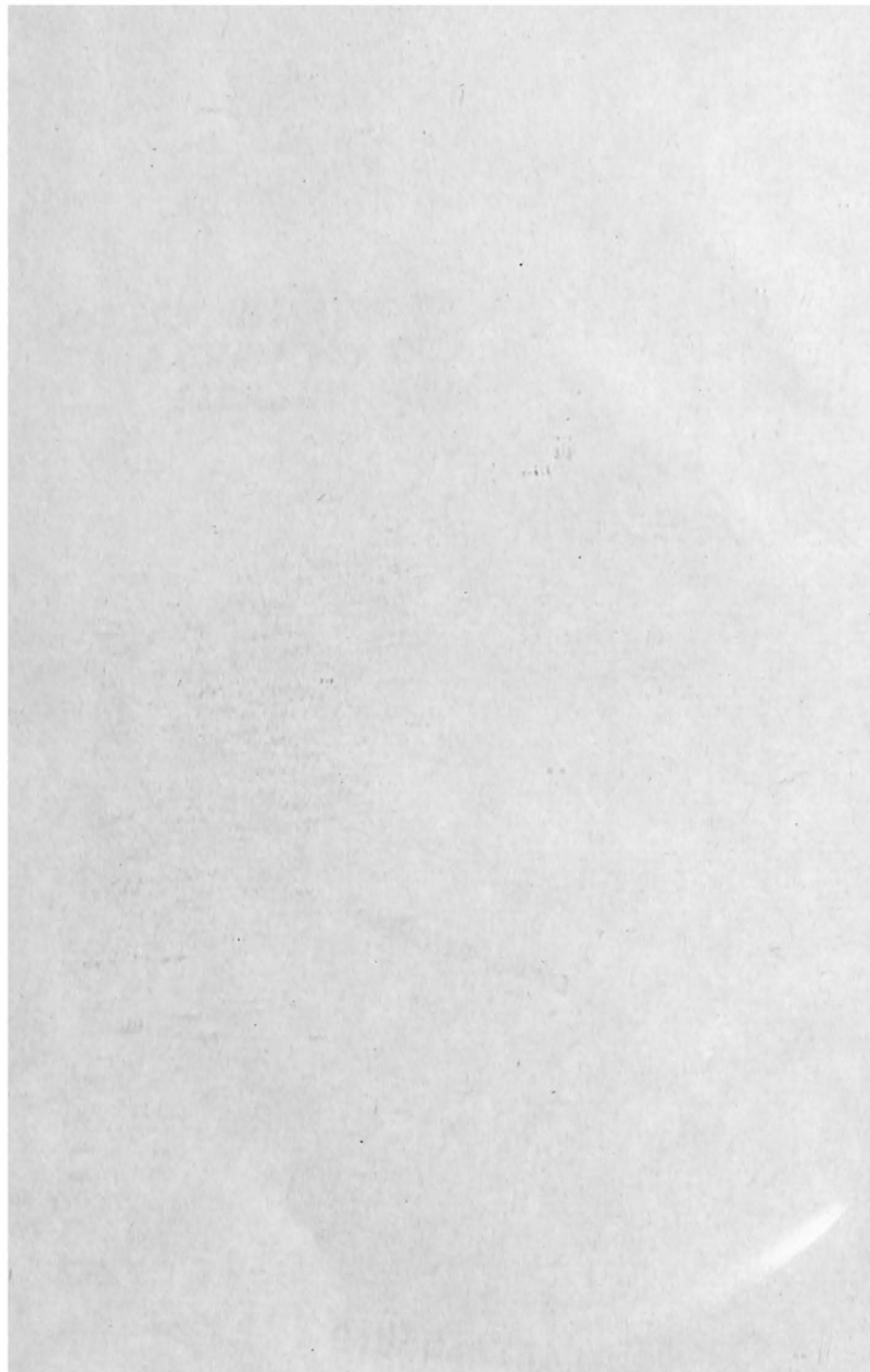




# **THE RIMLESS WORLD**

**MARGARET CHATTERJEE**

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Also by the Author:

The Spring and the Spectacle, 1967,  
Writers' Workshop, Calcutta

Towards the Sun, 1970, "

The Sandalwood Tree, 1972, "

The Sound of Wings, 1978, Arnold-  
Heinemann



## MALKAGANJ<sup>1</sup>

What lasts longer than monuments?  
Shall I speak of grass?  
Of a place called Plataea,<sup>2</sup>  
Battered by armies  
Five centuries before Christ,  
Wiped out by an earthquake  
Only yesterday?  
What survives?

On the dump outside the house  
The neck of a discarded garha<sup>3</sup>  
Lies like a heavy garland,  
The kind that trapped the jackal  
Who went to steal molasses  
Century after century,  
Since when we hang the pots from rafters  
And mice and jackals register complaint

The shard speaks  
In syllables earthy and black,  
From Greece to Italy,  
From Malkaganj to Jerusalem,  
The voice of the shard is  
Heard in a wilderness of streets.  
Let a million shards return to dust  
—They will rise again.

O potter of two thousand,  
Three thousand years ago,  
Your hands  
Breathe life  
Into today's wet clay.  
Let it not rain today.  
Let today's batch  
Bake well in the sun.

- 1 Area in Delhi where potters live.
- 2 Site of the Greek victory over the Persians in 497 B.C., recorded by Herodotus.
- 3 Large earthenware vessel.

## THE EYES OF THE ETERNAL BROTHER\*

Questions posed in the Stoa  
Hang like incense in the air;  
You cannot miss them for  
Their scent travels like  
Migrant birds seeking new shores.  
I hear the magic syllables  
Of ancient voices  
Which generations listened to  
In forests and mountain caves.  
The old men are at their  
Devotions in the park.  
I hear the twang of bows,  
The thud of fallen prey,  
As my quilt is fluffed out  
To face another winter.  
I feel the charred taste  
Of the first cooked food  
On my tongue  
In this burnt bread.  
My hand remembers  
The weight of flint tools  
As I make a rock garden  
On my roof.  
Bather in the Ganga,  
Strap-hanger in the Tube,  
Tourist on the Acropolis,  
You who play a mouth-organ  
In the Kibbutz,  
I see in your eyes  
The eyes of the eternal brother.

\* A phrase used by Stephan Zweig

## FIGURES IN THE DAILY LITURGY

He has a ritual,  
An incantation,  
His special tools,  
The motions to be made,  
The sacred place under the tree  
— Our mochi.<sup>1</sup>

She has power over the elements,  
Water, steam, fire and iron,  
Mother of a new, unwrinkled  
Clean-minted day,  
The dhobin<sup>2</sup> in her sanctum,  
Full of other people's clothes.

The ruddi-wallah<sup>3</sup> is master  
Of the used,  
The no longer needed;  
He is an acolyte in disguise,  
Giving us a fresh uncluttered start.

The charpoy wallah<sup>4</sup>  
Stretches a space  
Out of bamboo and rope  
A space between  
Earth and sky,  
A sacred place  
For rest and sleep.

In the napit's<sup>5</sup> confessional  
We unburden ourselves.  
We acquire a new face.

The sweeper makes ready  
The place where we live.  
Without this how could you  
Spread your prayer mat?

The bhisti<sup>6</sup>

Is a gardener  
In his own way.  
He makes  
The building grow.

The fire glows  
In the darkness;  
We await the  
Mystic moment  
When the chaiwallah<sup>7</sup>  
Pours out the tea.

1 Cobbler

2 Laundress

3 Purchaser of waste paper

4 Seller of rope beds

5 Barber (Beng.)

6 Water-man

7 Tea-seller



## THE TIMELESS NOW

Friends still discourse  
In the Stoa;  
The old Meeting House  
Still carries the  
Mark of feet  
On the threshold,  
The intensity of  
Silent company.  
Spare a nod of  
Greeting for  
Those you cannot see,  
For the ruins  
Are peopled.  
It would be a pity  
To miss a curious smile,  
A courtly bow,  
An antique gesture  
In the timeless now...

## ON SCENTS

Spring is the scent of woods  
And autumn the scent of chrysanthemums.  
Jerusalem is the scent of juniper,  
And Greece is the scent of the sea.  
The south is the scent of temple flowers  
And the north the scent of the neem.

Even if you tell me I must have  
Been a faithful hound  
In a previous incarnation  
I may yet make my way into heaven.

## A FINE LAWN

A fine lawn has the suavity  
Of a well-turned phrase.  
But Indian grass has to  
Struggle to exist.  
My half glass of water, undrunk,  
Must not be wasted.  
I shan't pour it on the tulsi\* plant  
Which gets libations in plenty,  
But on a patch of grass nearby.  
I mean it to live.  
A point will have been made.

\* Basil

## GRASS

Those that survived Belsen  
Came out crawling as  
The gates opened,  
Reaching out to a few  
Blades of grass  
Beyond the barbed wire.  
Someone told me  
Who was there.  
The grass was green.  
It was alive.  
The blades stood upright.  
The sun caught the sheen,  
Not of steel  
But of young green shoots.  
When you blessed me  
With a handful of  
Durva grass  
Many years ago,  
I bent my head  
In a salute.  
I could not have put it into words.  
You would have thought it strange.  
I remembered those who  
Came out of Belsen  
And those who never came out  
At all.

## MONEY PLANT

Just how free is the money plant?  
It does not cling  
As much as the aparajita\*  
Whose name flaunts  
Big claims and whose  
Purple flowers  
Trumpet amidst  
Grey-green leaves.  
The money plant  
Explores a lattice of string,  
A framework in space.  
Happiest in the monsoon  
Its winter leaves are  
Shrivelling now,  
The bulbul perhaps welcomes  
A leafless stem.  
I watch him swinging to and fro,  
Using  
The money plant.  
Just how free is the money plant  
Secure in its lattice of string,  
Yesterday's assurances,  
Reaching out  
With new shoots,  
Tentative,  
For tomorrow  
Does not exist  
Yet?

\* A flowering creeper whose name means 'unvanquished'

## MY TEACHERS

To follow a fledgling thought  
Is to go hither and thither,  
Down not yet wing.  
The tree is  
An embodied argument  
Against the grid.  
Birds sing when  
Boundaries between  
Dark and light  
Are blurred.  
Trees stretch out.  
The bird  
And the tree  
Are my teachers.

## CITY TREES

City trees, like city people,  
Can rarely make  
A leisurely gesture.  
I have seen the gnarled neem  
Fight against the greatest odds,  
Its branches, or rather,  
What remains of them,  
Cry to high heaven.  
The peepul murmurs  
Ancient syllables  
And is luckily protected  
By holiness.  
But the tree down the road  
Has been slashed branch by branch  
With a blunt axe.  
When the monsoon brings new branches  
—It will be a miracle.

## THE RIMLESS WORLD

The rimless world is not for  
That reason cold.  
Like the heart of the rose and the lotus  
It has its secrets and it blooms  
According to its own law.  
Here is the centre,  
The clearing in the wood  
Where light falls,  
The eye of the fox and the eye of the deer,  
The warmth of the crowds  
In the market place;  
Here too in hospitals,  
Where first and last breaths  
Meet in the cry of those who love;  
Here in the adult eyes of  
The children of the poor.  
The centre can be a single note  
Or the timeless pulsing beat  
Of the whole composition.  
The centre is where  
You and I are,  
Here, then, and now,  
Even if I cannot see you.  
The centre is alive,  
Peopled and busy;  
Not a fixed point at all;  
It is where we stand and  
From where we reach out.  
It is where roads converge  
And from where roads branch out.  
It is the place of all seasons,  
Winds, storms and healing rain,  
Where the dry earth is watered  
And where forgiveness  
Thaws the ice of the heart.  
The centre is where



New leaves spring from the tree  
And where the evening lamp  
Is lit in the poorest hut;  
Where the tired tonga horse  
Rests at the end of the day  
And the plough stands.  
Where great dark wings fly  
And where the spirit  
Of man is sorely tried.  
The peak and the abyss  
—Both are at the centre.  
But what of rimlessness?  
This is where the sound of the  
Flute goes when you can  
No longer hear it.  
This is where all that was beloved  
Reaches out in a shining chain  
Of which we hold one end;  
The seas beyond  
The familiar shores,  
The tomorrows that may  
Or may not come,  
Next spring's crocuses,  
The burnished chestnut leaves  
Of last autumn;  
Spaces, continents  
Which you trod and  
Have yet to tread.  
I speak of the unborn child  
And of kindly death,  
Of the outstretched hand  
Which you have yet to touch.  
I speak of horizons that meet us  
And which we meet.  
The rimless world invites  
As the air invites the winging bird;  
It environs as the scent  
Of a thousand neem trees;  
Unmistakable as the appeal  
Of the homeless and the example

of the saint,  
Familiar as the gait of my brother,  
Warm as your arm  
Round my shoulder;  
How steadfast the centre,  
And how inexhaustible  
The rimless world.

## TO A DANDELION

He enclosed space within space,  
Put up curtains at the windows,  
Lighted a fire.  
Pull the chairs close.  
We can look out.  
But why should  
They look in?

Azaleas flamed,  
Rhododendrons blazed,  
And carefully  
Tended grass  
Sprung beneath the feet  
—Properly of course  
—On the lawn.

I greet an unintended dandelion  
Near the gate.  
Old friend  
I salute you.  
You remind me there is  
A world  
Beyond the gate.

## MEETING

How filamented that meeting,  
The shock of recognition  
—Unaccountable;  
Curiosity, assuredly;  
Somewhere a sadness  
So infinite, that all  
The blue-grey dusks of centuries  
Could not contain it;  
Somewhere a promise of more;  
The honest homespun cotton  
Of feeling akin,  
The pure thread of sound,  
The music we both love;  
The bonding of bereavement,  
The rough coir fibre  
Of past disappointment  
—How rare these filaments,  
The plaited moments  
That are strong enough  
To bridge continents.

## IN OLD AGE

If you are to take root in an armchair  
—As you must—  
Under a fan, or before a fire,  
Or both, in season,  
You can still travel  
In your mind,  
Even though your limits are  
The four walls, and even then,  
Holding on to things.  
From the window you see the bulbul  
Kindly having his bath in full view.  
You see leaves and clouds move.  
They have space.  
You do not even have time now,  
Some may say.  
The future is not  
And the present best passed over.  
Ah, but you have the past  
Which is the most  
Real of all.  
No, not only the photo album,  
Although that is comforting.  
The calendar days, stripped off,  
Spell, not time running out,  
But cliffs of days  
Shored up behind your back.

## ELEGY

Schoenberg wrote that an  
Artist is like an apple tree;  
When his time comes  
He bears apples.  
So does each one.  
Oh, may we send down  
Roots, come into leaf,  
Bloom and bear fruit,  
And then when all the  
Leaves have fallen  
And we form the gnarled  
Timber of old age  
Let the gardener yet say  
"This tree bore well;  
It needn't be pruned  
Any more. There is  
Beauty in its shape.  
It gives us shade."

## I CANNOT CONTOUR THE DAWNING DAY

I cannot contour the dawning day  
With the morning breeze  
For the heat will come  
Inexorably.  
So I am bound  
—It is my destiny—  
To love the night,  
The respite of darkness,  
When I can hear  
Small creatures  
Who are awake,  
The wings of insects,  
The scrabble of the beetle  
In the dry leaves.  
I feel the coolness  
Of winds that blew  
Long ago.

## ON THE LINE

Today a child's plastic toy  
Has blown up on  
The telephone wire  
And so I can hardly  
Hear you speak.  
There is constant crackling  
On the line.  
I recognise your voice.  
I am happy you  
Want to call me.  
I am much luckier  
Than the small girl  
Whose plastic parachute  
Hangs sadly  
In the wind,  
Failing to make  
Any contact at all.





## TO A SENIOR FRIEND

Mine are gardener's hands,  
Settling young roots,  
Cushioning the shock  
Of being transplanted.  
I love the feel of soil,  
Picking out stones,  
Breaking the clods  
So that the young shoot  
Can live.  
My pianist's nails are short.  
There must be no tap-dancing  
On the notes.  
I have climbed trees,  
Swum in seas,  
And now I write,  
Fingers curling naturally  
Round a pen.  
Your hands move me;  
They tremble as the neem does  
In the winter wind.  
I hold your hand,  
And in comforting  
Am comforted.

## SIBELIUS TO A FRIEND

"Come", he said,  
"I want you to see  
The lilies of the valley".  
They went to a  
Special place in the garden  
And gazed down.  
And his friend heard  
The hidden tenderness  
Beneath the icy crags of chords,  
The moving streams that  
Fed the roots,  
Saw spring in the blue  
Of his eyes,  
For it was winter  
And the valley was  
Filled with snow.

## PIANO PRACTICE

What a relief to be away from  
Questions, arguments and all the  
Not-quite-come-off formulations  
Of words, dear coinage, my stock-in-trade,  
But do keep away just now.  
I do not even need to read  
This must be adagio.  
It is not right yet.  
My fingers do not yet  
Obey my thoughts. They are my thoughts.  
But not mine only. Yours, you  
Who wrote it; all you  
Who played it ever since, and everyone  
Who ever listened. I am not me  
Any more. Only the music exists.  
And it is not quite right yet.  
The next bit comes with deadly accuracy  
But heartless. Try again.  
I find something I had missed  
In the bass clef, and alas,  
A note which is not quite  
In tune, and a most vital one.  
Perhaps it is not the note, but me.  
I try again. This time without the pedal.  
I become aware of the tiniest cactus spine  
Proclaiming stridently in one finger.  
And now the whole passage must be  
Related to the rest.  
The crispness of that ornament  
Stands out cockily. It should not  
Obtrude so much.  
I still have to decide  
How long to prolong this note,  
To find a middle path between

Schmaltz and matter of factness.  
A new possibility dawns.  
I accelerate and hold back  
Cunningly. But this is just  
What must not be done. I try again.  
I take it very slowly,  
Let the resonance of each note  
Explore the silent corners  
Of the room, till even the  
Cobwebs stir and the pictures  
On the walls look startled.  
Reckless, I crash out a chord.  
I launch on the fast movement  
Like a horse entering a stable,  
Fluff it and  
Start again. I'm going to break it,  
Woo it, jolly well get that passage  
Right this time.  
No way out but to count.  
I set my sights with mathematical precision,  
Unravel the trick, and the dotted note  
Steps back nearly into line.  
I almost have the feel of it.  
The technical teasers are  
Straightened out.  
Dear Socrates, talk of polishing concepts,  
I have to polish every single note.  
It is here most of all, at the piano,  
I experience in my fingers,  
Antennae of my entire being,  
The pursuit of  
Perfection.

## THE OSTRICH

Chasing the ostrich most  
Unfairly, four wheels over  
Against two legs, the tourists  
Gaped at the grasslands,  
Willing the ostrich to live  
Up to his stereotype;  
But he did not, would not  
Put his head in the sand.  
He stared back,  
Magnificent, neck erect,  
Watching the featherless bipeds  
Encased in hard iron\*  
In their four-wheeled cage,  
Camera-clicking arrested,  
Exclaiming peevishly,  
Because they were supposed  
To be rational animals,  
"Now why won't he put his  
Head in the sand? "

\* Cf. Lyly's Euphues: "The Estridge Digesteth harde yron to preserve his health".

## TO AN INSECT

The knife edge  
Of the petal  
Is the razor's edge  
Which belongs  
To the insect.  
He does not walk  
Along it  
But clambers over.  
Milinda must have  
Noticed that.

## HONEYSUCKLE

When nothing can quench  
My desire to see you,  
Touch you, hear your voice again,  
When even music curves  
Its long way back to me  
With empty hands,  
I chide myself and wait,  
And then I find you,  
Fragrant as honeysuckle,  
Twined forever in the  
Thorny reaches, the stubborn  
Wind-breaking hedges  
I have trained to grow  
About my heart.

## PORT MACQUARIE

The wind blew through the gum trees  
As he stood on the cliff;  
A stern man, stern as rock,  
Gazing at the Pacific,  
Thousands of miles of sea;  
And his eyes searched the horizon,  
Searched for the isles of the west,  
The surf carrying his heart  
In a wave of longing  
To the furthest Hebrides.  
He stood near my shoulder,  
Pointing out just where they would be  
—Macquarie of Mull.



## SAMOS

Do we know what  
Happened to Icarus  
When he plunged  
Into the sea?  
They say, and certainly  
Daedalus thought,  
He was drowned.  
But who knows?  
Perhaps he discovered  
Beneath the sea  
A lost world  
So fantastic  
That he forgot  
The sun.

But what if he dived  
To the ocean bed,  
Sprang to the surface,  
Battled with the waves  
And was picked up by friendly fishermen?  
I heard he spent his  
Days exploring  
The beckoning seas  
With oars and sails taking  
The place of wings.  
The horizontal world,  
Its peaks and troughs of days,  
Claimed him for its own.  
Voyaging about the isles  
He loved the  
Twilight most of all,  
When the sun is kind.  
At dusk the fisherfolk  
Mending their nets  
And the old men  
Returning from the  
Vineyards on  
Their donkeys

Found him gazing at  
The horizon,  
Remembering a flight  
They never knew.

## VILLAGE BOY

Voyaging in turbulent  
Seas of green  
The boy steered blindly  
Towards the nest,  
Hands, knees, bare feet  
Thrusting against the rough bark.  
His eye caught  
The eye of a bird.  
There was an outraged  
Rush of feathers.  
Dry leaves snapped  
As the bird flew.  
No bones were broken.  
Last year's leaves  
Crackled flameless  
As the boy fell  
Out of paradise.  
To live is to move,  
To climb, fly, fall,  
To save one's limbs.  
But his father said,  
Again and again,  
—"His eyes are saved. His eyes."

## COLLOQUIUM

Socrates and Falstaff  
—City men—  
Surely met  
In a paradise for  
Inveterate talkers  
Midway between the Parthenon  
And the Tabard Inn,  
Around a table  
With the lamps lit  
And of course celestial drink,  
Falstaff scoring  
A pint or two,  
Question after question  
Raised, and  
Many of them  
—Not all of course—  
Ending as they should  
—In laughter.

## GALLERY METAPHOR

Do not graze\* the painting  
With your eye;  
Stand here.  
The frame disappears.  
Frames are for galleries;  
There is no frame round today,  
Round our meetings;  
No, not even the frame  
Of birth and death.  
Celebrate this exploding cosmos  
Which the artist shows,  
And which we inhabit.

\* An expression used by Paul Klee.

## IN ATHENS

My eye fell on the hands  
Tieing the sandal  
Before the race.  
In marble. Centuries ago.  
I had a crazy thought.  
Let me call our mochi.  
Let him tighten that strap.  
He mends sandals  
Just like yours,  
And I want you to win.  
Did my thought reach you  
O runner in the race?  
I want you to win.

FOR ANNA HAJNAL\*

Hunting in the unfamiliar telephone  
Directory I was not successful.  
Where, in what street, was the poet  
Who felt the suffering of  
Every living thing in her body,  
Who, like me, knew the fear  
In the eyes of small creatures,  
The thorn of the rose;  
Who trod grey streets  
On winter days,  
Seeing the bridges enveloped  
By seas of dusk;  
Who must have walked with  
Her shopping bag to the corner shop,  
Anna, who survived.  
I wanted to enter your loneliness  
And share it with you.  
We had so much in common.  
You spoke of the oratory of rain;  
I wanted to tell you about the monsoon.  
You wrote of the felled plane tree,  
And I of the cassia whose heart  
Had been cut out to make  
Room for telegraph wires.  
The wild goose you heard in autumn  
Is still heard in the valley of Kashmir.  
You wrote of the elephant's giant ears  
Which fan for the Lord,  
Of the snake drowsing amid dead leaves.  
I wanted to tell you of the chenar tree  
Brother to the plane,  
And of the house lizard  
Who can be a companion in a lonely room.  
Anna, you walked the streets of  
Budapest with me,  
And I was puzzled as  
No one seemed to know where you were.

On the last day they told me  
You died two years ago.  
And everything fell into place  
Because your separate time  
Had been caught up at last  
Where all the small creatures that  
You loved were unafraid,  
Where the felled plane tree  
Put forth new leaves,  
And you were free to  
Walk the streets with me.

\* Hungarian poet.



## I DO NOT SPEAK OF GEOMETRY

I do not speak of geometry,  
But of centres and no circumferences,  
The curving lines of music  
And of seashores,  
Parabolas of human relationships,  
Foursquare chords,  
Birdsong tangential to traffic,  
Woodland tracks which are not  
The shortest distance  
Between two points;  
Avenues of rain trees  
Meeting not at infinity  
But overhead,  
And above all,  
Strong plummeting roots of  
Tamarind trees  
At Adina and Gaur,  
Slowly cracking walls  
Which challenged  
Centuries.

## THE NARRATIVE OF DAY

The narrative of day is  
Punctuated by so many things,  
The parenthesis of your visit  
—Very welcome—  
Not so the doorbells,  
Telephones, street cries;  
But seeing the neem tree  
Surge on a gusty day  
Is a comma which lets me breathe.  
On very lucky days  
There is the fullstop of a  
Rare pause, the complete  
Absence of sound;  
I speak not of the  
Sparrows' inevitable continuo,  
But of the blessing of  
No interruption.  
An unstructured hour enables me  
To weed my plants,  
With apology, for every green thing  
Deserves homage,  
A digression from which  
I know I must return.  
Of course it is an illusion  
To think the narrative is  
In my control.  
At times I hold the moving finger  
—At times.  
Just now fate and wish coincide;  
Here are some minutes in a bracket,  
Fatigue takes over.  
I freewheel about a still point.

## ELEGY FOR ELM TREES

Scanning the horizon with blind eyes  
They stand like primeval skeletons,  
Like the wrecks of indigo houses  
—Ruined trees.  
The wind churned primeval oceans  
In the elm tree sap  
For in the brush of new twigs  
Where trunk thrust from the soil  
The history of oceans spoke in the tiny  
Ribbed leaves, fluted like shells.  
Now the rooks are refugees.  
Perhaps the elms no longer stand  
With blind eyes in these fuel-scarce days.  
I am left mourning the gentle  
Soughing of branches,  
So like the sound of the sea,  
Miles way and  
So very far inland.

## OLD CHINA

Looking down from the air  
I could see them,  
The mountains of old Chinese  
Landscapes, hanging in the mist;  
Cataracts and snowy forests  
Seen from above instead of  
From below.  
This time it was  
The human figures, the fragile bridges,  
That had to be filled in  
Through imagination.  
A glimpse over mainland China  
Took me to Boston  
And out of the galleries again,  
Journeying not through space  
But back into times  
That exist forever  
Through hands long crumbled  
Into dust.

## SALUTE TO AN AZTEC POET

The Aztec poet Techihuitzin  
Wrote of the heart  
Putting forth green shoots.  
Had he seen, I wonder,  
The cactus renew itself,  
The infinite pathos  
Of green springing from  
Thorns and prickles,  
Spines and every possible  
Defensive strategy  
—Like youth suddenly  
Flashing from the eyes  
Of very old men.

SALUTE TO A ZEN PHILOSOPHER IN THE  
MONSOON

If you wear colourless glasses  
You will be able to  
Perceive suchness;  
That the green of the parrot's feathers  
Is like the green of  
Paddy fields.  
But your glasses must  
Be colourless  
And there must be  
Monsoon rain.  
And you must be  
Looking out  
And only at  
That.

## AS I TRAVEL

As I travel I find  
Myself putting down  
New roots,  
Like mint layerings  
Spreading in many  
Directions.  
Pass your hand over  
The leaves  
And you will catch  
The scent of distant  
Places, the special  
Savour of that  
Particular soil,  
My new friends  
Root me in many places.

## EARLY MORNING IN BUDAPEST

Ah, what a singing quality  
Has this new day,  
With the Danube  
Taking a big curve  
Round Margit's Island,  
Sweeping in a great  
Waltz of water,  
Flouncing the castle with  
The delicate swish of foam,  
All shades of grey to blue.  
Ah, the perfection of the curving river  
At dawn,  
Clear and true as  
The soaring note of  
A violin with the  
City's obligato  
Still hushed and yet  
To raise its voice.



## BUDAPEST

I've tethered the fugitive moment  
To a chestnut tree,  
Prodigal of leaves,  
Spent gold beneath our feet,  
Bedding down your yesterdays  
And my today.  
Someone else's dog leaps  
Friskily, chasing  
The moon's shadows.  
A chill wind blows  
From the castle,  
And screaming tyres  
Circle the tiny park.  
Two years away  
I am still in the park  
And you with me.  
Did I not promise  
I would tether the moment  
To a golden chestnut tree?

## TOKAY

I mull over the moments  
Like wine.  
I hold the glass of memory today,  
Thin-stemmed  
Against the light,  
And therein savour  
Sweet delights,  
Scents, textures, and  
Above all, the sound  
Of laughter.  
The bouquet is  
Irrestible  
—Your health  
My friend  
—We shall meet again.

## IN NEW ENGLAND

In a very elegant house,  
Ivory-white in a sea of green,  
I was introduced to  
Two ginger cats.  
Unrelated to Macavity  
They were yet well known  
To the local police,  
Having a habit of  
Setting off the newly-installed  
Burglar alarm  
—Quite inadvertently  
Of course.

## RIVERDALE

She took me to the woods  
To look for chipmunks,  
The young girl with the  
Long hair  
And innocent eyes.  
We saw the tulip tree  
And the blue jay  
And we saw  
Three chipmunks.  
And then we went back  
To the blur of the highways  
And we crossed the  
Road hand in hand  
—Very carefully.

## IN THE SUBWAY

Someone getting fresh  
I thought, having been warned.  
Someone definitely  
Rubbing against me.  
Then I saw the little  
Black toddler who  
Had been scolded a few  
Minutes before,  
Sitting next to me,  
Her sobs getting less and less,  
Stroking my silk sari  
Unconsciously,  
And feeling comforted.

## ON THE MOTORWAY

"Fill'er up?"

He asked, and we nodded.

Expanding as the neon lights came on,  
He opened up.

"There I was", he said;

"A lad of ten, standing  
By the road selling sprigs  
Of orange blossom

And the Allied troops  
Snapping them up."

How many lire did they fetch  
In those days?

He couldn't remember.

"Viva Italia" he said  
Down somewhere  
In his heart.

"Going downtown?"

He asked,  
Jumping back to base  
Thirty years after.

## CIPHERS

The cipher is  
The resonance  
Of the single  
Note.

The cipher is  
The aperture  
Through which  
I see.

## TIME CIPHERS

Each moment is in bas-relief.  
Run your fingers over it  
For time will flood it  
As children's sand castles  
Are flooded by the sea.

Memories and hopes jostle  
Like a boat grating the dockside.  
I come back with almost  
A sigh of relief, to today.



## SPACE CIPHERS

This patient road,  
Dug up, strewn with sewer pipes  
And used by tyre, hoof and foot,  
Ministers to me.

And think of the mystery  
Of seamless cloth,  
That it can  
Cover you.

Surely things  
Have a face,  
Furrows, wrinkles  
And the sharpest eyes?

The day has contours,  
Height and depth,  
Slippery surfaces,  
Rough edges.

The piano keys  
Are in space.  
The octave span  
Contains all the notes.

## PORTRAITS

His body opting out,  
He sits in the park,  
Scuffing his way  
Through a whole  
Childhood of  
Autumn leaves.  
Rooted to the chair  
Her branches stretch  
Over many continents.  
Her memories sit  
On the twigs  
Like happy birds.

## HILLSCAPES

While landscapes  
Sent boulders rolling,  
The tree-ferns exulted  
And the moss celebrated,  
Greening the stones that were still.  
The orange-roofed  
Mountain hut  
Claps its hands  
At the sun.  
Glory be to God  
For maize.

## GENERATIONS

On a summer day  
I suddenly  
Caught sight  
Of my shadow.  
I nearly ran to meet you...  
My shadow,  
My father's  
And my son's...

## THE SMALL MESH OF THE MIND...

The small mesh  
Of the mind  
Cannot capture  
What the hand  
Knows.  
But even the potter  
Does not know  
Just what the pot  
Will look like  
When it emerges  
From the kiln.

## KEYRING

My keyring is an  
Uncharmed circle  
Of all that binds.

The toothed keys  
Bite most  
When lost.

The keyring lies  
Now in my hands;  
Flaunting itself.

## ON WRITING

Built into my bone is  
The collision of continents;  
Built into my mind  
The friction of other minds.

The hinterland supports  
And nourishes,  
Even though,  
To write,  
You must stand  
On the edge.

## CLEARING\*

One way is to cast about desperately,  
Making a clearing where light can shine,  
Cast about with a scythe of words,  
Battle not only with bramble and couchgrass,  
The stubborn roots of thickets,  
But with the tendrils of convolvulus.  
Something new must be said.  
I wait in the clearing which is there,  
Where the pine trees meet the beech wood  
And the forest takes a deep breath  
Before beginning again.

\* Vide an idea in Heidegger's later work.



# ENVOI

This will not do, you say,  
 This tendency for  
 Words to approach a  
 Vanishing point;  
 Would not silence  
 Be best?  
 I should explain.  
 I don't want to string  
 Them out like  
 Rows of electric lights  
 In a cement jungle,  
 A loud display,  
 And how expensive.  
 I would rather like to  
 Prick you with delight  
 With a single word,  
 Like finding a single  
 Tiny flower, white  
 And fully awake  
 —Sole survivor of the frost.



