camera will record  
it all: the hands' precise movements,  
all the correct emphases  
captured through an indulgent lens.

You hold so many possibilities,  
just inside the skin.  
You could be any number of things:  
manipulator, mechanical pawn,  
victim.

The image is never really fixed.  
Allow, for one moment, your guard  
to slip, and all the world  
will catch a glimpse  
of the thing you have kept hidden  
all this time . . .

the maggot power  
squirming at your eyes.

## An Officer's Death

Just before they shot, you sat  
quite erect, hands and mouth in place,  
eyes on parade.

Your body was contained within  
a brittle concept of yourself.

Had this event been just  
a name strung up on facts, it might have died  
as you lived, closed in upon itself.

But there's the photograph, a screen of grey  
on grey, that changes you, quite suddenly:  
your pride picked up and thrown away.

Now, an attitude of wonder.  
Head thrown back, mouth open, eyes wide.  
What god exploded inside your head,  
making fierce demands?

What command  
let your body loose upon death?

## The Rope

Do you think you have buried  
your enemy?

Does a man or woman end,  
shovelled into the waiting ground  
where every creature is a friend,  
busy, under a deceptive mound,  
with the minute cleaning  
and polishing of bones  
that grew in the womb,  
hardened and prepared themselves  
to grasp this state,  
quite worked over, smooth  
as a pretty stone?

Do you feel, now, you are unbound,  
limitations fallen away?

You have found  
new power. What a chain  
you set in motion,  
from thinker into thing.  
All that is left of marching  
and dissent: these bones knocking  
one against the other, gently.

Knocking out a deadly code.  
Stones heave slowly, underground.  
Ghosts live and breathe  
in other minds.

They walk, eat, sleep,  
rub up against you  
in the street.  
They make your future  
a bright noose  
that hangs above you, swinging  
casually, loose,  
waiting for the time when you are ready.

The time when even enemies  
will come of use.

You see a room  
closed up, shutters drawn.  
A shadow swinging on a wall . . .  
Somewhere, quietly,  
a rope still hanging  
above us all.

\* \* \*

One day you hear  
he is gone; a hand raised,  
head turned, feet  
dangling awkwardly above the ground  
at that time when motives come  
pure and clear,  
the still moment before dawn,  
before fear.

You hear the sound  
of a rope creaking;  
a lullaby your grandmother  
would sing.  
All around you, quite gently,  
shadows begin to swing.

Be still, and wait.  
You are the cause, the victim  
and the one witness:

these are tomorrow's cradles rocking.

