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FOREWORD

A New Decade!

No, this is not a reference to the calendar. It is *Kavya Bharati's* new decade which begins with this issue number eleven, and we are rather excited about it.

What's new in this issue is primarily the many "new" poets who are publishing here for the first time. We are once again grateful for the many old friends who have given us poetry for this issue. But by our count nineteen contributors to *KB11* are appearing in our journal for the first time, and we consider that a cause for celebration.

But something more radically new is in store for *KB 12*. Poetry of Indian Women will dominate our next number, and we believe that this is the first time that an issue of a poetry journal will be devoted entirely to women's writing. More information about this next issue will be found on the enclosed subscription form-- which we hope you will use so that you will not miss this extraordinary volume.

This will be the second special issue of *Kavya Bharati*, after number 9 that was devoted exclusively to Poetry in Translation. And more special issues are likely to be in the picture for this "new decade". But the *KB* staff is eager to hear from you, our readers, regarding subjects which you feel would be appropriate for concentration in one of our volumes. We await your suggestions.

We continue to look for reader response to the content of our current issues, and will be eager to begin a "letter-to-the-editor" page or section if such material reaches us. Even a full article or essay in response to something you read here would be welcomed, and might possibly be published in an issue of the near future.

We want *Kavya Bharati's* "new decade" to be yours as well as ours!

KAVYA BHARATI
a review of Indian Poetry

Number 11, 1999

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RANJIT HOSKOTE

EFFECTS OF DISTANCE

Call it providence if the day should turn
upon its hinges, letting light colonise
this empire of jars and shutters, this room.
A telegram on the rack spells hands that burn
because you did not reply, did not realise
that some words are too proud to remind you they came.

Blue is the colour of air letters, of conquerors' eyes.
Blue, leaking from your pen, triggers this enterprise.
Never journey far from me; and, if you must,
find towpaths, trails; follow the portents fugitives trust
to guide them out and back. And at some fork,
pause; and climbing in twilight though you may be,
somewhere, address this heart's unease,
this heart's unanswered wilderness.

NOCTURNE

Nursing your silences, I watch night
wedge its broad shoulders tight
in our window.

My nerves ache with the curfewed bells
ringing in your head, cradled sullenly
in the crook of my elbow.

The air of cherries, your wordless breath
fills my empty flesh with a flaming
chorus of swords.

SNARL

In memoriam: Francis Bacon (1909-1992)

Who can paint grass the cannibal shade of hair?
Who can paint water as if it were
a leper scarfed in black? Who can sit back
and with chill eyes condemn a table of drunks,
chalking up the blessed and the damned?
Who, slouching in doorways, can pluck
every man's fate, chess-player's and lout's?
He can, whose gamester hand treats life
as a shackle of terse hair around a wound.
He knows that when the plastique of lust explodes,
every mouth screams: cardinal and wart-hog
are sewn in one itching, muck-mottled skin,
and even the gilded angels wind up grilled,
a snarl of rare meat you can fork off a plate,
a cradle of bones.

ALIBI

Wipe your fingerprints from the air,
rinse out the mug from which you drank
last night's coffee.
Clear the view in the window
with a sweep of plush curtain
that takes cloud, sky and mountain with it.
Cut the photograph from the frame,
grab the red hair-band from the onyx jar,
the spectacles from the desk.

Cover your tracks.
Walk through water.

You were never here.

OUT OF RANGE

I.

Single cloud impaled
on a mallard's cry
I sit
out of range
across a lotus pond
 centre of breath
 for a tropical Monet
grown silent, eye-hand-brush watching
great cupped palms
thrusting green from the weed-clogged water
to receive
the benison of rain.

II.

Cast wide
the net of dreams.

A mountain deposited by morning
has fallen asleep in the eye.

A single egret, the one note
of dissent under a radiant cloud.

III.

The technician's only ambition:
to grow from fish to salt
in the ocean's churning.

IV.

From a single straw, the field seeds
a harvest of suns.

Suns that torpedo
my clotted veins.

V.

A hermit in autumn, reluctant to lie down
on the sharp points of grass.

To call the sun home is like trying to heal
a physician:
he knots himself in the sheets,
muttering fevered curses, fighting off
the mountains flying through his sleep.

NIGHT SHIFT

All night, the whistling migration
of rumoured kestrels kept us awake:
we heard their wings beat close to our ears,
their beaks ripped cold meat such as appeared
as we undressed for a bed unmade
by bristling shadows and taloned fears.

We spoke little and could not lie
still, or in each other that night.
In the early hours we fell asleep at last
but, our pillows stained with winter sun,
awoke as soon. Outside, the roofed trees hung
in a lake of cloud; the surly lamp-posts

remained in place in the past, unshaken
by the night shift.

But we came rough,
in retreat, to breakfast, disarranged,
trimmed closer to silence, gripped and changed
by the draught of wings, night's grey, destitute tears.

GRANDFATHER'S ESTATE

Steam of hard-ridden horses, squelch of crab apples
under hooves: these filter through the lattices.
Mouldy ashlar. Crackling of leaves being fired
in the yard; swishing of billhooks
in the fields. Peat smoke; moths flit, unpeeled
from lanterns. For months now, the vexations
have piled up and nothing has worn a name
except the chirping of finches, the damp
creeping up the drains like a gaseous ivy.
Ripe wine, bitter almonds. He sits and listens
for the garnet drop to fall
at sunset on the open diary.

The tap-tapping of walking-sticks
on Minton floors upstairs, as if
queues of old men were conducting
discreet negotiations with outlined Ming
vases and the upturned corners
of Isfahan carpets. The transoms are a music
of whisperings, a serenade of strings,
the gurgling nuptials of doves.
He hears the refrain of rain, his fingers
trickle down the page: moves in the dusk,
stratagems disarmed, the tentative devices
of a blind man's poetry.

SPEAKING A DEAD LANGUAGE

I trespass on sentences that ash has muffled,
the lichen overgrown; then re-kindle tropes
that farmers dropped in their kitchen grates
with the husked corn and blue glass beads
when the northmen rode in on champing roans.

Hindsight is a poor cousin to revelation.
Listening to the hiss and splatter of rain,
the crackle of fire between the words,
voicing my breath in strange shapes of mouth

is like looking for you.

The north-rose flowers in every direction
on the tattered map I pull from a chest,
a hidden magnet
around which iron filings frame a crown.

I flatten the continents on a table
and read there of our love,
not lost but translated,
its cadences learned again
in other countries by other tongues.

TABISH KHAIR

THEIR WORLD

Someone is putting a needle through the horizon,
Threading it with the golden string of a sunken sun

Which will emerge in a few minutes like all treasure,
Too brilliant to be seen and much beyond reach.

What is within reach is this weak, watery dawn
With dew on its leaves and a dissolving sky.

The sprinklers are rotating on my father's mown lawn,
The sparrows are gossiping in the *mehndi* bush.

The narrow and potholed road that sidles past
My parents' home and fades into hill, fog, grass

Is resolving into the shapes of morning walkers,
Mostly male and portly, all fifty and plus,

Who plod heavily on, pausing, stretching arms,
Cultivating the habit of cheating dawns and angina.

I peer to where the road is overhung with trees,
Expecting any moment my father to emerge,

And the slight clatter in the veranda below
Where my mother would be waiting, a tray

Of tea (with four arrowroot biscuits) placed
On the old wicker table: to start another day,

Knitting it into the pattern of all their years,
Stitched in various threads, though mostly grey

And with nothing golden to tempt the roving eye
To examine it closely or attempt a salvage.

And yet, were you to look at their watered-down world,
Its artistry would amaze you, its knots and purls.

THE WEIGHT OF ANGELS

Outside, sunlight is heaped like hay,
Making of you almost what Midas made
Of his world. But treading the air's
Passages of pollen you gel from gold
To quivering flesh, human and sneezing.

This is what I wish to tell you of them
And their religion of sun and sand and wind,
How at the very moment that you close their world,
Embalm them in the square of their book, your views,
They return to themselves, slipping through like water.

Look at it this way: they believe everyone of us
Has two angels, one on the left shoulder, one on the right,
One recording the good we do, one the evil;
And yet -- this is a marvel to them and a sign --
We walk balanced and upright.

Can you not see how finely their lives are etched
In arabesque over each even shoulder?
Can you not see how well they bear my gaze,
Your scorn, their book and the weight of angels?
Watch them with their goats then, watch them with guests.

This is what I wish I could show you: their slow
Pouring of tea into glasses, their genuflections
On reed mats, their forgiveness and homicides,
Their grasshopper hands, their waterfall faces,
Their longing for, their fear of our Midas touch.

FRUIT
(After Ayodhya)

We ate them everyday like you,
Those ancient Hindu gods,
Many-armed, heavy-bodied
Like the jackfruit which for us
Was *Ramphal*, the fruit of Ram.

Or in the sudden stillness of summer
When nothing stops except the wind,
When circumscribed by shade
The bumblebee buzzes, ladybirds
Evade the peck of magpie, mynah,
Death is still life's meal, we shared
Krishna's food, *Kishenbhog*.

Ramtorai, *Devi-pasand*, the choice of gods
Made flesh and rooted in soil, erasing
The line between human and Heaven,
Proving or disproving ultimate identities
By the arrangement of various articles --
Not prayer-book, tea-pots and cups
But the less monastic mystery of fruit--
Plate, knife, seed, rind, recalled
Across generations by each of us.

So that today when gods are incarnate,
The flesh of my flesh, how can I carve
This name out to slake your claim to it,
That name out to appease his anger?
How can I hand you your fruit without
Giving, what you detest, my flesh?
How can I give you anything except
Myself, whole and flawed and bruised?
And having given, how can I still be
Me?

CIRCUS ACT IN GAYA

A netted globe of wood and two motorcycles
Circling its bright hollow interior, a hair-breadth
Of distance death and themselves between; these

Young women, muscular in their glittering tights,
Gripping the bare seat like the thighs of a lover,
Seen for a magic moment, when they pause for a split

Second, materialize from a mechanical blur
Before accelerating away at another angle
To the fume-filled reality of their closed world.

They describe circles within the ring of their expertise,
In the throes of a crowd which is itself a circle
Of spectators in a patched tent overlooked by the town.

Though, at this instant of precision what do they care
For the circumscribed flimsiness of their naked globe
Or for another world outside fixing on them its stare.

They are a thousand miles from where they kicked off,
Some palm-fringed coastal village in the south of India,
Where there may be none waiting or a widowed mother.

They are miles outside everything, in their world of wood,
Lighted up at the moment, filled with engine smoke
And the sound of metal: there they hang upside down,

For a frayed second, fall free, crisscross, brake.
This was their last circle. With some disappointment,
They raise their arms to the clamorous world outside.

GANESH STUTI

He squats wooden in a corner of our sitting room, lord
Of the dwarf-demons, the long-eared one, the hang-bellied one, fraud
Who won two wives sitting in one place. It was a race

Around the world. But would he run? He, the obdurate one,
Who had half a tusk knocked out by none other than the sixth
Avatar of Vishnu for refusing to budge, would he? No, not him.

He sat there while his brother ran circles round the earth, returned
To find him, the glib-tongued one, gabbling next to the starting block,
Surrounded by his mousey cronies, claiming to have got back before.

Proof, shouted the brother, proof. And bit off his tongue. Proof
Was what Ganeshie always had lots off, he ate proofs raw, devoured
Them in books. Off he went, rattling facts, figures, descriptions

In his thin, squeaky voice, his strangely mousey voice. He knocked
The judges on the head with his words: the world went whirling
Around them. He won the wives fair and square in their eyes.

Back in Delhi, he used to rest on his belly in my room: distance
Is nought to him, having lumbered the forest paths to East Java
Without moving from his spot, rubbed into existence from oil

By Parvati to prevent human beings from strolling into heaven:
Hell empty, *yamdoots* getting laid off by the lot, the gods worried.
Something had to be done. And then there he was, big, black, bogus,

Four armed, elephant-trunked, the great Indian dilemma, *baksheesh*,
Was born with him: how to attain merit you have to bribe the gods,
(Him, that is) how having bribed you cannot go to heaven. Hell

Is flourishing now, jobs have been saved thanks to him, savvy *seth*.
Though some say he was born earlier, that when Apollo was a wolf,
Athena an owl, he was King of the jungle, trumpeting, rampaging

As sign of longevity, symbol of intelligence through Africasia, that
When all those wives of the Brahmin gods of India were still unmarried
And tribal, he was no freak, he was an Elephant. Whatever

He might have been and done, clearer of paths, glib-tongued one,
Patron of writers and liars, stuck-in-a-hole teller of yarns,
He fills our rooms -- the one Elephant in our little lives.

KESHAV MALIK

GREEK POETS

Why write the way you do,
Greek friends?

Is it the age--
machinery, steel, concrete, plastic . . . ?

Is it the combustion engine--
blind speed?

Are you entrapped--
trapped in a world
made by your brothers?

What is your pain exactly?--
dishonour of the spirit
that will celebrate
the old Ionian sea
and the weathered stones
and thyme and rosemary
and sun and air,
a right body temperature?

Will you have nothing to do
with this time and place,
seeing grit in all this!--
the unloving man come to stay,
hard the heart, the head swollen,
the denial of emotion?

Cheapness and the tinsel
and you straightaway turn your backs
on it all and run scurrying indoors
to your lyres.

Do I hear a voice cry:
Bury the poets
and their tall claims--
the world is at war with itself.

INDEX FINGER

Your index finger ever points
at discords divisions conflicts,
as if these were all the earth offered,
as if words of that order
formed the world.

Then what the world is?

It is you, you and me--
us, not that crash of darkness.
We, you and she and he
are world;
not our inner wars,
nor the clashing outer systems
or delusions are we.
We are our mutual loves,
the rest is silence.

There's nothing beyond us
nothing behind us--
not scrape not dig nor probe,
we are all;
we are surface, and we the depths;
stop,
stop the moan and fret,
we are it--
we are all.

THE ANSWERS YOU GIVE

The answers you give
the questions you pose
are not mine, all yours.
Let them be thus,
there is no other course.
But blinded by the great thirst
of our loves we blunder
to mirage agreements,
not truth.

We gain momentum towards different suns,
swoon at different moons;
our scissoring skills cut stock
to different tunes--
if both cut equally neat and smooth.
So be it, but love,
hang on to love.

PITCH

Lured, despite myself, into what appears
an absolute silence
by degrees I, as it were, begin to hear
what grows and grows to such a pitch
I fear I'm sucked into a truth
stranger than fiction;

there is the dim apprehension
that near is what--an intangible--which
dizzily turns round a still centre.
What though?--
electrons going about protons,
planets the sun--
some such?

I'm hard put to find an answer,
but there is no brushing off
a commanding presence--
well, not as yet.

SMITA TEWARI

SOMEWHERE

Was it a going towards life,
was it going away from it?
memory has begun to blur,
voices have ceased to be heard,
for now has emerged the larger purpose of life
in a longer context.

Somewhere in the night, a dog barks,
and someone calls out,
somewhere along the line
time stops and holds its breath
to listen, to care.

Somewhere a voice whispers a something not too coherent,
a shadow falls across sleeping faces,
somewhere, someone waits for the whisper to repeat itself,
for the shadow to fall again.

It shall not matter to either go towards it,
or go away from it,
for the discovery that neither is real
is all that matters.

So let memory blur,
let voices go unheard,

for now, even the *real* does not matter.

DEJA VU

Faint memories of a land that was mine,
a land I have never visited;

memories of a wrinkled, selfless woman
who must have been my mother;

bright eyes with unshed tears
that belonged to my son, my very own;

memories from nowhere
of a somewhere I have always known;

a familiarity that eludes me
fascinates my senses with things long forgotten;

when was I last there
when did I meet the faces so dear to me

who draw me to the present which must have been there,
over several births and rebirths?

AT THE FEET OF CLAY

You, who taught me and gave to me the values of life,
you, who taught me how to emerge
from a crippling loneliness into a sublimating alone-ness,
to communicate through silence.

You who taught me to go beyond the gods
and beyond all horizons,
to have the courage to stand alone by my convictions.

You who understood me more than I understood myself,
taught me the meaning of self-reliance and of self-sufficiency,
of self-realisation, and of tranquillity.

When and why did you turn away
to belong to a sly and treacherous world?
you have taught me now
what it is to have gods with feet of clay.

TO MY SON

You must go my son,
go away to a future, all yours,
to a world that beckons you
with all the hopes you deserve.

You must go away, my son
before I crush you with my own irrational fears,
my anxieties and all the insecurities
too deep-rooted within me
for me to fathom, for you to remove.

Leave me behind, my son,
put behind you the traumas you have known
of a fatherless existence
and of my world, too helpless to offer you
anything.

BIBHU PADHI

A VISIT TO THE EMPTY PALACE

(For Gajapati Sri Sri Dibyasingh Deb)

What gloom hangs over
these almost empty halls?
I know, history will never answer
my stupid questions, will in fact
turn its dark face away towards
a darker time and place where
my words may not reach.
It seems as if these tall columns,
this large quadrangular space
where silence sits like a solitary guest,
has been known to me for a long time.
It seems as if it was once mine.
As I look around, I can almost hear
the distant sound of horses' hooves,
see magnificent elephants
delicately decorated in
shining clothes of embroidered gold.
I can hear the delicate sound
of dancers' feet, feel
old shadows standing beside me,
eager to narrate their own tales
of victories and defeats.
I see the dark round-eyed Lord
walking quietly on the broad corridor--
his face crumpled by the hands of time
and the inherent cruelties of history.
Who else is waiting to come down
the staircase of memory
to share her loneliness with me?
Who else is dreaming here with me
of a lost time and place?
Now, even as I start to return
with my compassionate wife beside me,
I can see and hear ancient shadows
following our very human footsteps
towards the mean world of common things.

THE BURDEN OF PRAYER

For a long time now
I have forgotten how to pray.
Words come and go
like thoughts and things, each
to its own appointed place.
I see people sitting down
to pray, meditate.
I am being asked again and again
to meditate, sit down to pray.
All prayers seem to have been
lost in the body--
perhaps at those precious places
which would not obey
the mind's common laws.

There are times when
even now the mind longs to pray,
but it is always otherwise engaged
in its own games and play,
in its pains radiating
in the directions about which
I have little knowledge.
Even my physicians would not know
how the body goes from place to place
in the hope of seeing
a prayer somewhere;
the body itself hardly knows
where it goes and why.

Today the body seems to have been drained
of its own ingrained energies.
Today I feel as though
this body is no longer mine
but belonged to yesterday.
Words are no longer heard;
even whispers get shrivelled
by the body's lethargy,
its unwillingness to listen to the words
while others sit down to pray.

How does a prayer begin?
I wonder if it begins somewhere
in the body while it is away
from every predesigned sound,
every hope and doubt,
every possible prayer of today.
I know, even if I received the hint
of a word from somewhere to begin with,
I would be stuck at the place
where I have been all these days.
How does a prayer begin?
It seems the very fear of beginning a prayer
has finally come to stay.
I know, I can no longer pray.

ARRIVAL

Once you have arrived,
there is the wish to stay on.
Days and dates begin to matter;
they come together with a finality
that brings back the old fears--
the fear of going back
to the place from where you came;
the fear of leaving the place
where you are, now;
the fear of embarking on a journey
once more;
the fear of not arriving
anywhere at all.
Thus you play your game
of hide and seek
with the dates and the days,
all the while keeping
your eyes open to see
if any one of them is about to play
its tricks on you.
You reassure yourself
with others' words
of consolation and comfort--
their reassurance that this time
the place shall not leave you.

A NIGHT WITH SLEEP

Night.

You lie down on the bed,
waiting for sleep.

You count the numbers,
end at the point from where
you may not go too far.

You return to the beginning numbers,
start counting from there again.

Night.

The sea can be remotely heard
through the grilled windows,
sleepless as you.

Dreams come, lost faces reappear
behind the screens, lean bodies
seem to sleep beside you.

Night.

You get up, put on the lights;
the darkness is now outside.
You start dreaming again
of your night with sleep, tomorrow.

Night.

You forget the numbers.
The sea is still struggling
with sleep just as you do.

Night.

Where is sleep without you?

TODAY THE RAINS

Today the rains came
defying everything.
We closed our doors and windows,
spoke in whispers
or hardly spoke at all.

Today the rains came
Whistling past our
little intentions
to be ourselves.
We sat inside our rooms,
now turned into dark holes,
imagining the shape of further rains.

Today the rains came, disregarding
daylight and the sun, sweeping us
into themselves, throwing in
trees and hills among
brick-coloured buildings,
dropping in names long forgotten,
dissolving all their own fears
of being themselves once again.

Today the rains came
with the warning of a night
that brewed in our ill-fated dreams,
framing washed pictures
of our friends and well-wishers
in transparent-grey colours,
throwing open the walls
of our faith in ourselves.

Today the rains came,
without hesitation, as though
it were the beginning
of another faith, yet another
way in which we might
relocate ourselves.

Today the defiant rains came,
dislocating even themselves.

THE PEN

It lies transparent
on the black shine of my table.
It has so happened that it has
given shape to my words, lines,
stanzaic forms. It has
brooded over its past romance with words.
Today it recognises a word
long before its arrival
in our painted minds, long before
the formation of a line.
Now it turns its blue
and black opacity
into thin, visible lines.
It too has seen the world,
perhaps even has learnt from it,
but it has never forgotten
its first romance with words
in sensuous, delightfully crafted lines.
Now it lies transparent
and always remembered by us,
in each of our separate lives.
Now it lies transparent,
gracefully angled
on my table's dark shine,
awaiting further words
a remote speech, perhaps overheard.

SHADOWS AT PLAY

Against the candle light
small hands send their shadows
to the walls, the counting begins.
How many hands are there
on the farthest wall?
What turns the shadows
into animals and birds?
A little effort of the fingers,
a fraction of fancy--
that's all that is needed
to let wings move, disperse.

The shadows disappear and then
reappear in a long sequence
of childlike play.
We need the shadows at this hour;
we need them to stay.
But suddenly, small hands greet
the light's sweeping arrival;
the shadows shrink into
their own branches and leaves,
each as fair and busy as
my fair child at play.

ANJUM HASAN

READING PAZ

(Between poem and poem
there is no kind of breathing,
no sculpture of space to lean from
and wait for requitals).

I don't speak of the city
but the stones that outlive it,
I don't speak of the name
but the woman whose name alone I forget,
in forgetting whose name
I have forgotten all of myself
but my name.

Watching in a darkening room
the seas fight their old wars
of water and colour on the steps
of the old spinning earth,
somebody began me and I walk continents
searching for the meaning of my face.
From the blood on the mountains
and the glass on the street,
is the blood of my fingers
and the glass of my eye,
and I am a part,
yet I am apart
for this horizon of weakening light
that watches me.

Tonight I am a street,
sick with the incessant clatter of feet
yet searching, searching
for the moon's slant of white,
the composition of darkness and light
that will deliver truth
in the hands of the poet.
I write a line and it looks back

with its own black life.
I was born in my sleep I tell it,
on a date of the alphabet I awoke,
I am not separate from the thrill of pain
that closes my youth with a dead flower.
I am the child of my illnesses
whimpering on the lost plains of age.
I sleep in the pit of the enigmatic night,
surrounded by windows that
multiply my body and imprison my dreams:
entombed in a body of dreams,
I neither body nor dream,
only human as a wind
trapped in the thin red rocks of history,
I fight the strata of dead men
who have contributed their mortality to mine.

WINTER AFTERNOONS

Wavering light of leaves and sun
on the earth's floor. The afternoon's brilliance
is the woman who pulls the white handkerchief
from her hair and stands in the face
of the sun, letting her child take up
the soft murmur of her blood.
He grows in her arms like the damp earth.
But he is young. For a long time
he cannot tell the taste of her skin
from the food of winter.

That water is everywhere,
that water of shadows and breezes,
tied to the rustling of leaves,
filling our rooms with silence.

She stands with bare feet in the garden
and the child on her hip searches for her
like a cloud lost in the ancient
well of the sky.

The dry canals and half-threshed fields
are mute with winter
but she is the hot red earth
that renews itself without rest.
Her son knows none of this
and is surprised by the sun's abundance.
Maybe as a man he will stand here
taking in the fields and the rustling groves,
trying to recall what he has lost.

Even in the trembling of this light
nothing is taken from her.
The hills blaze in the distance,
briefly, clearly,
before afternoon fades.
Night knows her before us,
like the boy, sleeping alone,
who dreams fiercely of returning
to the circle of those hands
and those shoulders.

HOSHANG MERCHANT

KARMAPA JOURNEYS SOUTH

The wild geese flying south
The gooseberry frosted on the bough
The lake frozen in the valley
The grass turning dry at its edge
The Karmapa journeying south
In search of a lute and a hat

The guards let him go
The mother averted her eye
The brother did not know
The sister of 24 wished to go
With her brother in search of a lute and a hat

The wheels crushed the snow
The horses were willing to rear up
But the riders let them go free
The Karmapa had ridden a bestiary
Of wolves and goats in valleys
His stone a high throne
His toy a lamaserie made of small stones
His face shone and shone
In twenty days he came home

The High Lama broke his reverie
Twice to see this bright boy
The klieg lights blew up in his face
His face shone and his eye was clear
He ate light, slept well
And went in search of a hat and a lute

Then as if in a dream
There was no throne
There was no lamaserie
There was no lute or hat
There was none of all that

The water unfroze in the lake
The grass returned, green
Where there was a valley
There's now only a stone
And a tear unlocked in the boy's eye

He saw what the Buddha had seen
He spoke once only Tibetan
But now he does not need to use even that
 All the world watches stunned
 The Lama is silent
 Like an unstrung lute
 an empty hat

DHARMSALA CANTO

And so it came to pass again
That when I had a modest name
as a poet and teacher
the man who gave me my name
and my body, my father
died
And I came back to the Dalai Lama
after 21 years for blessings

The Dalai hadn't aged
though he was 60
There are those whose karma
make them lose their homeland
But they gain the world:
The Dalai and I were one . . .

It was a long way to Lhasa
The Dalai had dispensed with even a bow
A brisk 'Tashi Delek,' Hello!

With a firm Texan style handshake
had replaced the prostrations
21 years ago we two had shaken hands
I, alone among a sea of Tibetan refugees

And my old teacher Ngwang Dhargey
who'd asked me pointedly to forget him
Had gone on
to become a living Buddha in New Zealand
Dead, blinded by diabetes
after a long life of goodness
He would have turned in his urn
to become thus deified in death!
And I had much anger and lust in me yet
But you do not get very far with anger
or lust

Now the Dharma teacher
Played himself in a film
Compassion without money doesn't go far
And talked of dolphins' mercy rescuing sailors
The Buddha as Turtle offering his vitals
to the ants
Feed! So you may live and I may die

And Ben Vine of London
gives me the first smile
in a class full of bad karma people
They're here because they made the Bomb:
Die! So I may live
And they now wash off karma
with a little dharma

And Ben Vine remembers
Our Lord Jesus Christ from a Tuscany childhood
The evil in the Tuscan church frescoes was cosmic
Ben squinted to see the devils fly
or plunge down to hell

So if you give refuge
 you invite a stranger into your home
And if you seek freedom
 in exile you become a beggar

The world is a mandala:
red, white, green, yellow, blue
HRI, TAT, SAT, OM
OM MANI PADME HUM
Painted on sand in coloured sands
Blown away by the winds like sands
Everything is change

And the Buddha became an exile
 In Sarnath and Budh Gaya
where they murder for a rupee
But he lives in Thailand, Taiwan, Japan
and is re-awakening in Laos, Viet Nam
from under the jackboots of the commissar:
I forgive you heel
 for kicking me into the dust

Mother was divorced
Father is dead
Last summer's swans have flown
and left no address
The Dalai Lama says:
I bless and bless
The bored monk knows each stone
 on the temple path
His mind is emptiness
His hands full with conch, vajra, bell
Gong, horn, drum
Poverty and prayer and temple-service:
Life as myth and ritual

Kavya Bharati 1999

Hands are not for toil
but soft petals for ritual gesture
Eyes are not to see the slender girl
but to turn inwards
The ear in a foetus
 coiled in upon itself
yet to birth after hearing the Word

It has rained
It is yet to rain again
The temple tank has been ruffled
 With nightstorms in waves
The temple flag moves:
Is it the air that moves
Or the flag that moves?
It is the Mind that is moving.

The lotus blooms again
The lotus is yet to bloom again
 and again
My lotus-poem my illusion
I clasp you to my heart:
Father, mother, lover, teacher, god!

Kavya Bharati 1999

Making them Moslem
And the Moplah was born
And the tree of the coconut
was Kalpavriksha

Fruit and seed
Thatch and root
Coir and rope
Kernel and boat

The men set out to sea
They had their songs
The women stayed home
They had their tears

Vasco da Gama came
And before him the Arab to Sind
And after him the English by sea
to Chennai and Chandranagore

Imagine the Christian
Sweating blood in the marshes
Imagine the convert
Sweating blood on the Cross!

There was no rain
There was no rice
Then there was Christ
And then there was grain

And the sea gave fish
And the land gave loaves
And God gave English
And we were all British

Seamen going to sea
Seamen going to war
Man-of-war going down
to the bottom of the sea

These were pearls which were
his eyes

And the bones became coral
And the bodies became water
And the world was an empire
On which the sun never set

The sea is deep
The sea is cruel
The sea is ebb and tide
The sea sings repetition

The sea joins lands
The sea divides lands
As sex joins and divides
Man and woman

The sea is contradiction
The sea is reconciliation
The sea in deep
The sea is cruel

What O sea do you bring us?
-- I bring you pearls and coral and Death
Where O sea do you take us?
-- I take you on a sea change

So the Malayalee speaks Arabic
And the Sinhalese speaks Malayan
So rubber grows in the Nilgiris
And tea sprouts in Irien Jaya

Kavya Bharati 1999

And everything is changed
Into something rich and strange
So yellow marries black
Imagine their babies

I found one fettered
to a sugarcane stalk in Hawaii
That was her history
She'd rechristened herself 'Ai', a poet

Sounds like a scream of pain?
You bet --The Christian god gives you grain
And Arab marries Somali
Imagine their babies

I found one tied
to his grandfather's magic carpet
On which he transported his Swahili slaves
Back to Oman

He flew Air Oman
And dreamt Swedish women
Of course he's called Mohammed
And by now he'd be dead of AIDS

But Islam saved him
Or alternating fasts
With fornication saved him
Saved, for what?

Cleopatra was tied to a chariot
And ridden through Rome
That was her triumph
Christ was tied to a tree, Ixion to a wheel.

That was theirs
We were tied to the English tongue
We untied our various sacred threads
Threw them into a well or a sea

(Everything sacred goes to water
Everything profane goes to earth)
The language we took to
Made us spring wings

We took to air
And Caliban curses no more
in his own tongue
But in an alien tongue now his own

O sea wash our sins away
O water purge us of our bestiality
O Ganges going to a sea
Drown us not but resurrect us

Into our own individuality
(Ah! The sin of sins!)
Is there ever a top-dog
 among dogs?

Caliban was a cannibal
He ate his own race
What do you name one
Who eats other races?

When I eat grain
He becomes my god
Then god becomes my blood
Then grain becomes my flesh

Nightly my lover
eats me in bed
Daily the sea
Grinds my bones on the stones

Kavya Bharati 1999

My ancestors prayed to Ava--
Goddess of the sea
O Goddess protect us from perfidy
O Lady submerge not Bombay City

And my poor father
And his poorer grandfather
All prayed to the lady of the sea
And now stepmother steps in her mules

Into a family tradition
She isn't fitted for
For Mother Mary came out the sea
And before her Venus

And after them the Black Mary
Crossed the sea
Selling herself on board
Christ accepted her in the Holy Land

And my mother dreamt Mary
When she lost her first baby
And Mary promised her many
When she tried to drown herself in the sea

We all drown at birth
Choked on our own sails
We all hope to resurrect at marriage
But really we only resurrect at death

My lovers say I'm looking for a poem
My students say I'm looking for god
But I'm neither looking for lover nor poem nor god
But for Death which is all of these

Death is a sea
Rajiv went to Lanka
and dealt death
so they came here by sea

To kill him.
Rama went to Lanka
to seek Sita
The bear and the monkey helped

to set Sita free
And the squirrel's pebble for the bridge
earned her a stroke
-- the stripes on her back

And Rajavarmana went to Kamboj
And built Angkor
A Ship of Death
for Be ready to die, the Buddha said

And the fire heard him
And slaked its thirst
And the water in the pot
Cooled its heat

The parrot saw a forestfire
And brought the sea in his beak
And the sparrow was saved from the eagle
With the barter of Buddha's own body

For stories are also a sea
And all the stories sink
to the bottom of the sea
I was Caliban

Now I aspire
To be Prospero
I write in blood and semen
And I break my pen.

EULOGY FOR VIRGIL LOKKE^{*}, MY TEACHER

Virgil sits
reading Physics
at table
Four days short of death
Virgil doesn't care
for cosmic dances
He's concerned with physical detail:
Weight, matter, density, gravity
Virgil knows
When you go/you just go

It is winter in the valley
Virgil is short of two weeks
and a month for his 83rd year
There aren't any more Eclogues to be written
The leaves have turned with the year
 And are buried
The snakey gravel path he constructed
 a la the philosophers
Leads nowhere
It only goes from here to there
Snaking all the way

Virgil, where is Dante?
Didn't you design the city-church's steeple?
Did you not hurl yourself upon the deeps
 from up there?
Take me with you, Virgil
For there is no comfort here
All is false
The demons are of our own making
And hell is not elsewhere

*Virgil Lokke, known for his scepticism, taught at Purdue University

Did not the leaves turn red for you
 last autumn?
Did not the glow-worm dispel dark
 in the glen
 on your last night?
You went into the night
You just had your soup
Your dessert was here / not elsewhere
It is all here / 'There' being not there

Did Vivaldi strain again in church
At your funeral as he did at your wedding?
The Fourth season:
Is there a fifth?
I hear one straining in my breast
Ravi Shankar on the sitar
This India morn
And I feel re-born, a lover
You Virgil, would have liked
 the mathematics of it:

Two boys one young
 one old
Stand on the river's brink
And hear the enshafed flood
It is the tide of blood rushing in
And then the earth grows cold

Green me, beloved teacher
I too turn cold with the leaves.

BATHERS AT RIVER BHAGSU NAG, DHARMSALA

Wend your way
up a snaking path
To come to Bhagsu Nag:
Bhagsu came here
In search of water
And put an entire river
in his pot
The Snake-King, Nag
Uncoiled these labours
For the river was his habitat
Largeness of heart
Saved the day
Bhagsu became king
of hill and plain
Where the river wends its way. . .

Today the boys
are at their Sunday bath
I watch them strip to the waist
And plunge heedless, headfirst
into the pond, newly born
Their wet limbs ripple
in the morning sun
As their loincloths fall
in coils to the floor
Beads of water fall like rainbows on stone
And the snake in paradise
is aroused once more: Jai Shankar!
Jai Jai Bhole Nath!
Generosity with the young alone
Saves the old
The sun sleeps in shadows
on the bank of fallen leaves
The King, Bhagsu was young

The Snake, old
Such is the hold of old tales
Upon our young
Father and son coupled in story
and history
And water washes away everything
to a steep fall into a valley
There to snake to what sea
Which is but a vast store of actions
and re-actions . . .
You can trace your way
from the valley
up the river
to a green spring:
From that clean source
Sprang our actions and our poems
Which are told like the telling of beads
And our lift was muddied
by our very hands . . .
But if all is maya
Then what is this body
of my lovers
rippling in the sun
Writing their reality
on the water
and the waves
Beckoning me, an old poet,
to come . . .

Himachal Pradesh
Summer '98

RABINDRA K. SWAIN

SUMMER EVENINGS, POWER CUT

It has become a part of us,
the power cut. We are getting used
to the dark of our souls
like owls. And no longer do we howl.
We sit in the dark and watch

dry clouds while the clever ones are on the prowl.
Each culvert is occupied, each street
fluorescent with big girls in mini skirts
and young mothers with their perambulators.
A cow, grazing, is in no hurry or in greed.

The sights are not much though
we grow familiar with them over the years.
Only the sound of a few planes taking off
over the afforested casuarinas
please us immensely.

Being with the babies in the evening
we start lispings, and need lullabies
in the night, for our steps are not in tune
with our souls, though our sleep,
having no room for dreams, is certainly secure.

ONE DAY

One day the clairvoyance must come
with the morning dews
and declare its presence before the cocks and crows.
One day the spell has to be broken
and the strip of moss on your tongue
has to be made a compulsive path.
And one day one has to speak out for them
what they want for themselves, those who
used to enquire about your well being,
your petty needs and what brings tears
into one's eyes. Their looks were glued
to the rain thickening on the hill tops.
Now they question your feathery imagination
of a stork that flies across the rain-clouds.
Now they ask you,
what does poetry make,
what spells of drought does it break?
What use is a lullaby once the child is motherless?
One day, one must tell us again
it is pain which puts a poem on paper,
it is lullaby which puts a crying child asleep
on the lap of a mother eternally vacant.
One day one has to declare oneself
as a lone parent of an orphan poem, at least.

A GOODBYE, ALMOST

The river Gobari flowing in the dark
by Kendrapara lays no claim
to it like her author Ramachandra Behera.
Here, he says, things are taken for granted.
The course of Gobari, a narrow strip
of water, parting here and touching there,
gives one the feeling of a stealthy
flutter of feet across the door screen.
And you are afraid to take
to those flights of steps that open
into her darkness again and again.
This little town has turned its back
to her though, the river Gobari waits patiently
like a tortured wife to submit herself
to her man's whims. Before she turns away
at the door, before you leave her corroding bank
to the hordes of majestic swans,
her author, Ramachandra Behera, while getting up
from the cracked platform of the disused well
before his house, will be taking his last look
into it, almost like wishing goodbye; almost.

ANIKET JAAWARE

POEMS OF MINOR NATURE

ANT

For Michel Foucault

My porcelain truth I had baked, hard, in the heat
Of my reason. Over the years, it has yellowed.

There are stains, remnants of the liqueurs
Many had drunk from it: generalisations

Sustained only by the hard baked, adamantine
Truth I had forged, in the smithy of my heart.

You live a world of detail,
Minute. The sugar crystal, delicately balanced

On the rim is, for you, a moon on a horizon.
You work your way up, groping slowly.

Strong enough to carry it, your mandibles
Do not crush it. Sweet weight drags you down,

And your hind legs have the strength
To grip the horizon, climb down in reverse.

You revert me to a dinosaur.
After such knowledge, what generalisation?

CAT AND PRAYER

I was tapping away at the key-board when you
Announced your arrival. I looked, but did not see
Your going into my open cupboard
And settling on all the emptied envelopes:

Thick ones which had carried academic work,
Theses to be examined, to be returned. I was
A little offended, you know. There were books
For which you had found deviant use.

Then I saw you, huddled there, looking at me
A little accusing, but anxious. Would I drive
You away? I had not seen, then, the open wound,
The thigh bone white like an eyeball, the flesh

Sticky-pink. Someone had done you mortal harm.
I sat down to look at you. You shifted a little.
There could be no trust, as always. Believe me,
I did not know you were hurt. Your eyes--did they

Seem a little different? I had not seen you before,
And couldn't tell. You pleaded: now I am sure of that.
You wanted to be left alone to nurse your wound,
Lick the rot away. This was your first life.

I put out a hand, as if I was the one begging.
You slashed with a paw: just a warning.
I decided that you were not nice.
In a chair now, I waited for you to go.
You relaxed a little, as if hoping permanence.
I got up, and brought a stick. The sight sent a tremor
Through your body. You tensed to spring.
But remembered you couldn't. You got down
And walked away. It was when you turned I saw
The harsh wound. Can you forgive me, from beyond life?

CENTIPEDE I
For Thom Gunn

My fingers crawled into your path,
Two gigantic antennae, converging onto yours,
Thinner than hair, quivering, making waves in the air
That only you could sense.

I loved you, wanted to know how it feels
To kiss with antennae. I wanted to build you a house
On my lips. The convergence was inevitable, with my knowing.
But you did not know.

Does the blood in my veins move
With the same hesitation, cutting a path through the tunnel
As you move through your tunnel of air?
I did not know you well enough.

You hesitated. Something told you
That mountains blocked your path. You stopped.
I retracted one finger, folding it into my palm.
Now there was only the waiting.

Your antennae quivered and waved feverishly
Like a magician casting a spell. The wall of air parted.
And you could move again, probing, testing, pushing.
Then we touched.

I could not have known that at that contact
So desired, so unknown, I would recoil.
The length of your body undulated, your antennae retracted.
You backed out.

I could not have known, then, that love
Often precedes hate. I could not have known.
You raised your body, balancing like a trapeze artist
On only a few legs. You backed out.
Then there was only your colourless blood.

CENTIPEDE II: CLIMBING

The ledge turned up and over. You did not know
The topology of life so well. You gripped the wall
And climbed up. After the straight climb, another turn,
Upwards again. A flicker of suspicion made you stop.

But you did not have the concept 'horizontal'.
At some point, as you raised half your body,
You were bound to fall. Bending to see how you
Managed, the floor was hard and cold to my cheek.

You fell down, of course. Wriggled about, your hard back
Forbidding your legs to touch the ground.
A hold presented itself. You could not believe it.
Or know it. I held a piece of stick so that you could

Stand on your legs again. Now I had you on it.
Like a strange bird in a stranger tree, you rested.
I put you down. You flowed over the stick, like a flood.
Then there was a wall in front of you. You climbed up.

You did not know the topology of life so well.

SPIDER I: SESTINA PIANISSIMA

What you said hung in my mind, suspended
From brachia, connecting wound to adjective,
Un-noticed among the foliage and fruit;
Visible if only I looked up at the sky,
Words, still, at the centre of a growing web,
Disturbed only by rare gusts of emotion.
The faint transparency of emotion,
The evenly spread light, slow, suspended
From the sun, could not shake the tensile web.
With the slow shimmer of subtle adjective,
The web shone on that noon, against the sky.
It was complete. It covered leaf and fruit.
The labour of words had yielded strange fruit.
It spread its invisible emotion
The tendrils groping amongst leaves and sky.
It waited, the centre of its suspended
Trap, devouring, feeding on adjectives
Caught by the gummy lines of the slow web.
Easy it is, for you, to say the web
Is a figure, like the strange grey fruit
Born of my wound, your callous adjective.
But the spider has sucked real emotion
Though seeming unreal idea, suspended
Like an ideal black star in the bright sky.
It does not yield anything, the round sky.
The spider sits at the centre of the web,
Salivating light, strengthens suspended
Blue leaves, it stays, the large yellow fruit.
It gathers threads of growing emotion
Into itself. It transforms adjectives.
The dry, dessicated, sucked adjectives
Nourish the yellow sun in the bright sky,
As the wound nourishes false emotion.
False, like the transparency of the web.

Their sap has flowed into the strange fruit.
Its quick repetition is suspended.
A hole in the eye, spider in the web,
Sits like a black centre, pit of a strange fruit.
Loose, slow threads steam in the wind, suspended.

SPIDER II

I cannot forget: you seemed a dark star against
The bright sky. How easily you inverted my world.

I had not seen spiders so high up. I was used
To seeing you crawling--maybe at eye-level--or

Hanging from the ceiling. I did not know you were a star.
The web defined the orbits of the insects circling you.

You devoured them. You were strong.

In the inversion, I lost my sense of being.
The air around became too thick to move.

You strung me up, like an insect screaming,
Unable to see that which bound me,

In silent,

gossamer constructions,

silky, streaming.

ROGER ROBBENOLT

IMAGES FROM THE STREETS OF INDIA

January 1999

Prologue

THE PRINCE OF TIDES

(Atlanta: the La Quinta Motel)

I move toward India
to ferret out ancient tales that twist and heal.
I am brought up short
watching the film "The Prince of Tides"
in a motel room.
I feel my mind-sick adoptive daddy's fist
in every blow,
in every kick
upon the screen.

India awaits.
Perhaps in sorting through
a handful of the three million deities
who stalk the corporate psyche,
One will emerge
who will uniquely embrace
my unhealed pain
whose scar tissue was ripped asunder
by images on a dust-streaked monitor.

COBRA

Out of the grey dust
the hooded form
snaked from the littered earth.

I leapt back.
The shape rose and poised as if to strike.

Every image from Hollywood horror films
fled across the landscape of my memory
in the half-light of dawn.

The hood opened
into a supplicating hand
as an emaciated, naked beggar child
rose to confront my caring.

TRIUMPH OF THE WEST *(American College Vespers)*

Heart-hungry, I left a Sunday vespers
still nurturing a dormant hope
that, beyond the chapel's stark, unadorned symmetry,
a touch of jasmine might enhalo a Christ image
to counteract the monotony of word flow
echoing the Book of Common Prayer,
the Anglo sermon in which wider context went unacknowledged,
and the magnificent music, untouched by sitar or percussion
which might have been performed anywhere in the States.
Remembering Honest Joe, the used car dealer,
I realized that I had again experienced the triumph of the West.

A DISHONORED PERSONAGE OF SOME HONOR

A dishonored personage of some probable past honor
sits dourly on his stout pedestal (an Englishman, obviously),
properly embalmed in bronze,
but presently unknown:
a multifarious poster has been pasted over his identifying plaque--
 *"Erotique-a film descending to new levels
 of feminine passion."*
Around him has ascended a colony of thatched huts
graced by the presence of a pair of tethered bullocks.
A cock persistently welcomes the dawn.
Does some memory stir within his enmetalled psyche?
 In the distance, I hear a single flute.
I half-expect the gigantic cobra of poverty
 to rise sinuously over the compound
 and envelop it with his hood.
Would that I had a tattered Union Jack
 to cover the statue's shame.

CONSCIENCE: PRICE--FIVE RUPEES

The corner, cast in deep darkness,
was caressed by the yellow glow of a single oil lamp
 illuminating the obscure shrine of an unidentifiable deity.
I strode toward the light with my usual too-quick step
 thereby stumbling over the sleeping form
 of a sidewalk dweller.
He cried out, rolled over, and held out a hand toward me.
I placed a five rupee coin in his palm
 to assuage my guilt over the accidental awakening.
He rolled back over and went to sleep,
 His fingers curled around the coin.
I stepped to the mythic figure
 and prayed for my sleeping brother
 as the smoking wick soaked the last of the oil.
 The flame guttered out.

PROGRESS PERHAPS

The old woman
manoeuvred the bullock cart
through incredible traffic.
The great beasts plodded more and more slowly
ignoring the impatient horns of three-wheeled autos,
blaring buses,
and the tintinnabulation of bicycle bells.
The street clamor built upon screams of drivers
as collisions between autos and cycles multiplied
behind the great stack of strolling straw
topped by a small girl in a sky-blue dress
with broad white hair ribbons flowing out in the wind
like flags of truce.
Since truce was obviously unacceptable,
a laconic policeman
unfolded from his curbside perch
and led the reluctant beasts and screaming drivers
to the street's edge
beneath the overpowering billboard for
NATIONAL PANASONIC DIGITAL WORLD.
The child sat silhouetted against the sign's gigantic
computer-topped globe,
her hair ribbons limp.

A SENSE OF PLACE

I pass the great-breasted goddesses
partially obscured by smog
surrounded by flower-bearing followers
at festival time
who fill the air with vitality.

I come to the Christian chapel
with its bowed heads
and bowed words,
which raise wonderment within me:
Where is MY place?

Did all of Christianity's potential imaginative energy
bleed out upon the cross
leaving us with an unincarnated resurrection?

I stare upward.
The cables holding the whirling fans
are swaying in the rhythm of trapeze ascent ropes.

For a moment
I envision climbing above all this.
I remain earthbound.

THE HEALING

While the temple rhythms still throb within me
I taxi through the waking city
to the Kairali Ayurvedic Centre--
a site where ancient Hindu medicine is celebrated.
It is famed for its massage techniques.
Disrobing,
I am greeted by two young men with all-enveloping gentle smiles,
who sit me on a flanged table
and pour a grail of warm sandalwood oil over my head and
shoulders.
Their hands begin moving over my body
to the exact rhythm of the temple music still beating in the center of
my being.
Then,
they look at one another and abruptly stop.
One says:
"You have been deeply marked by hurt from long ago.
We will try to flow away the shadows.
There may be pain."
For an instant, the boot and fist and whip of my mindsick daddy
flashes on my mindscreen.
I close my eyes as the hands return to the temple rhythms.
The touch begins gently as if I'm being caressed by bird wings.
Then, a kind of sacred power strengthens their hands
as every muscle system is explored and cleansed of ancient
images of destruction.
I am wheeled into a chamber of steam.
My body loses all substance.
I become like light.
For a moment, I experience something like resurrection.

KYNPHAM SINGH NONGKYNRIH

OVER MY HEART THE SEASONS DID NOT PASS

I did not remember when
the sandstorms of Iaiong *
drowned in the floods of Naitung **
the month that stinks.

I did not remember when
the downpours stopped
or when she lost her loveliness
and ripened to a bulge.

It was my wish alone
that days were spent filling in the pages
with ministers and chief guests
laying a stone here
cutting a ribbon there
showering praises on dead men elsewhere.
Each day, that is, was spent
filling in the pages with mundane things
recently with murders and shoot-outs
that have also become mundane even here
this backwoods town of ours.

Not till the bed claimed me with fever
and redeemed me from the suffering
not till she loved me to my feet
orbiting like a planet
did I notice the strip-tease cherries
clothed in the finery of pink blossoms.

The cherries were in bloom!
The seasons had changed!
The year was ending!

But over my heart the seasons did not pass
and once more days were spent filling in the pages.

* April

** July

KYNSHI*

The cub reporter
regrets not bringing the camera.

This western land which breeds
the truest Khasi braves,
this sovereign river, Kynshi,
rolling from the hills of Raishan
with a flat sweeping flow
so much unlike a hill stream,
the rare sight of paddy
flowing with the river,
the road, playing hide and seek
with its bends and quaint villages
ranged as spectators on hillsides,
need to be recorded
in more than memories
or the words of a backwater poet
ploughing clumsily through a foreign tongue.

Indeed I have developed a strange fancy
for this western land and Kynshi.
Perhaps because I have loved its women.
Oh, yes! I have risen so high
and sunken so low
in their indiscriminating arms.
I love them still
in the dark room of my heart
and loving them, I become
soft and poetic with this land and Kynshi.

There is much beauty here.
I see nothing of head-hunters
who value life, they say,
less than a pipe of tobacco.

Children with cattle swarm the hills
laughing with the stones.
Singing men and women throng the fields
and there is much gentleness
in beaming faces that I meet.

Inevitably, however, time
has left its ugly bites here too.
Pines like dressed chickens
leave woodlands in truckloads.
Hills lose their summer green
explode into boulders
boulders into pebbles and sand
the sand is not spared.
This is the tragedy with us all
we cannot think beyond possessions
and live but for a single season.
And that is painful and makes me
softer, more poetic with this land and Kynshi.

But Kynshi goes on
however changed the land
however changed the people
Kynshi goes on
with its flat sweeping flow
to the valleys of Bangla.
And however far it travels
it only seeks as an arrow
laying claim on new territories
forming new seas

Sovereign river
why do we lose ourselves here
not going anywhere?

* The largest river in the Khasi hills.

OF SUN AND SUNNY DAYS

The rising sun bubbled with memories
behind convalescing hills, in Cherra.

My home had seen it all once,
had felt it all, that plethora
of sunshine in Cherra. Winter
never broke into its rooms.

I never dreamt I would leave, then,
and walk into this house where morning rays
play just beyond my reach. God knows
I have walked into many such houses
in this new town that has never called me
its own, or an equal of its landlords.

Yet this time I hope
my love is sun enough.

DARSHAN SINGH MAINI

GENRE OF LOVE

You had been kind, love,
To turn cruel at the door,
And bar the way
To the sanctum of your heart.
There was pain enough in that,
And a virtue in that pain;
Musing over a simple fate,
I should have worked out
The great sum of grief
In the autumn of my days!
But no, you had other dreams,
Other songs, other metaphors
Of form and style,
And the riches you offered
Were but a bait
To an imagination of faith!
O what genre of love
This was, a theatre of cruelty
And kindness where
Not even a knife could divide
The skin from the bone,
Or the hero from the harlequin!

COMING OF THE AGE OF DISCRETION
(For Yasmine)

On this day of fog and mists
When the mountains were draped in white,
You opened a pair of doe eyes
On this fair and wondrous world.
And as you grew up in sun and sand
Amidst the music of murmuring brooks,
You imbibed, like a golden peach,
Sweetness of that perfumed soil
And its magnanimities of sound and sense.

And now ripe in spirit and form,
You're poised for a leap
Into the wider world of men,
And carve out a space for
Your dreaming self in trust.

And I wish you, dear child,
A home full of flowers and fruit
Harvested and gathered in laps of love.

RAHUL RANCHAN

DIAMOND RED

She has a high profile
Chiselled from the tears of childhood

The pomp and pageantry she imagined
As a girl of 12
Are now really hers
Exchanged as it was, is, for blood

Blood and tears forged together
In the fire of the heart
Making her a steady rock
Who yet plays with dolls

But this rock bleeds
Glistening tears trapped within
For Mother, Father, Brother
. . . and me
Perhaps the only diamond ever
That runs rivers of red.

MEMORY

A wisp of smoke
lingers in my mind

A ray of light shines
When I close my eyes

A lilt of vibration
Dances on my chest

Come back
I need you
If only to see the wisp
Catch the light
And feel the lilt.

HOPE

The empty urn
Cries silently for rhubarbs

Companion, the jasmine-scent
Mantle hearth
Bleeds sans flame
Momentarily unborn

I place each
Side by side
Light the flame beneath
Headiness fills the room
But the guests have left

Tomorrow I shall fill the urn
While the breath of dawn
Continues aflame

Perhaps leaf and flower
Will bed one another

Meanwhile, the fire lingers
The urn gasps
Hopefully, a friend will come by
To light the taper of love.

MOLSHREE A. SHARMA

POEM

After they all left
I cried

Although they never knew
I went a little mad
Smoked, drank tea and flipped channels on the tube
Two characters got confused in my head

Later I imagined being stuck with them in an elevator
Me and the guys on channel three and four
At first we were formal
We introduced ourselves
Things got better though
And we made plans to meet when we got out

And may be we were vulnerable
I shared secrets with them and they with me
Channel three was sort of sad
His girlfriend had left him
Channel four was worried what would happen when the
lease ran out
And from then on we met for a long while
Once a week
At the same time
At the same place
Until circumstances made me move
To another country

PERSONAL COMPATIBLE

Tripping on the lamp lights
And the green haze of night worship
First name personal
Last name compatible
I call him lovingly
My own P.C.

I'll write you a poem
Don't you despair
I have stored words and words for you
Anger teeters precariously
On the edge of love and hate

I'm laughing now
Kissing the lips of the sky
Twirling around a moonbeam
Remembering those old lines
I wrote and flushed
Down the toilet bowl
Along with dinner
And the man who was stronger
When I was still a child
It all comes back
Somewhere in the middle

Invent me a new disorder
When the old ones seem to only vaguely fit
Bulimia, anorexia, schizophrenia
Invent me a fresh one
Hot from your speculative frying pan

Now you analyze me
And analyze me
You solve my problems

And give me a hug and hold my hand at the door
Then tell me I'm crazy
And I'll scream to make your show a success

Now you tell me your love stories
How you'll care for me
Be there for me
And I'll not hit you back
Won't tell you
Stranger
Lover
That I'm on the trip
Gone to the movies and anticipating the kiss

I'll rewrite you a poem
One you wrote for me yesterday
And you'll never know

Tricksters, tripsters, green machine gods
Lurk inside me
And I manipulate them
Sell them for a good price in the market
And throw them against the walls
Immortality shatters when it touches me
And here I am
No match for myself
A moment is wasted
by this miserable, mortal
Me

SEVENTY MILES AN HOUR

My dreams are coffee colored
And lukewarm with time
When I think of death
Seeping through the windows
Only able to enter this space
But too tired to leave
My coffee colored dreams
My sugar spoons
And spilling cups
Comfort me

Lets play knock knock with the ceiling
Knock Knock
Who's there?
It asks me
Warm light from the lamp
Water in an old mangled bottle
My throat is dry and thirsty
Too late could be forever

I slit it
Red, red lipstick
May be she is born with it
"May be it's Maybelline"
I shoot it
But no sounds
No one gave me a gun
I drug it
And I think of glamorous aftermaths

Will they ever find me
Tomorrow at the back staircase concealing evidence
In the bathroom heaving over the sink
Washing off smells
I am disturbed for a moment
Then calm again
I drive past the buildings

And the lake and the people
I get away
A great escape
One dead body rests in one room
One subconscious in another
One is unsure
Still making a decision
And drinking in her coffee colored, chocolate flavored,
 peppermint cold
Dreams
Going now
Steadily
At 70 miles an hour

SNOW

Snow falls outside
and covers
the city unknown
and miles away in the yellow sun my heart searches
for life

The white makes me think of a body elevated
a procession
chanting

The white makes me think
of sheets crumpled and tossed aside after many promises
after much love

The white makes me think of the woman
who stands alone after they have had their fill and left her
arms bare, focussed on the stars they said would be hers

It makes me think of the nakedness of the house once the
 betrayal is over
of the silence of loneliness once the songs have been sung
and the solid stillness of the eyes after the tears have fallen
and have become snow

POEM

The telephone rings
Yes it's the right number
Yes I'll hold
And then a familiar voice
Will I come to see you?
Am I free to share an hour or two together?
You have time
And although you know
Although I know
You mustn't ask
I mustn't accept
We set a time
It is inevitable
I'll be there

Talking in the sun
We have been here before
Yes I remember
The old corner
The old table
I do remember
Poetry

Now there is change
There are changes
I tell you of my new life
I tell you I am happy
I tell you of the seeds and the flowers
Germinating

Now it is the same
You recount
I shut my eyes
Red

Warm colours
Warm tears falling
As you go on recalling
The eyes are filled
They have been painfully cold and dry for so long
I feel it
the pulse throbbing
And you say
Don't restrain Chitralkha
Let it rain Chitralkha
Let it pain Chitralkha
I'll let you go if you must move on
The world is yours
The word is yours
The page is yours
And the poetry

I have stopped listening now
I do not comprehend anymore
I look around me
The old corner
The old table
The same places and spaces
The same roads where we've walked and written lines
which cheated us
When they settled on the palms
And you say
The world is yours
The word is yours and the poetry
The poetry
Is yours

SANJEEV SETHI

DEATH IN A METROPOLIS

Corpses carve a logo,
a philosophy.
Have you ever lived
close to a burning ghat?
I have. And noticed
there is a corpse each day.
Sometimes, there is more than one dead march,
crawling through the lanes and bylanes,
recording each dead person's
last signature on the street.

The vendors don't notice
the plight of the pall-bearers.
Urchins rend the air with their catcalls.
Beggars and bootleggers
go on with their business.
The traffic doesn't pause.
Housewives continue with their chores.
So do the pimps and the priests.
Corpses carve a logo,
a philosophy.

JHAFFUR KHAN AZAD DARAKTH

RAGA HAMEER

Dusk in a mango orchard,
green ringed by parakeets in flight
the grass straining in anticipation
of footsteps in the dew drenched night.

Crow pheasants whoop in syncopation
the scent of romance rests suspended
with a brush of cloth, a flash of nails,
and the anguished cry of running quails.

Alert to distant voices like an owl,
the heart hears what the sky breathes.
The heat of day ebbs into soil
as missing memories rest unhealed
and the song of longing gently drips
from the lengthy tips of mango leaves.

DARJEELING

Give me tea with a touch of dust
and the sound of a whistling thrush,

with the sweat from a chulla hand
and the hum of pahadi song,

with a breath of distant snow
and the monastery gong,

with the warmth of an oily razai
and the smell of a gunny sack,

with the mist still morning sent
and the night still warm on my back.

THE HEEL OF HISTORY

I thought I felt from a distance
the angst of Independence,
the ache of the reeling soul
of India, dancing like a *hijra*
upon the heel of history,
hair thrown out
to the oiling Eastern wind,
full of *attar* and aplomb.
I thought I saw the pataka plumes
spreading annual animal energy,
so glorious and yet not,
illuminating with fresh abandon
both fecundity and rot.
I thought I saw in shadow play
the *kichri* of history
passing slowly on a tray
amidst reconstituted sweets
and rolling opportunity.
I thought I caught a scent of how,
within the cyclic clutter and debris,
the drama of renewal turns
and the old fields burn
to fertilize another future.

WHEN THE MAHUA FLOWERS

They smell like heat,
like dry roof thatch,
like sweat in the small
of an elephant's back,
like wet rice hot
in the aluminium pot,
like the well used corner
of a cotton razai,
like an unploughed field
lightly sprinkled in May,
like dry mud walls
in a village room.
They smell confusing,
like conversation turning
in continuous circles--
or dizziness burning
through the brain at noon.

They smell intense
and vaguely disturbing
like popcorn turning stale
in a canvas bag,
like crotch rot and tennis shoes
in a steaming locker room,
or ancient lust in a very hot tomb.

No one passing beneath their scent
can help but feel their tribal power
the mind gags when the mahua flowers.

I HEAR THE SOUND OF MARCHING ANTS

Life hangs on tingling hinges
swinging tickling to the opening breeze.
The sun's out and the eucalyptus leaves
are playing tag in that wind
that is young once only,
every time it blows.

I hear the sound of marching ants,
their anklets strung with bells.
The old tomb starts to shine
where the sandstone's exposed,
younger with each gust.

I guess it pays to grow by seconds,
each puff a feather turned.
To feel each breath before it leaves
and catch its sweet return.
An oriole calls -- slicing, liquid, clear,
a laughing lung for a living ear.

GOPI KRISHNAN KOTTOOR

NOBODY BROUGHT THE BODY HOME

Death is not the traffic lights where we stop
Every morning on our way to work It is not
What we make friends with easily
Saying, forget it, we are all human, and make
Mistakes don't hold it against me it is the moral
In the story of the fattened pigs of loneliness
And it sometimes smells of cancer sometimes
Suddenly bleeds on our common roads
Throwing our vitreous nakedness to the winds.

Nobody sticks *Wish you a happy journey* on the
Cabin baggage as we go past cold rivers of
Fairly place,* forever away from the sweet farmer's
Daughter coming down the hills looking up her newly
Sprouting breasts, this is where they all step back
After their shattering cries in the stalactite voids
And we touch down in a glazed land one hundred
Percent time-proof where the temperature outside
Is a glowing zero.

And god sweet devil, dreamer of flesh and pain
Sits by the quietest fire quaking the sun
Streaming down his dolphin polished shoulders
Smoking the reefer of the wet tobacco of our
Rolled out tears, growing his most delicious worms
Upon the brightening flower beds of time's seasons.

* **Fairly place**, by the Hoogly, Calcutta

MRI, BRAIN

She's leaving with him her gold necklace,
Bangles, ring, waist-chain that he kissed her with,
Upon their wedding night.
Now it's time to leave
These precious things, he'll gladly keep.
Soon the dimly lit A.C. room will throw up
Blood flowers growing in her secret garden
Flowering fine pink china roses
In contrast dye--Giving the kind farmer
Hell, plucking them.
And down hard nights he'll remember
Her smell of the waist chain
Cold on his kissing lips that wedding night
Laid upon his life among the slates
Where the fine rain writes the reason
And is still rubbing the dark stains
Off those fine pink china roses.

BIBHAS DE

MILLENNIUM

The millipede inches along, haltingly,
For the murky edge of the millennium.

A mist clouds my morningside window
This morning on the peachtree blossoms
Ravaged in the wind of the eveningside sea
And what I see, all I see, in the syncopated
Dance of shadows on my morningside
Window on a torrent ashen sky is a shape
Of a thousand florid deaths congealed,
Or the death of a rhyme not reckoned.

Mythmaking in midwinter: creatures
Affixed on the sandstone cliffs consider us
Past a lens of time, dimmed eyes that speak
Dreamtime themes. The deep holds many
Lores, dryly, in the crocodile's home.

Nightly the islet of the scarlet ibis becomes
An ibis, many as one, a mound of treetops
Dotted red, by homing light, lonely also
The night, the raincloud's edge nearly gold.

And thence a resolution. What ails the weary
Millipede inching on in asynchronous strides
To the starting line of the millennium, old
Excursions ended, none begun? The dance
Of shadows, reversed, is a dance of light.
A rhyme is a rhyme for what we provide.

SANCTUARY

In a fragile forest of filigreed glass
Such as an artisan makes, trimmed
With goldleaf, opalescent stones
And green beads, there often is a
Vision, back to its once-vibrance,
The fullness of foliage and bliss;
Or onward to its skeletal fate,
Extinct, and nothing beside lives.

What is the link the muses have
To the man Siddhartha, across
The lines of lands and credos,
Felt in the odd peace that glides in
The temple gardens of Shinshoji, or
Hovers over Anuradhapura, at home
In the mystical and the wondrous,
Though stalled out at Dharmashala?

Kanyalifeka--a place of fire.
Under the flamed-out Africa sky
A column walks, to this land
Or that, the often migrators,
Villages afire, numbers re-cut,
Lightless eyes that say to a camera
Eye, or leastways, to an empath's
Eyes, leave us a serving of dignity.
The dead eyes do not say.
Kanyamagufa--a place of bones.

Perhaps it is the peace that lingers
In some nodal spots on this old,
Orbit-worn Earth, an awareness
Lost at the eternal sleep, in course

Returned, and what better medium
Would there be than the hopefuls
Who assemble at the muses' door?

Damyata, Datta, Dayadhvam.
The thunder's voice is gone,
For the jungle's canopy is gone.
Trunklike roots can scarce support
The load of the clear-cut trunks;
The clouds pull away, but not
Always so, as in the morning of the
First Convocation: companionable
Youngsters of gods, humans and
Demons, gathered for a last sermon
At Brahma's hermitage school,
Heard no speeches, nor saw
The lightning, but from a darkling
Cloud deeply, monosyllabically,
To each the thunder spoke: *Da*.

So consider this proposition: That
There is an umbilical connection
To which the muses most of all
Are prone, that reaches back,
Time-travelling, into the source,
The cool, shaded well of the good.

This is the forest of no fear;
The tiger leaps, strong, virile, his
Carcass no more a multi-use thing.
In the astral place of fire sacrifice,
The nine muses seated at a trance,
A cupful of oblation is poured
To keep from dying the flame
That marks the last sanctuary.

ASCENSION

Solitude on the mountain sits
On three tiers of noise
Of the sugarcone pine, its skin
The skin of an ancient reptile,
With stubs of longhealed wounds;
Of the basal serpent, coiled of fear,
Hissing up a garbled sound,
Then daring up a ways
Into the place of fresh foliage,
Chirrup and tweets, sated nestlings
Consoled, the ether electric
With happy talk, now coherent
But dying out to the verdant tip,
The sound crested and evanesced,
The level of five purities where
Patches of light and cloud contend.
In the cloud there is nobody.
In the light there is no sound.
The notes the tender nodes make
In breaking out of the gnarled skin
Are notes you may not hear.
Some say that seated lotuslike
You can will the serpent
Clear to the tip, and past,
And even hold her there
Where, peaceably, so they say,
Silence at last meets solitude.

THE SEASHELL

An unlikely alliance of adventurers
Assembled at the ill-planned project
To churn out of an ungiving sea
The mythical pot of ambrosia--
The slender hill the reciprocating rod,
The great serpent the winding rope,
The gods tugging from our shore,
The demons on the nether shore.
But under a strain too great to stand
The snake bared her twin fangs,
The twin streams of venom
With no place to safely dispose
But for the fair god to swallow, now
And forever, the blue-throated god,
And the project renewed apace.

Of the churning of the milken sea
Rose at last the buttery froth,
Fish, fin, foam and flotsam,
Boding well or not, and a shell
Of particular note, of the deepest
Torment formed, and seeing it was
That it was, the gods withdrew.
To this day hunters cut a wide swath
On every shore of every sea,
Picking, examining, discarding
The bringings of every laden tide
As if to slake a mirage-seeking thirst
For the aphrodisiac of the demons
Or the nectar of the gods.
The shell eludes, the sea endures;
A mirage oasis is still a moving goal.

SNOWBEAR WAITS

From season to season the salmon runs,
The snowbear waits, the Inuit waits,
The tundra flowers at caribou hoof;
These truths from out of the snowmelt

On sunrise rise, should the coatless
Moose, out there, in winter's last bite
Not remember her moorings; should we,
Harvesting time in fields of cyclic crop

Or counting holy beads, pause to ruminate
On the rainy nights of rainspun tales, on
Dreams transposed onto the time of light,
Those images inverted in cascade pools

Of common realities the salmon knows,
Up from low water's shaded depth, leapt
The whole way up the down waterslide,
To cascades on cascades and the cascade

Of the sun. Jaws open wide, the Inuit
Aims his spear; at each leaping in harm's
Way, there's a truth the salmon weighs;
The moose wanders, the snowbear waits.

FALGUNI DUTTA

FAMILY PORTRAITS

My son dreams only of flying.
He says, Dad, in my dream
I just wish off the ground,
spin up the air
or glide like a kite.

My wife only has her nightmares to spill.
Often she sees herself stranded
in the unlikeliest of places
such as deserts or tropical forests
with hope drying in her mouth.

My septuagenarian mother has begun to see
Krishna, standing with his legs-arched pose,
on the banks of our derelict village river
flute in hand, a beckoning smile on his lips.
She says, Son, last night I saw him like I see you now.

CONVERSATION WITH WIFE

Possession comes stringed with desires
menacing like swirls of a river in spate:
inviting you to its labyrinthine core.
Too much nearness asphyxiates with its weight.
Sometimes it sets in motion a bitter, internecine war
none will win. Let's move

from shallow waters with uneven tides
to the sedate heart of the sea.
Let's waft into space where silence
quietly replaces manic pledges and
fear gives way to unwavering faith
as our insides turn to glass.

SOMETIMES

Sometimes, the house becomes a trap.
The bed is a bier
for flickered out hopes.
There are seductive cobwebs
on four corners
into which you must comfortably lapse.

Sometimes, the road ends
and begins
in the same rat holes
and between the deadends the earth
has lost its all to you.

Sometimes, there is no escape.

THE TRAP

Everyday, the old man waits
under the leafy neem tree
for the fish.

Everyday, the bait waits
trapped to the rusting hook
for the fish.

Everyday, the fish evades
the old man's eyes and the bait,
and lops off the day.

Everyday, a lust stirs
and a return to the shades
of the tree.

BOBBY. D.

WINTER

Winter brings cold panes
As well as warmth;
This warmth starts
As a spark and
Ignites into something bigger
And more wholesome;
The wholesome being something
More profound and generous,
Which men refuse to comprehend.
If opposed, it magnifies
And embraces all kinds of elements
Which constitute this world
We live in.
The winters of the heart
Are numerous indeed,
The cold spells outnumbering
The warm ones by a wide margin,
If the warm ones did exist.

BIBHUDATTA MOHANTY

TIME FOR CHANGE

It is spring again
with a restlessness yet to be known.
I don't know which lonely string

harps on persistently within, transforming,
inciting with its irresistible mystery
the butterfly to come out of its pupa,

like new, tender foliage
from inside the joints and caverns
of rough bark and hardened sap.
Which unknown voice
from an unseen corner whispers
its rebel cry into each cell
and vessel of blood ?

They come out in a new form
shedding their crawling past
of doubts and fears,
glide over the sweeping expanse
of unexplored horizon.
Signs of breaking waves and foams
at the threshold of some new land of faith
swell the tide of their subdued spirit.

The caravan moves on,
new forces joining all the time
in search of yet another land of promise.

OTHER WORDS

(After listening to the first few translations of the Upanishads by the Indian-English poet Bibhu Padhi.)

There is always
a crowd of words everywhere--
in the streets leading to our destinations,
in the attorneys' courts, the courtyards
and the college where
I have to teach Carl Sandburg.

Sometimes you join the crowd
with your own frail words
trying to reassert themselves;
at other times it carries you away
in its own irresistible way.

The movements are within the bounds
of prediction and reason, however.

There are times when
a passing zone of an unusual silence
breaks through the fence
of your secured limits:
words dare not approach it.
Gathered lumps of thought dissolve in the sky.

There are times when the mystery of darkness
freezes the flow of perception
in your failing nerves and veins, prevails
over the lean light of reason,
afraid to face it, embarrassed.

There are times when
a dry heap of dissatisfaction burns
within, fanned by our doubts and fears,
when some words germinate
inside the womb of a dark silence--
words that strike you with

the thrust and subtleness
of a powerful beam and a self within you,
undiscovered until now, detaches
from its sleeping complacency
and flies away, far
beyond our known horizons.

Your body, with its terribly sensitive organs
and their proud experiences,
lies before you, charmless.

For the first time you know
what the illusion of colour and matter is.
For the first time, it seems,
you know the taste of life.

VINOD V B'KRISHNA

APPREHENSIONS ABOUT KARAIKUDI

I play out
My piece of insignificance
Refusing imminent despair
For as long as silly faith
Rhymes with laboured breath.

I wait for the noises to wane
Like the seventh day of Flu
So to collect the shards of habit
Grown automatic and mixed
With middle-class blues.

Wonder what grave sins of my forebears
Brought me to a land, dreary, dry and ungiving
Where the thorns and brambles
Spread ingratiating palms to mean
That is all the green they can afford
In such a place.
There is more moisture in the silent tears
Of this once prosperous race
Than in the wells of their ancestors.

An unwelcome crow
Perches on my window
Caws like an uncouth image
Showing awkwardly on a rewritten page.

My peace broken for the umpteenth time
My ears listen to bones knocked about
By impish interns
In a musty laboratory.

THE WOMEN OF KARAIKUDI

They're dry, desiccated, dark skinned.
No adjectives can room them
In the poetic expanse of the mind.
Their breasts are taut webbing on the bat's wing,
Placid cricket-pitches in the subcontinent.

Angular and bony their unfinished waists and hips
Look drawn by a sedulous schoolboy
Eager to impress
In the Biology class.

Jasmine flowers, strung in the hair
Like fire-crackers, ask to be taken
For as much woman.

For they keep their heads bowed all the time
And turn answer-scripts silently
In an exam-hall.

The forlorn faces resemble
The lampless streets they live in:
Have no complaints, and dimly put up
With the agony of missing cardinal steps
In the sum of growing up.

Their gods are smears
Of sandal, ash and vermilion
Or tiny pieces of felt
Glued to sullen foreheads.
They take after their mothers, in pubescence,
With nose-studs and ear-studs,
And chains of lustrous gold
In traditional designs.

The lot of such women in a hot country
Is to wait for the men in their beds
Who soon will come, with turmeric-stained threads
In ancestral homes.

MOIN QAZI

PAIN

Nobody can mend
A broken heart.
We have drugs for the body pain
But what of the pain
That tears the heart
When broken promises
Glare at us,
And the sorrow of failed love
Engulfs us.
Nobody can mend
A broken heart.
Nobody can cure
A heart sickened by deception.
Nobody can cool
A heart burning with remorse,
And quench the raining tears
Flowing from ruptured emotions.
Nobody can fuse the broken fibres
Burnt by the flames of agony.
Nobody can mend
A broken heart.

DECEPTION

How long can you invent faces?
Some days you show up as a friend
With a gentle smile, a reckoning heart;
Another day as a distraught man
In need of money and succour.
I dole out a few hundred rupees
From my hard earned salary
That doesn't measure even five times
Of what I have lent you.
Then suddenly I find you in richness
Entertaining friends with dainty food.
Such people break kind hearts
and make men a merciless race.

VIHANG NAIK

MAKING OF A POET

sometimes you feel the urge to fly
with birds against the sun

a wish to walk down the streets
of a city as a stranger

a desire to be alone amid the crowd
be lost in the flow

listen to rains or jungle drum beats
howl with wolves or talk to walls

did you instruct your hand to move
or make a poem?

then you may even wonder how poetry
makes a poet.

MORNING

the burning
of the wound
still flames

within you

pain flowers
as you awake
and open your
eyes

to the world before you

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K. SATCHIDANANDAN

THE PATH TOWARDS GOD

Don't go to the temples;
Images will entangle you.
Don't trust the holy books;
Their truths are obsolete.
Don't seek out priests;
Middlemen always bargain.
Keep away from groups;
They breed only violence.
Watch your body:
It is splitting apart.
Attachment does not hinder;
Only practise it with detachment.
Love is the way
If not confined to man.
Poverty is divine
When not imposed.
Don't block the wind,
Don't go after the cause.
Meditation needs no mounts.
Squat on the grass.
Listen keenly to the leaf,
The bird, the rain and the river.
Don't forget the waking sun
Even while sleeping under the moon.
Don't curse solitude.
The world is most alive
Inside the lonely.
Silence is prayer;
Emptiness, fullness.

(Translated from Malayalam by the Poet)

CHAITANYA AND THE BITCH

Chaitanya was at Puri then.
A bitch, leprous and dying
approached him limping and asked the sage:
"Lord, some hold only Man has soul,
who am I then?"

Chaitanya replied : "Mother,
Have you seen only those
who do not know how
fire burns and snow cools?
There is an unsung melody
in the wind-swept tree,
in the still water,
in your intense agony even.
Each birth is a word
Uttered in a language where
the said coexists with the unsaid.
Ask this breeze fanning your sores
Where we spring from.
Listen quietly like this rock.
Gold runs about within him
yet he retains his calm
until the liver delves into him.
Those who look for proof
are those who do not know
they are the proof.
What the plant feels as
flowering, fruit as ripening,
what you feel as movement
and Man as freedom
are all the same.
Your pups too open their eyes
into the same Light

that cannot be imprisoned
in temples.
You did not create differences
and then the weapons
to undo them.
You did not run after thrones
nor build rotting cities.
You made your life a hymn
with this modest tail.
You listened only to
your dispossessed blood.
You became the statue of equality:
your will was nature's own
and so your action.
You recognised the moist earth
and chose her for refuge,
like the tree in the graveyard
stirred by the dreams of the dead.
The Eternity beyond all thought
is here, in front of you
like an unwritten page."

Then Chaitanya
caressed her bruised frame
with his water-like fingers.
Her breasts oozed milk.
Only a white flower remained
Where she had been.

(Translated from Malayalam by the Poet)

DERRIDA, JANUARY, I

With the square face of the theoretician
Derrida inside
With the round face of winter
January outside
Between two chills, I
Between us a trembling goblet of wine.

Derrida does not believe in rebirth
But the wine calls Derrida
Bhartrhari
And winks at me.

My fever-ridden childhood
Comes running on emaciated legs
With a charmed thread around his neck.
I don't recognise him.
My dead sister outside
Throws in a white flower.
I see each one stripping
One after another, as I stand and watch.
They would instantly be
Led to gas chambers.

Derrida, this is our last supper.
This goblet is filled with
The tears of the animals being butchered
In Kerala, we call this rain.
You should have gone there.

Derrida raises the goblet above his head
I remember the magician who performed
In our school in my childhood.
And certain of my dreams
That were led to the abattoir

We can hear the lament of objects
When we are silent.
Derrida looks at me unblinking
With the loathing towards those who construct.
There are no wrinkles of rebellion
On that forehead
On those lips
There is not a single new way to love.
Around that heavy head
Only an Indian fly, with the face of Ananda Vardhana
Whizzes in Sanskrit.

Grief is asleep now,
It lies like a cat, in the warmth
Of an extinct fire-place.
Don't wake it up
Talking about the Tree of Knowledge.

Leave words alone, Derrida,
Here truth is not on the margins of the text
But on the fringes of streets.
Look at these people
Who lie with their heads on night's arms
Awaiting small deaths.
The ones no thunder can wake up.
Derrida is not withdrawing his gaze.
That gaze deconstructs everything
One after another
Table, chair, wine, fly,
Derrida, January, I.

(Translated from Malayalam by A. J. Thomas)

REVELATION

It was on the island
that the snake bit me
My body turned blue
I became child again.

A staircase appeared before me
I climbed it to meet
my dead grand dad.
His beard was growing still.

Grand dad sat me on his lap
gave me a draught of some leaf-juice
When the venom left my body
I was in another age.

There were no riots there, nor wars,
Gods and men were naked alike
We bathed in light--
in the same light my sister
had once shown me in the
hollow under the tamarind tree
We kids had then thought
it was the serpent's jewel
but it was another Time
There was no religion then
there was only Soul
There was no darkness nor death
no outside and inside
The Self and the Other were the same.
None was alone
All bathed in the same river,
ate from the same tree.

K. Satchidanandan

An angel whispered:
"The second Millennium has ended"
A tumult deafened my ears
I was alone.
It was fire all around.

(Translated from Malayalam by the Poet)

MANUSHYA PUTHIRAN

CLOTHES OF THE DEAD

don't know
how to keep
the dead man's clothes

can't wear them
simply
for it would seem
I were waiting
for that chance

can't let them be
in his place
for relating with the dead
so easily
is impossible

can't give them away
for his image
would surprise you
at unexpected places
through unexpected figures

can't burn them
for my hands tremble
to cremate him
again and again

dead man's clothes
are not like clothes
for
they are his skin

(Translated from Tamil by N. Poovalingam)

SABARI GHOSH

THE GOLDEN SPRING ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE ROAD

1.

Pomegranate sunrays blush on white peaks--
My heart says he will come then!

Wild rose bushes shred their blossoms in the breeze;
Is it too late then, I fear.

2.

All alone on a dangerous mountain road;
Ascending unsurmountable climbs--
I lose my breath; pain pervades all
My senses. I flop down, on a roadside stone.

Someone appears with some water and food;
Never seen him before, but he seems so familiar--
Faces once known blurred by distance now
Faces I seem never to have known too well.

3.

A blue lake at the heart of white peaks--the Golden Spring;
A pilgrim's paradise--people flocking for sacred bliss--

I don't have a god, nor do I have any knelt-down prayer to offer;
Oh Infinite--absorbing this intense beauty, I just want to
feel graced.

4.

Here it's midnight soon after it's dark,
Inside a small room I -- and my companions.
Between us mountain ranges, mute quarries and a silence
not to be crossed!

5.

Well fed people on half-dead horses ascending difficult hills;
Virtue-hungry, they want to visit the sacred spring.
What if the horse gets all the exertion of pilgrimage, and its
blessings too?
What, then, will remain in those deluxe fists?

6.

A depressed mare
Carrying a load far greater than her strength
Climbs uphill on exhausted legs:
In a herd, but all alone.
She looks very familiar to me; I wonder
Where have I seen her before . . .

All on a sudden I recall
The full-length mirror in my toilet!

7.

On these beautiful, high up peaks of the Himalayas
Salvation-seeking sages used to live. It's said
That they achieved salvation through years of ascetic self-denial.

Even if I live here a thousand births
Salvation will never touch me--
For beauty holds me enthralled--a lover
Through and through . . .

8.

A parrot-hued valley among the hills--
The Valley of Flowers,
But we're here in off-season; now
All flowers sleep under the soil.

The young man acting as our guide says: "When it's time for
them to shred
They just drop on the ground. When it's time to bloom again
All the blossoms come back.
That's the law of Nature."

Hearing that I tremble all over.
When the flowers drop dead on the ground once
Why does the season of blossoms enter the grave forever
In my life resembling a bereft camel?!

9.

I'm climbing up a spiral mountain path.

Those I've left behind far far back in my family,
They've all dropped from my heart.
Those who are with me
They are not really with me either.

Do mountains, then, remove bonds?

10.

The snow in the mountains' heart melts into rivers--

If all the secret sorrows of this heart
Melted into water as well
This whole world would be drowned then.

11.

The rhododendron trees look all red with blossoms--

Sitting at the head of my heart I keep muttering jargons of
total apathy,

But what a bother! Why do you still keep invading my mind!

12.

A rose plant in bloom

Bends towards an unmanageable waterfall;

If the naughty fountain quietyens down for a moment,

She'll quickly take a look at herself

To know how the mountain sees her!

13.

Those who meditated on the Himalayas

With their eyes closed for years and years--

My salutes to their self-control.

I don't even feel like batting my eyelids;

I feel apprehensive--what if a beautiful moment

Drops down before I could take it in!

14.

Long, slender trees surround the forest bungalow,

It's the dark fortnight: no moon behind the leaves today--

I sit on the balcony--a cold, companionless night--

In the dark his memory sparkles like sudden fireflies.

15.

In the heart of an indifferent mountain
Reclining on the sky
This lake like the goddess' tears--the Golden Spring--
Exquisite lilies blooming on its shores.

Surpassing itself, somehow my body
Has managed to reach this far up;
But my heart hasn't quite managed yet--

I am as earthy as a mountain spring, as fickle--
Forever enthralled by trifles in great passion,
Loving to fall!

16.

It seems as if I've walked across the entire stretch from
The south to the north pole--all alone.
Unending roads in front of me still--Like the ambitions of the
cruel one--
Stretching straight towards the sky.
Somewhere at the end of this road, who knows exactly where,
Lies that sacred place--that blue lake, peace's sibling
Exquisite lilies in bloom on its banks.

Land of snow all around; stone-cold--just like civilization's heart.
As far as eyes can see, mountains sleeping
Snuggled in white snow-quilts.
My heart is heavier than mountains now
With the load of exhaustion and frustration.
Wounds on the stones' feet. On this solid snow
There is the path too easy to fall along.

Mother Earth, if my feet slip today,
Will you stretch your arms for me?
I am not Sita, the king's daughter,
She was as delicate as petals--
just on hearing the proposal of a second ordeal
She'd sighed and cried and given up the fight.
But in my life some hundred times I have
Walked across the path of fire, distressed since birth.
I am not Sita, the king's wife--
So I'd caught fire too . . .
I've been burnt to cinders thus.

Today in this merciless land of snow,
Like a broken, tired rock
If I really fall down a fathomless quarry--
The whole world will remain untouched still, apathetic -- I know.
Epics get written in this world for suffering queens . . .
Does anybody ever cry for a mere woman?

Not even a single sigh
Will ever curve on the wind
Even the shortest elegy for me--I know.

[This long poem was written on the poet's trek to Hemkund
(literally translating to Golden Spring) in the Garhwal hills, and the
exquisite lilies mentioned here are *brahmakamal* flowers that
bloom only in this region and nowhere else in the world.]

(Translated from Bengali by Paramita Banerjee)

BIBHU PADHI

TODAY AGAIN

Today we have again to move away
from ourselves, today again,
when your smile leans against
my clean mirror. Today again,
away from ourselves,
everything seems familiar once more;
you, I, others and even the dead bodies,
breath-tormented tears, the waves
breaking at a furlong's distance.

You know, there is this desire to return
from oneself, to see oneself
as someone else,
to make him your own.

Let the cloud-roots
of their vain, anxious talks hang
from the sky of their banyan-branches.
Today, let us move away
from ourselves again, while you leave
your sad looks on my own mirror,

and return with the sunlight
for our prayers for tomorrow,
for ourselves, for others.

(Translated from Oriya by Bibhudatta Mohanty)

JAYADEVA

SACRED PROFANITIES:

Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda*, Some Poems in Translation

Jayadeva, the worthy successor of Kalidas, Bhavabhuti and Sriharsha, is perhaps the last great poet of the classical Sanskrit poetic tradition. Born of Bhojadeva and Ramadevi, in *Kendubilva* in the Eastern part of India, he flourished in the 12th century. The place of his birth, however, remains a matter of controversy among Jayadeva scholars and critics. The Bengalis claim that Jayadeva was born in the Birbhoom district of Bengal and the Oriyas legitimatised their claim too in advocating that *Kendubilva*, which Jayadeva himself describes as his birth place, in the signature verse of his seventh poem, *Kendubilva Samudra Sambhava Rohini Ramanena*, is a village in the Puri district of Orissa. Ironically enough there is a village of the same name in both the neighbouring states. Recent studies and researches, however, tilt the balance in favour of Orissa with conclusive proofs.

Bengali or Oriya, this remains an undisputed fact that he was one of the greatest poets of India and an unrivalled master of erotic-religious poetry. *Gitagovinda*, one of the finest dramatic lyrics in Sanskrit, deals with the *sacred profanities* by deftly fusing eroticism with a profound religious experience. The theme of *Gitagovinda*, as its title suggests, is the "song of *Krishna*" which celebrates the springtime love-frolic (*Vasanta Rasa*) of *Radha* and *Krishna*. On its surface the poem appears to be of a regular *carpe diem* cast. But it doesn't stop there. Its spiritual dimension--the *Madhura Bhakti* that it exudes--is what saves the poem from lapsing into the category of the merely erotic. The restraint and control that *Jayadeva* uses through language transform the purely erotic subject matter into the material for aesthetic and religious experience. That is why one finds, in spite of the crude, vulgar, erotic details, the poem never stimulates a wanton desire in the readers. What seems *prima facie* in the poem is the element of devotion. The allegory of the union of *Jeevatma* and *Paramatma*

(the human and the supreme) is implicit in *Gitagovinda*. Through imagery, tone, colour and rhythm Jayadeva mingles levels of physical and metaphysical association, where the divine and the human are fused into one condensed religious ecstasy, where mundane distinction of "I" and "you", "mine" and "thine" are totally quelled, and the imaginary barrier is broken.

The Vaisnava devotional poetry (*Bhakti* poetry) is replete with this theme. *Tirupavai* in Tamil celebrates the love between *Andal* and *Krishna*, and in Rajasthan we have the whole body of *Meera Bhajans* which enshrines love between *Meera* and *Krishna*. But in the case of both *Andal* and *Meera*, the lord doesn't physically involve himself in his beloveds' mundane existence, though he loved them equally intensely as he did *Radha*. In them we see the divine presence but from a reverential distance. Whereas Jayadeva in *Gitagovinda* humanizes Lord *Krishna*, and depicts him as an ordinary human lover who suffers the pangs of separation, and betrays the weaknesses of a mortal male at the sight of a beautiful female. Jayadeva artfully balances the divine lover against the mortal beloved and places them on a very intimate plane where reciprocity of their love could be made possible. He seems to suggest that their love is mutual, not unilateral and that *Krishna* is not allowed to strike a condescending, patronising attitude towards *Radha*.

In terms of the technique, the poem shows superb craftsmanship. The poem has a dramatic structure, as is evident from its episodic divisions in twelve cantos. The sequel of feeling and action, and the shifting of locale and interplay of light and shade give it an unmistakable dramatic dimension.

What is more important about the poem is its simple unpretentious diction, wedded to a remarkable lyrical lilt. Though written in pristine Sanskrit, Jayadeva uses a vernacular rhythm in the poem, which explains its phenomenal success and the intimate place it occupies in the Indian popular psyche. The

remarkable rhetoric of love which informs the poem is what gives *Gītagovinda* its novelty and speciality.

Gītagovinda has been translated into almost all the Indian languages and many European languages, including German and Italian as well as English. English translation of *Gītagovinda* has been done by several eminent scholars beginning from Sir William Jones to Barbara Stoller Miller, and by several eminent Indians such as S.Laxminarasimha Sastri.

I too have tried to translate *Gītagovinda* anew, without suggesting in the least that the earlier translations are inadequate. But I certainly feel that there is still scope for improvement, and there shall always be. Every translation is only a humble attempt to get closer to the original. How far I have been successful in realizing this goal is only a matter to be decided by the readers. In the process of my translation of *Gītagovinda* I realised that it offers several problems to the translators. It is a deeply cultural product with profound religious significance. A translator has to keep these two aspects in mind and should not miss out on either. The "culture specifics" in the Source Language pose problems for the foreign translators though they handle the Target Language eminently well (because it is their own). Conversely the Target Language poses problems to Indian translators in the sense that the "culture specific words" with deep religious undertones find no translatable parallels in English. One has to be satisfied willy-nilly with a workable substitute. Obviously, therefore, the translators--foreign or Indian--at one stage or the other have to make compromises with the sense or with the language. It is in the very nature of translation itself that such compromises are imperative. Therefore, the most acceptable version would be that which makes the least sacrifice on either count. Further, when one realises that even a hundredth part of the beauty of the original cannot be distilled into the Target Language, one really feels intimidated and humbled.

Keeping all these inherent problems in mind I have tried to translate *Gitagovinda*. Since I am deeply conscious of the fact that *Gitagovinda* is not what it appears to be on the surface, I have taken meticulous care about the choice of diction (in my translation), hoping that it will be in keeping with the dignity of *Jayadeva's* verse, and that it will evoke the right kind of response by providing the appropriate wavelength between the poet and the readers. What follows here is a selection of translations from *Gitagovinda*.

CANTO I

Song 2 : *Raga* : *Gurjari*

Adorned with ear-rings
And beautiful garlands of wild flowers
You rest on *Kamala's* bosom, Oh *Hari*,
Glory be to thee and triumph to thee!

Halo of the sun's orb,
You the deliverer from earthly bondages,
The Swan in the *Manasa* lake of saintly hearts,
Glory be to thee, Oh *Hari*, triumph to thee!

You, the subduer of *Kaliya*,
The bringer of happiness to men,
The sun of the lotus of *Yadu*-clan
Glory be to thee, Oh *Hari*, triumph to thee!

You, slayer of *Madhu*, *Mura*, *Naraka*,
Oh, rider of *Garuda!* *Hari*,
You are the bulwark of happiness
Of the heavenly host,
Glory to be thee, triumph to thee!

Oh, lotus-eyed *Hari*,
The dispenser of earthly bondage,
The refuge of three worlds
Glory be to thee, Oh *Hari*, triumph to thee!

You, whom the beautiful *Sita* adorns, Oh *Rama*,
The destroyer of *Dushana* the demon,
And slayer of the ten-headed *Ravana*,
Glory be to thee, Oh *Hari*, triumph to thee!

Beautiful like the new rain-clouds,
Hari, the holder of *Mandara*
The *Chakora* of moon-faced *Sri*
Glory be to thee, triumph to thee!

Jayadeva sings this joyous song,
Auspicious and glorious, in your praise,
Glory be to thee, Oh *Hari*, triumph to thee!

In the embrace of *Madhusudana*
Padma's nipples
Leave saffron-stamp on his broad chest
Mixed with beads of sweat
Caused by the fretful game of love,
Flow like their sanguine passion.
May their love bring you happiness!

In the spring's solacing breeze,
The flower-like, tender-limbed *Radha*,
Searches *Krishna* in his countless haunts,
Through terrains and wastelands
Afflicted by the fierce arrows of the God of love.
Pensive and thoughtful,
She is assuaged by the joyous melodies
Of her friend's ecstatic song.

Song 3 : Raga : Vasanta

The tender clove vines
Flutter to the soft touch of vernal breeze,
The cooing cuckoos and humming bumble-bees
Make the garden huts an amorous haunt,
When *Hari* roams in the richness of spring
And dances with young beauties, Oh friend,
A time too cruel for forlorn lovers!

The love-lorn wives of travellers
Languish and groan in unsatiated desire
Swarms of bees settle on clusters of flowers,
Conspiring to laden the *bakula* branches,
When *Hari* roams in the richness of spring
And dances with young beauties, Oh friend,
A time too cruel for forlorn lovers!

The new leaves of *Tamala*
With their sweet musk aromas,
And the beautiful *Kinsuka* flower
Appear like manicured nails of *Ananga*
And rip the heart of the youth;
When *Hari* roams in the richness of spring
And dances with young beauties, Oh friend,
A time too cruel for forlorn lovers!

The bright coloured saffron-stalks
Look like *Madana's* golden sceptres
And the bee-like trumpet flowers
Look like arrows in love's armoury
When *Hari* roams in the richness of spring
And dances with young beauties, Oh friend,
A time too cruel for forlorn lovers!

Shunning the sense of shame,
Lovers open out their hearts
Like buds their bosoms in bloom,
The *Ketaka* spikes rise like shrapnel
To stab the hearts of the love-lorn,
When *Hari* roams in the richness of spring
And dances with young beauties, Oh friend,
A time too cruel for forlorn lovers!

The sweet fragrance
Of the newly bloomed
Madhavi, Malati and *Jati*
Which even entices a hermit's heart,
Are the most beloved friends of young lovers,
When *Hari* roams in the richness of spring
And dances with young beauties, Oh friend,
A time too cruel for forlorn lovers!

The budding mango trees feel thrilled
When entwined by a delicate creeper
As *Brindavan* forest feels holier
By the girdling *Yamuna* waters
When *Hari* roams in the richness of spring
And dances with young beauties, Oh friend,
A time too cruel for forlorn lovers!

Jayadeva sings joyously
Invoking *Sri Hari* 's feet
In rhyme, narrating
The pleasant spring-time forests
In tune with the erotic mood.
When *Hari* roams in the richness of spring
And dances with young beauties, Oh friend,
A time too cruel for forlorn lovers!

The forest filled with fragrance
Of the pollens of Jasmine bloom,
The scent of *Ketaka* wafted
By the breath of *Ananga's* friend,
The spring breeze,
Touching everyone, torments here.

The honey-greedy bees swarm round mango shoots.
The cuckoos noisily frolic about the thick foliage
Making the love-lorn passengers sick with desire.
Cheered by the hope of reunion
They pass these hard days in trance.

Radha's attention drawn
By her friends to see
Murari (Hari) who loves,
The embrace of several women
And enjoys the exotic love-game.

Song 4 : *Raga : Ramakeri*

Sandal balm smeared, blue bodied
Robed in yellow-silk,
Sporting a garland of wild flowers,
He smiles beautifully
With bedecked ear-pendants dangling about
His chubby cheeks
Hari revels being enticed
By the beautiful damsels of *Gopa*. (Refrain)

A buxom-bosomed cowherdess
Embraces *Hari* lovingly,
Intoning a tender love song.
Hari revels being enticed
By the beautiful damsels of *Gopa*.

Enticed by his wanton looks
An innocent damsel is lost
In contemplation of the lotus-face of *Madhusudana*
Hari revels being enticed
By the beautiful damsels of *Gopa*.

A huge-hipped damsel leaning
To whisper into his ears
Implants an ecstatic kiss
On the chubby cheeks of *Hari*
Hari revels being enticed
By the beautiful damsels of *Gopa*.

Curious of his art of love-making,
A girl on the banks of *Yamuna*,
Drags him by his clothes
Towards a thicket,
Hari revels being enticed
By the beautiful damsels of *Gopa*.

Hari hails the girl,
Bemused in the dance of love
Whilst clapping, and the
Jingle of her rapt bangles
mingle with the soft note
Of his flute.
Hari revels being enticed
By the beautiful damsels of *Gopa*.

He clasps one, kisses another,
Caresses yet another beautiful lady
He eyes some one's meaningful smile
And pursues some other damsel.
Hari revels being enticed
By the beautiful damsels of *Gopa*.

Jayadeva describes
The beautiful love-game
Of *Keshava* in *Brindavan* forests
Let this bring benediction to all.
Hari revels being enticed
By the beautiful damsels of *Gopa*.

The bringer of happiness to the world
Is the lotus-eyed *Hari*,
Whose dark and tender limbs
Set in motion the festivity of love.
The unfearing damsels of *Vraja*
Caress him in spring, O friend,
Hari plays like "love" incarnate.

The wind tormented
By the fiery breath of the serpents
Of *Srikhanda* hills
Eagerly rushes northward
To embrace the snow,
The cuckoos merrily sing
Their mellifluous note
Seeing tender buds
On smooth mango branches.

CANTO II : THE CASUAL *KESHAVA*

Seeing *Hari* in amorous play
With ordinary women of *Gopa*
The conceited *Radha* stung by envy
Flees to her hideout in the thicket
Infested by humming bumble-bees,
Feeling forlorn and lost
She whispers her secrets to her friend.

Song 5 : *Raga* : *Gurjari*

Nectar sweet melody flows from his lips
His wanton eyes, his head and ear-rings
Sway from side to side
To the tune of his flute.
Hari luxuriates in his love-dance
And my heart recalls
His loving, winsome taunts. (Refrain)

Peacock-plume bedecked crown
With curly locks of hair,
The varicoloured clothes
On his cloud-dark body
Beat the rainbow in its pageantry.
Hari luxuriates in his love-dance
And my heart recalls
His loving, winsome taunts.

Craving to kiss the mouths
Of the heavy-hipped women of *Gopa*
Waiting under the *Kadamba trees*,
Smiles flash
From the sweet rose-lipped *Hari*.
Hari luxuriates in his love-dance
And my heart recalls
His loving, winsome taunts.

A thousand beauties he encircled
By his enthralled and ecstatic arms
The jewels on his hands and feet shone
Dispelling the darkness of the night.
Hari luxuriates in his Love-dance
And my heart recalls
His loving, winsome taunts.

The sandal (paste) spot on his brow
Beats the beauty of the moon amid clouds,
Presses he the pointed breasts
Painfully about the wall
Of his merciless manly chest.
Hari luxuriates in his love-dance
And my heart recalls
His loving, winsome taunts.

Beautiful, bejewelled
Makara - shaped ear-rings
Adorn his tender cheeks,
His yellow robes enticed
Men, sages, gods and demons
To follow him--servile and meek.
Hari luxuriates in his love-dance
And my heart recalls
His loving, winsome taunts.

Meeting under the brightly shaded *Kadamba*
He quells my fear of evil
His amorous glance billows
Into me delight deep and divine.
Hari luxuriates in his love-dance
And my heart recalls
His loving, winsome taunts.

Jayadeva sings
The beauty of *Madhu's* foe
To remember *Hari's* feet
Is a pursuit worthy of righteous men.
Hari luxuriates in his love-dance
And my heart recalls
His loving, winsome taunts.

Recounting his prankish ways
My heart refuses to rage
And find fault with him
But feels a strange joy.
Even when he runs away
With other women, leaving me alone,
My heart pines for him
What else can I do?

Song 6: *Raga : Malava*

Lying in the lonely garden hut
Stealthily at night, he ogles in all directions,
With expectant eyes, and flings
Lascivious smiles.
Friend,
Bring the sublime subduer of *Kesi* (Refrain)
And satiate my desire
To revel with him.

In utter shame I blushed
When I met him first,
He cajoled me and coaxed me
With multiple flattering words
And when I smiled
And spoke to him tenderly
He loosened my loin clothes.
Friend, bring the sublime . . .

Laying me on a leafy bed
He lies for ever on my breast
And I embrace him and wildly kiss,
He clings to me, suckling my lips.
Friend, bring the sublime

With my eyes closed, lazily I lie
My forehead a-quiver in a startling thrill
My body soaked in sweat
In the act and the fret,
And he trembles too
In the intoxication of lust.
Friend, bring the sublime

Marvelling at the mastery
Of his love's art
I cooed like a cuckoo,
My blossoms crumpled, my hair dishevelled,
And breasts wore nail marks.
Friend, bring the sublime

Bejewelled anklets tinkle at my feet
In the frenzied orgy of passion
My girdle falls with a clamour
As he draws me back to stamp a kiss.
Friend, bring the sublime

Contented I lie
After the act of love.
With his lotus-eyes
Half-open, he lies.
Numbed my body lay like a creeper
Delighted by love lay *Madhu's* killer.
Friend, bring the sublime

Jayadeva sings devoutly
The graceful love-game
Of *Madhu's* foe,
Let the story of love-lorn *Radha*
Shower happiness on all.
Friend, bring the sublime

His enticing flute fell off his hand
Soaked was he, with the sweat of shame
Nonplussed he stood, incredulous his smile,
When he spied me watching him beguile,
Revelling with a host of *Vraja*-beauties.
Seeing his pitiful plight
I enjoyed with all my heart.

The newly bloomed crimson *Ashoka* buds
Pain the sight,
The pondside cool breeze
Wafted through the garden is tormenting too.
O! friend, not even the melodious hum of bumble-bees
That roam about the clusters of mango-shoots
In high bowers, is any comfort.

(Translated from Sanskrit by N.S.R. Ayenger)

KRISHNA RAYAN

WHEN TWO GENERATIONS MEET

Jeet Thayil, *Apocalypse*. London: Aark Arts, 1997. pp.64. Rs. 199.

C.P. Surendran, *Posthumous Poems*. New Delhi: Viking, 1999.
pp. 96. Rs. 195.

Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *The Transfiguring Places*. New Delhi:
Ravi Dayal Publisher, 1998. pp.40. Rs. 60.

Shiv K. Kumar, *Woolgathering*. Mumbai: Orient Longman, 1998.
pp. 76. Rs. 60.

Both were born in 1959. Both were born in Kerala. Both now live in Bombay. Both are journalists. Both are "Bombay Poets," whatever that might mean. Neither writes poetry which will reward a reading strategy evolved from theories such as postmodernism or postcolonialism.

Here the comparison between Jeet Thayil and C.P. Surendran ends. Each has to be approached and understood separately and solely in terms of himself. In fact, the present collection from each must be approached and understood in terms of itself and in isolation from its predecessors.

* * *

Philip Hensher, writing in the *Spectator* a few weeks ago, condemned contemporary British poets roundly as "much worse than boring; a fatal pall of nothing-in-particular hangs over them.... Very few poets seem to be able to find their way to an individual and memorable voice." One wishes that he had strayed outside the 1993 Bloodaxe anthology and looked at some later work, like, for instance, Jeet Thayil's *Apocalypse* which has been published in London. Thayil makes no concessions to the reader and the text is difficult--not so much from willed inscrutability as from the nature

of the experience which is mostly resistant to explication. In seeking access to the poems, one is reduced to picking up clues from sources extraneous to them, such as the title of the book, the titles of the two Sections, and the quotations introducing each section. The portmanteau word *Apocalypso* ("the Song of the End"), in a way, says it all. The supporting quotation is from Ezra Pound: "It is difficult to write a paradiso when all the superficial indications are that you ought to write an apocalypse. It is obviously much easier for an inferno or even a purgatorio." The titles of the two sections of the collection are backed by quotations from the most deeply disturbing book of the Old Testament: the Book of Job. The quotation for "The Leper King Speaks of Love" (Section I) refers to corruption in its original literal sense: putrefaction. The quotation from "Brother to Dragons, Companion to Owls" is from a passage which begins:

When I looked for good, then evil
came upon me: and when I waited
for light, there came darkness.

The most obvious symptom of what tunes Thayil's harp to mourning and his flute to the voice of them that weep (to borrow the language of the Book of Job) is that he is "much possessed with death." Death, particularly death by one's own hand, is a theme that dominates some of the poems. "Other People's Deaths" tells of the way John Berryman, Delmore and Hart Crane killed themselves; "Dolphins Saved My Life" narrates how a death wish was redeemed from an unexpected quarter. The end-piece in the collection is "The Mercy Tree":

When the clock winds down,
Mark for me an urban surround:

Squalid, anonymous, free.
How much easier then

To pick up and leave behind
The constant currency

Of breathing, for another rhythm.
This obsolete frame,

Discarded like a suit of clothes,
Will make fire, fodder and fish food,

Befriended by worms
Milking the mercy tree.

"Life Lessons" elaborates the litany: "People die in circles . . .
People die heedlessly . . . People die plentifully . . . People die.
That's what they do."

Mysteriously, in the ritual of dying, or killing oneself,
breakfast figures as an important act. Hart Crane's last supper was
"EVERYTHING on the menu." "Horse Breakfast" presents horses
"a half-step ahead of butchers" breakfasting on garbage:

Once the winged steed of hope and desire
Of possibility, purity--now deceased.
Nothing of the mystic beast of West and East.
These were Bombay horses, breakfasting
On garbage, all traces of beauty and grace

Obliterated.

Incidentally, the poem can be set beside Yeats' image which,
however, has a very different context and relevance:

There's something ails our colt
That must, as if it had not holy blood

Nor on Olympus leaped from cloud to cloud,

Shiver under the lash, strain, sweat and jolt
As though it dragged road-metal.

("The Fascination of What's Difficult")

In startling contrast to these contemplations of the heart of darkness are poems which touch upon other faces of reality. In "Pushkin Knew Heaven (A Place Where Nothing ever happens)," happiness is defined as habit and inaction: what Wordsworth called "a wise passiveness." "Where This One Came From" explores the mystery of creativity more daringly and complexly than Ted Hughes's "The Thought-Fox" and is a major achievement in the self-reflexive mode:

Tonight the poem walks abroad
In moonlight, ravening for a thing
That cannot easily be named, tonight

The poem knocks, is allowed entry
Into a room no bigger than a cupboard
Lit by a single discoloured bulb

Pulling back the covers, poem
Lays down, spreads wide arms & legs
Gives itself completely

Now poem sleeps the pure slumber
Of madmen, children, drunks. By first light
Poet will vanish, leaving no shadow.

There are two remarkable companion poems on rain. The first tells how

Every year when the monsoon rains begin
something big happens in my life.

The second narrates how

But always, without fail, it would rain
Every time they lay together

Unable to bear such perfect oneness
With the elements, he drove her away.
Now unwashed, always thirsting,
He sits surprised,
Even his tears are dry.

These and other concerns add up to a considerable diversity and range of themes, which together with a controlled and withdrawn mode of utterance makes the arrival of the volume an important event. Thayil is well on his way to becoming a major poet.

* * *

Surendran's recent collection, *Posthumous Poems*, is largely the product of an intellectual-emotional crisis. When the Naxalite movement in Kerala ran out of steam, he found himself shorn of his social identity; and in an attempt to find some stability, he invested heavily in an individual relationship. Only to discover that he had exchanged one trauma for another. Following a divorce, he lapsed into addiction to alcohol. Eventually, he fought his way back from despair to normalcy in the same way as T.S. Eliot had done--through the therapy of creative language: "I got out of that all too common, dark place by means of words. I became well as I wrote. I began believing again. Not much, but enough to get by." The ten-piece eponymous sequence in the volume, read along with some of the other poems, chronicles the experience fragmentarily and obliquely and with delicacy, tact and control. Among the presiding images of the sickness are a late train ("The Night Special came, bathed in neons") and lying on the floor amid other fallen objects: a teacup, a toothbrush, a newspaper ("Too much gravity in here . . .")

Understandably, a recurring concern in Surendran's poems is words:

This has been a difficult love
For the while it lasted;
What we feel
Is not what we speak
And in translation
We lose, just like these subtitles.
("Movie")

Love is words which "breathe in the images of the flesh," the death of love is "the passing away of a language."

The dead are beyond reaching out, words,
They are perfect; trying doesn't become them.
So tonight, the two of us will sit
Across this yawning table, each sworn to a just silence,
Dead in bed and out of it,
And drink a little ahead of time
To those who lie right
Under our feet and stare at our soles.

However, the poem "In Good Company" which says this contradicts the poem "A Cold Feeling":

Words are cold things, come after
Broken ties and wrong doors burning
In the middle of the night . . .
. . . Words are old things
Come after much yearning,
When the body is dead and cold.

Words embody and inform other kinds of love, including parental. The father, arrived at the hospital, where his child lies sick, leaves his copy of Brodsky's poems in the taxi, as it speeds away:

Tears speed into his eyes
From the words he lost.
("Cabbie")

The great enemy of language is physical violence:

But now that I am 40, I no longer care
Who has the right of tell. I think now
Each blow to the body is a word
Deleted from the dictionary.

The shaping experience of his life--the sickness and the recovery--establishes that the discovery of "a regime of muted justice and order within language . . . outside the arbitrariness of the social universe" is Resurrection itself; the dedication sums up the theme and thrust of the book:

To Bombay, her electric embrace
First ashes, then words . . .

In Surendran, the confessional tradition in Indian poetry in English has found another recruit. If his imagery tends to be over-emphatic, that only serves the purpose better in making Surendran on Surendran noteworthy.

* * *

Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, although only 12 years senior to Thayil and Surendran, inhabits a different world. In his poems, a nuanced, resonant, understated language has been the voice of the layered, apolitical, inward sensibility which characterized the poetry of an earlier time. Constantly, the remote and the immediate, the absent and the present, dream and reality intersect and illumine each other in the present work. This happens most strikingly in the title poem:

They teach you how to survive in the wild,
How stalk a quarry, which roots to eat,
Outdoor skills of no use in the street,
Where in sola hat of branching horns you chase

In grass and air the scent marks not there.
It's in the mind, the transfiguring,
Trysting places (banks, grocery stores) and
The trees you walk under, escaping,

Their leaves burning like light bulbs in the day
And a wind, long-toed, jostling you back
To the rear of a queue or the edge
Of a street, leaving you stamping the ground

With your feet and shaking your hatted head.
Wise up, I say, there's no running away
But taking the counterfoil or receipt
Crushed in your pocket in your composite stride.

("The Transfiguring Places")

Similarly, in "Nautical 2", fantasy and fact, the ancient and the contemporary, meet and light up each other:

Early travellers to upland towns
And the Coromandel coast, whose feet
Trode the ground but walked on the sea,
Have left accounts of mermaid sightings.

I sighted one as I ran across a street
On an errand. The traffic light was green
And cars, their headlamps dipped, braked or swerved.
I bought a loaf and took the same route home.

The return felt shorter, the luminous ports
Touched in reverse order. The sky was black,
As before a storm, when I drew ashore,
Scaly thighed and with weed-hung arms.

A backward glance at a mountainside village from the bus can transform it into "Shiraz, / Or a firth in the North Sea where the skelds set out"; the call of a tailorbird while he is reading the newspaper can make the floor drop below him, and

I sailed in fields
Where gale-winds blew
But each leaf
Was still, as if

On a windless day.
Then evening fell,
The living room's
Colours changed
("Tailorbird")

As Wordsworth did retrospectively, he realizes the value of the third eye:

It is November
And he sees March,
The jacaranda putting forth
An affluence of mauve blossoms.
To see it in November, though,
Is the bronze coin he seeks--
Small, countable, and legal tender.
("Beggarhood")

And like Wordsworth, but very mutedly, Mehrotra in his poem on the printed vase on the tablecloth laments the decline of the gift of mystic insight (through the metaphor of married love):

The tablecloth is brown,
As in maps a mountain range is brown,
But the Java Sea is green, in which the vase,

Dragging its anchor, is a sailing junk.
The tablecloth is a hank of yarn,
Which doesn't make the vase potter's clay.

It never was that anyway.
When did he last, seeing the vase as a vase,
Put some flowers in, or not lack the desire?
("The Vase That Is Marriage")

As the last poem in the collection mournfully records, the cartographer who ". . . would draw / Anything once . . . Now he draws less, / And such features only / As memory in receding shows." This could be the same person that Mehrotra sees in the mirror prophetically--the grey-haired man "whose life policy has matured." ("Approaching Fifty")

As critical as the observed object which triggers the visionary experience is the observatory: the point from which you "View the passing show with an inward eye" (p. 5) -- the seat in the moving bus (p. 7), the seat or berth in the train to the plains (p. 15), his chair when the tailorbird appears (p. 31), and above all,

This cone of light
In whose spell I sit,
A mechanical pencil
Gripped in my hand,
Like a microlith.
("Domicile")

The importance of the seat is corroborated by Thayil in his poem "Pushkin Knew Heaven":

. . . I make myself
a cup of coffee, sit in the old wood chair
by the window, as I do every day.
I scan the headlines, sip from the cup,
look out at the quiet street.

There it is, all of it
and it's nothing short of a miracle.

Occasionally, Mehrotra experiments in verse with rhymes or refrains, or "realistic" poetry, or most memorably, lyrical poetry. The two lyrical poems "The Reading Room" and "Nautical 1" are of haunting beauty. These are welcome variations. However, the core of the present volume is composed of the poems recording epiphanic experience. This has added a new dimension to Mehrotra's *oeuvre* which was already impressively versatile. Never given to mere ingenuity or idle innovation, Mehrotra's work which was ever rich, controlled and quiet in its tone has now grown more so, so that as we read the poems we become aware of an indubitably major presence in Indian poetry in English.

* * *

Born in 1921, Shiv K. Kumar is the most senior of our living English poets; *Woolgathering* is a selection from his output which started with *Articulate Silences* (1970). Among the characteristics which have endured in his work during these three decades the most significant is the confessional bias, of which if Surendran is the youngest example, Shiv Kumar is the earliest. As in Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, the poet's father is an important figure: there are two elegiac poems on him, affectionate, ironic, irreverent. The most important of the poet's relationships, the marital, is caricatured by the monkey couple who

mimic, as though in a pantomime,
each spectator's own private chronicle--

an estranged wife, recanting her nuptial vows,
while her spouse tugs at her mirrored
petticoat, imploring a compromise.

"I Say it on Oath, Your Lordship," "Bedroom," and "Twenty-fifth Wedding Anniversary" (and some others, if merely

in passing) are bitterly sardonic commentaries on "wedded bliss." Then there are the poems on its products. There is an elegy on the first-born and a verso letter to the son, and a poem on the grandson. And finally, there is the poet's persona, enthroned and trapped at the centre of this complex web of bittersweet relationships, but living his own life, dreaming his own dreams, and occasionally breaking out of the system in order to foster his sexuality.

Shiv Kumar's poems on married love are Surendran's conscious or unconscious precedent for treating love--whether love or "love"--and language as either interpreting or defining each other. In Shiv Kumar's "I Say it on Oath, Your Lordship" the husband says:

I was always subjected to the terrors
of her scimitar-tongue, which hurt me
like a surgeon, doing the stitches
without anaesthesia . . .

. . . if I ever let my desire speak
the body's language as a gesture,
she immediately receded. . . .

"Twenty-fifth Wedding Anniversary" refers to:

Your impulsion to needle
each word I spoke
As if it were some brown worn, squirming.

And in "Bedroom,"

Lying together in bed, though distanced
by daily wrangles, we've been engaged
since the first sunset
in a colloquy on love's doom.
If time and space lend perspective
to the mind, we should have learnt
to sift the word from its resonance.

On the whole then, love is words; and also absence of love is words. But there are words and words--words which are direct and referential and words which are figurative and suggestive. During the divorce proceedings, the husband asks:

But isn't each plain statement
a heresy . . . ?
So may I use my own language, please,
which speaks more through vehicle
than tenor?

("I Say it on Oath, Your Lordship")

Writing over twenty-five years ago, I had elaborated the notion that confessional writing is, by its nature, non-figurative, explicit, expository. But Shiv Kumar's poetry and Surendran's, which are both densely packed with imagery, speaking "more through vehicle than tenor," show that confessional poetry is not necessarily matter-of-fact unechoing language. The work of both poets is peopled with emphatic and vivid (often lurid) metaphors.

It is probably not proper to consider one poet purely or mostly in relation to another--and certainly not an elder poet in relation to a younger poet. But in viewing work so many-levelled and many-sided as Shiv Kumar's one is reduced to picking one approach out of several and hoping that the choice will prove lucky. But clearly, the similarities between Shiv Kumar and Surendran show that despite the shifts and switches and the -isms that succeed --and repudiate--each other, modern English poetry in India does have a certain degree of continuity.

ANJUM HASAN

JAYANTA MAHAPATRA: POETRY OF FEELING

Jayanta Mahapatra, *Shadow Space*. Kottayam: D. C. Books, 1997. pp.82. Rs.65.

Jayanta Mahapatra in *Shadow Space*, his latest collection of poetry, once again shows himself to be master of the lyric poem with its manifold possibilities of evocation and emotional subtlety. All admirers of his poetry will discover in *Shadow Space* the lyrical qualities and consistent suppleness that give his work its distinguishing character. Of all contemporary Indian poets Mahapatra alone can portray, with aplomb and conviction, in poem after poem, the agony of historical vicissitudes as a personal agony. The effectiveness of his poetry is all the more noteworthy for an added reason. He does not scale down tragedy, rarely displays humour, and only occasionally takes refuge in irony; the tone of these poems is one of muted stoicism and yet their appeal lies in something beyond philosophical convictions. It can only, perhaps, be ascribed to the poetic talent which makes suffering recognisable and human by touching it with art.

The India that dominates Mahapatra's poetry is a metaphor, a quality of feeling. But the more tangible India, the India of cruelty, wrongheadedness and proliferation, is also evoked, and both coexist in these poems--one as ambience and the other as fact. "And a little tired, the minister/ who finally had to resign./ In the half-flight, his pride sitting / quietly in this chair, the bodies of five-year plans / strewn around, their mouths open to the sky./ The elections over, villages filling with shadows./ My father took four long years to die./ lying on the edge of his pus-filled bed sores." ("Possessions"). Human fates are linked, in these poems, to ancient and burdensome pasts, and the present is rendered grotesque because of both its insignificance in the face of an overwhelming history and its own deficiencies. He mines the "fate of the country

after Independence" for a rare kind of poetic reward. That reward, for both poet and reader, consists in the rich lyricism of Mahapatra's poetry--a lyricism that combines philosophical insight with poetical imagery, directness with mellifluity. My personal favourites in this collection, however, are poems like "Autumn and Illness", "Losses", "Morning" and "The Colourlessness of Poetry", where he pares down what he has to say, distilling it to achieve the effect of both subtlety and deep empathy. "Pain takes one nowhere./ About the wind, who can tell?/ Or about the sharp edges of light./ Can illness help to identify/ the urge that makes two yellow butterflies/ dance out their lives in the sun. . . ."("Autumn and Illness").

If all creative expression is meant to endow life with significance, in Mahapatra's case the question of life's significance is itself what his poetry seeks to address. The results of this direct approach can be a little disconcerting, but less I think for their lack of ellipticality than for the sombre truths they contain. "Why does one live at all/ if one were not let free in the end ?/ What is there in the melancholy of white?" ("Sunset"). Or "How does one put one's world in place?/ With pretence, false promises, miserable lies?/ With the memory of those who believed in you?" ("Late"). One is more clearly drawn, however, to the poems where Mahapatra strikes a single, clear note and then, building up the tune, plunges into his song of despair. Poems like "Cloak of White", and "Life" which begins "To float along in the heart/ at times toward the end of an afternoon. . . ." are all of a piece and trip off the tongue with extraordinary fluidity.

Another hallmark of Mahapatra's poetry is the way his thought is always angling past the concrete, the tangible, to make sense of all human suffering. Working his way back from this inescapable reality he creates the architecture, not always symmetrical but dark and unforgettable, of his emotionally charged universe. In poems like "The Unease of Quiet Sleep" and "The Stories in Poetry" suffering raises questions about what would help

to sustain us, and these lead to reflection on the place of poetry in our lives. This in turn inspires the search for the nature and significance of words, a quest whose other side is almost inevitably a contemplation on the self. Many of the longer poems weave in and out of these kinds of larger preoccupations that are linked to each other both inherently, and through Mahapatra's skilful insertion of fragments of memory and evocative images.

Often in such poems Mahapatra seems to veer towards the belief that in an environment where human life has been rendered gratuitous by depravity, hunger and hypocrisy on the one hand and death and metaphysical uncertainty on the other, the much-vaunted value of language is suspect. He struggles with the paradox of having his imagination dominated by things that occur, in a sense, "beyond the border of words". "If there were only words, I'm afraid we'd lose/ dignity" he says in "Enterprise". And in another poem, "The Time of What Is", he shuns the "black-and-white rules" of words for something both more ephemeral and more beautiful: "...a trembling at the edge/ of an evening song, A small daylight/ on the edge of a scythe. . . ."

The overwhelming sense of loss that pervades these poems can sometimes induce a certain weariness, but at other times Mahapatra tempers his sentiment to good effect. "Beyond the trees, an endless night/ whose past pins me to the earth; and I, / wanting the past not to be that past, / and the sense of an empty hand still pressed down / over the photograph of an impossible exultation" ("Enterprise"). The voice that haunts Mahapatra is the voice of the blue-lipped woman whom Akhmatova made famous. It is the voice that asks in the midst of unutterable despair "Can you describe this?". Akhmatova replies "Yes, I can" and so does Mahapatra. He is a poet committed to making sense of despair. His poetry of feeling transports us directly into "the music of what is ". It springs from a single dark source and most often succeeds despite its multifariousness.

P. RADHIKA

SYNERGY OF "DIALECTIC OPPOSITIONS"

Surya Nath Pandey (Ed.), *Nissim Ezekiel: Dimensions of a Poetic Genius*. Delhi: Doaba House, 1999. 232 pp. Rs. 400.

Nissim Ezekiel's entry into the literary field, in sheer contrast to what we just recently witnessed as the Arundhati Roy phenomenon, was quiet and unaccompanied by media-fuelled razzle-dazzle. After the publication of his first collection of poems, *A Time to Change* (1952), he had to remain in relative obscurity--even while continuing to write--for over two decades before he could attract serious notice. Belated though the critical response was to Nissim Ezekiel's works, the verdict has been almost unanimous. His admirers as well as detractors have had to acknowledge the pivotal role he played in ushering in modernity to the genre of Indian poetry in English. There has been a general consensus too regarding the factors that brought about this change. A sense of newness was detected both at the level of the themes Ezekiel chose to meditate upon and his poetic treatment of them: quotidian events and common people filled the canvas and they were drawn in soft, unsentimental colours.

Ever since the publication of a special issue of the *Journal of South Asian Literature* in 1976, devoted exclusively to Nissim Ezekiel, articles on the various aspects of his poetry have swelled appreciably. The sheer bulk of these scholarly exegeses testifies to one fact: the Ezekielian canon is a very fertile site that yields itself to incessant and often intense excavation. It does not come as a surprise to us, therefore, to find critiques that contradict one another. If one reader sees Ezekiel's poetry as marking a break from the mystical and religious obsessions of its predecessors, another finds it intensely religious throughout and yet another, after a chronological survey of Ezekiel's poems, discovers a progressive interest in religion. Similarly, there are readers who argue that Ezekiel does not use nationalism as a subject in his oeuvre and others who opine that the poems reveal him as a leading nationalist.

To some, the poems reflect their author's alienation (religious, emotional, cultural or intellectual); to others, they are evidence of the poet's uncompromising social commitment. And, to legitimize all these perspectives, Nissim Ezekiel, in his very first collection, appears to have foreseen this critical dissonance and given a *carte blanche*, as it were, to his future readers:

The voice alone is mine,
The rest is what you make of it.

Nissim Ezekiel: Dimensions of a Poetic Genius, edited by Surya Nath Pandey, is an effective attempt at mapping the contours of Ezekiel's poetic personality. The anthology accommodates both old and new articles (the editor names them "Recent Essays" and "Latest Essays" respectively) written by critics whose interest in the contemporary scene of Indian poetry has been genuine as well as analytical. Taken together, the fourteen essays cover an impressive range. From a close reading of an individual poem to a panoramic survey of the entire canon; from an investigation into the various tropes employed in the poems to an analysis of certain recurring thematic concerns; from a tracing of a graph of the poet's mental workings to a clinical examination of his style with the support of statistical data--the sweep of the book is truly commendable.

Of the eight "Recent Essays", three are particularly noteworthy: "Making Light of the Process: Nissim Ezekiel's Poetic Fictions" by James Wieland, "Ezekiel's Credo" by D. Ramakrishna and "Self Within the Self: A Study in the Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel" by N. Mohanty. Wieland's essay (written in 1983) makes a chronological and exhaustive study of Ezekiel's poems in order to analyze the growth of their creator's mind. In the process, Wieland discovers several strands of evolution: from the formal compactness of early poetry to the open-endedness of the later collections; from the relative prolixity of early poetry to "an epigrammatic conciseness" of subsequent works; from the concern with the external world in the early verse to a more enlarged vision--encompassing the phenomenal as well as the spiritual world--in his

later poems, etc. Such an in-depth analysis leads Wieland to conclude that Ezekiel's oeuvre celebrates the active and enduring man braving the limitations imposed on him by the world.

D. Ramakrishna's article (written in 1986) addresses itself to some seminal issues that pertain to a poet's vision of art or credo. He analyzes not only Nissim Ezekiel's critical essays and his numerous interviews (both of which are more or less accessible to an interested scholar) but his private correspondence as well. Simultaneously, Ramakrishna explores Ezekiel's intellectual links with such Western literary giants as T. S. Eliot, Wordsworth, Coleridge, John Crowe Ransom, etc., thereby underscoring the validity and importance of some universal beliefs that sustain as well as enrich poetic creation.

N. Mohanty's essay (written in 1992) posits that Nissim Ezekiel's poetry amalgamates the basic tenets of Judaism--the faith Ezekiel was born into--and Hinduism--a faith he was constantly exposed to. The belief in the paramountcy of individual and social happiness and thereby the fraternity of man that Ezekiel's poetry reflects, according to Mohanty, comes from his Jewish heritage, whereas the faith in the "meaningfulness" of human destiny takes its origin from Hindu philosophy. Convincingly though Mohanty argues his case, one cannot fully agree with him at certain points. For instance, analysing Ezekiel's treatment of family values, the author opines:

In a good number of poems Ezekiel depicts the relationship of the family members and he does not hesitate to bring to the surface the weaknesses, the inadequacies of the members so as to make them conscious of such follies. This is how Ezekiel makes his personas and characters realize their shortcomings which clot the smooth movement of the family and slowly corrupt the integrity. (88)

One wonders whether Nissim Ezekiel is ever so positive and didactic in his outlook on life and also whether his poems ever take such a propagandist tone.

Among the "Latest Essays" is a brilliant and insightful article---easily the best in the whole volume--"An Indian Pilgrim's Progress in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry" by Jagdish V. Dave. It uncovers the profound values of Indian philosophy that inform Ezekiel's poetic output. Dave argues that the poet and his work are inseparable and that "[i]n a mingled stream they flow in a serene submission to the Divine will" (171). This is exemplified in the combination of conflicting stances: Ezekiel's unrelenting self-criticism and his compassion for others' foibles; total surrender to the Divine Will and simultaneous enjoyment of sensuality.

Besides these, there are critiques that amplify on other aspects of Ezekiel's poetry. M. K. Naik highlights Ezekiel's inability to give a "major poetic utterance" to his "alienational experience"; Zerine Anklesaria attempts to identify instances of metaphysical wit in Ezekiel's works; R. S. Pathak undertakes a chronological stylistic study of Ezekielian poetry and discovers a steady movement towards the purification of language; A. N. Dwivedi notes the poet's sparing use of imagery; the editor himself makes a thorough analysis of what he considers Ezekiel's magnum opus, "Background, Casually"; P. R. Kher argues how Ezekiel's humanism rests on the edifice of humility and moral responsibility towards life and the world around him; Meena Belliappa takes off from a point totally opposed to Dave's by asserting that "Ezekiel's poems voice the loss of faith of a modern age", etc.

There is however one article that does not seem to fit into the pattern--Shirish Chindhade's "Bathos as a Strategy in Nissim Ezekiel's 'Very Indian Poems in Indian English'". It attempts to find out the qualities that are unique to Ezekiel's dramatic monologues. For this purpose, he brings in for comparison the strategies employed by the master craftsman of this genre, Robert Browning. Ezekiel's monologues, according to Chindhade, are

never as "extended, analytical or three-dimensional" as Browning's but the loss is to a certain extent repaired by a strange combination of humour and sympathy. The linguistic deformities of Ezekiel's characters provoke laughter but their predicament commands our understanding. The arguments arrayed by Chindhade are, beyond doubt, logical and acceptable. But one fails to see where "bathos" functions as a trope in the poems under scrutiny. Interestingly, the word "bathos" does not find a single mention in the entire text. On the other hand, the analysis of the endings of "The Professor" and "The Patriot" emphasizes the role of pathos (139, 141). Let us hope it is a printing error, though a significant one.

Perhaps the most outstanding feature of this anthology is that it brings together opposing views, although none appears to invalidate the others. We realize that what applies to the critic applies with equal force to the readers. The critical voices alone are theirs. The rest is what we as readers make of them. We may either choose to concur with Weiland that "Ezekiel's most recent poetry is a poetry of process and growth . . ." (33) or join Jagdish Dave instead and argue that "there is no such thing as further growth or development. He is one of the poets like Hardy who does not change at all with the passage of time" (174). We may agree with either A. N. Dwivedi in his contention that "some images in Ezekiel's poetry are repeatedly used, and they acquire symbolic overtones" (117) or Jagdish Dave in his diametrically opposed view that Ezekiel's poetry "carefully avoids indirect suggestiveness, ambiguity and fiction. . . and develops instead rhythms nearer prose and prose qualities of precise and plain statement" (188). Likewise, we may either second M. K. Naik's observation that Ezekiel adopts an ironic and superior stance in relation to the characters he depicts and the events he describes (48) or support P. R. Kher's remark that the "common and ordinary man's predicament is the focal point in his [Nissim Ezekiel's] love and sympathy" (155-156). In short, we have in this collection of critical essays the same embodiment of "dialectic oppositions" that Nissim Ezekiel himself notices in Art and describes in his poem "On an African Mask".

P. RADHIKA

TO ACHARYA, WITH LOVE

K. Srinivasa Sastry (Ed.), *Sraddhanjali to Acharya K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar*. Hyderabad: Yugadi, 1999. 70 pp. Rs. 75.

A character in Vikram Seth's novel *A Suitable Boy*, in a mood of lightheartedness, remarks that there are three types of teachers: those who are forgotten; those who are remembered and hated; and those who are remembered and forgiven. The joke is thoroughly enjoyable, no doubt, but if asked, how would we evaluate this assessment in real life? As an instance of black humour, or realism or cynicism? Of course, there is no denying that the damage done by bad or indifferent teachers can be extensive and permanent. And depending on the students' tolerance threshold or their success in salvaging themselves from the negative influence, such teachers are either forgotten, hated or forgiven. But to those students, who have had the rare fortune of enjoying the guidance of dedicated and knowledgeable gurus, this statement would appear most cruel. In the name of justice then, a fourth category would have to be included in the list--those who are always remembered, loved and admired. *Sraddhanjali to Acharya K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar*, edited by K. Srinivasa Sastry, is evidence of this phenomenon.

All the twenty pieces (including four poems) are unanimous in their praise of the teacher role that K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar played to perfection. Hence the Sanskrit appellation "Acharya" in the title of the book. Most of the authors are his students--the direct beneficiaries of his erudition and recipients of his warmth and generosity. What each of them highlights is his phenomenal scholarship as well as his willingness and capacity to share it without affectation. That one writer should feel gratified at having been a student of one of K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar's students speaks volumes for the impression he left in those who came under him. He comes through not as a teacher who merely taught his pupils

but, more significantly, as one who inspired and opened the inner eyes of his scholars.

To the scores of literature lovers outside his immediate ambit, K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar is a pioneering historiographer of Indian writing in English, a critic, a reviewer and a biographer. The man behind these numerous personae is, quite naturally, hidden from public view. *Sraddhanjali* is an effort at capturing the real person: the gentle, humorous, hardworking and disciplined man whose very living was an example worth emulating. The articles reveal another interesting facet of his personality--his selfless desire to disseminate knowledge. He himself wrote copiously and encouraged everyone to follow suit neither to ensure any promotion for himself nor to secure UGC largesse. Similarly, his efforts at introducing Indian Writing in English and American Literature into the M. A. syllabus of his university at a time when these areas were hardly popular, as well as his perseverance in putting his project through in spite of stiff opposition, reveal his urbane literary sensibility and the strength of inner conviction.

The genuineness of the tribute notwithstanding, one cannot help remarking that *Sraddhanjali* would have gained in depth if there were more, specific anecdotes to illustrate each of the individual authors' observations about K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar's nature and stature. Coming as it does within a month of his demise, the work reveals all the rawness of the grief experienced by them and (maybe because of that) confines itself to a mere listing and praising of his qualities. Some recollections almost seem to go overboard in heaping encomiums on the acharya. For instance, one of the pieces written by the editor himself ends like this:

For openness and range and understanding and catholicity in the field of literary study, review, interpretation, and criticism, translation, transcreation, among Indians in English, we can apply to him these words of Anthony Burgess

about Shakespeare: 'Next to God he has created most. Let us leave it at that.'

A bit of substantiation would have infused this assessment with more credibility and a bit of deliberation would have toned down this effusiveness. It could, however, be argued that had the editor been less immediate in his response to the loss, the spontaneity would not have been there. But then, one realizes, it would perhaps have been recompensed with more objectivity and narrative richness. *Sradhdhanjali* will, however, serve its full purpose if it leads to the writing of an authorized and exhaustive biography of K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar.

PAUL LOVE

GANDHI, THEN AND NOW

C.N. Srinath, *Then Came Gandhi*. Mysore: Goodwill Fellowship Academy, 1999. pp.42. Rs.75.00.

Some of us can remember back into the early 1950's in India, to a time when Gandhi was almost idolized. There was a veneration, perhaps approaching worship, which enveloped almost every word spoken about him. In fact, there was a point in time when some of us wondered whether, perhaps, there was a possibility of Gandhism becoming a new religion.

Now of course this atmosphere has changed. It is not simply that some feel free to criticise Gandhi's economic and social policies. The predicament is not only that eleven o'clock on January 30th morning often passes without notice. The tragedy is deeper still, and this little collection of poems seeks to probe it.

Not that Gandhi would necessarily approve of a collection of poems written in his honour. His attitude toward imaginative literature was at best ambiguous. We remember that when Mulk Raj Anand (whose "Afterword" is appended to Srinath's collection) showed Gandhi an early draft of *Untouchable*, Gandhi's immediate response was that "novels tell lies", and that a tract on untouchability would be more appropriate than a novel (advice which Anand fortunately rejected!). Neither fiction nor poetry seemed to have much fascination for this man who so single-mindedly devoted himself to the work of the nation and the business at hand.

However that may be, there is a modesty in this little book of poems that seems befitting for the life and life-style of its subject. This modesty obtains in the compactness of both the volume and its individual pieces. It exists still more in the simplicity of the language used. There are few attempts to turn fancy phrases or to use impressive figures of speech that would divert the reader's attention from the subject to the poet. There is a quiet business-like tone in many of the poems by which the writer perhaps sacrifices critical interest to a more rigorous focus upon the simple truths of Gandhi's life and his current neglect.

This is not to say that there is nothing memorable in these poems. The title poem at one point distills the subject with an elementary but seldom-found effectiveness.

Then came Gandhi
like gentle rain on parched land
like lantern in the dark hut
like voice to echo
like one self to one lost (4)

The same spare conciseness analyses the process by which today's poverty-stricken "Gandhism" destroys what was essential in the man himself: "We all mouth your adjectives / verbalize your acts. / Your language has grown fungus" (11). On occasion, Srinath develops and amplifies the cynicism inherent in our ritual observances:

We have commercial MG Roads
no footpaths of the Mahatma to follow.

We have Gandhi statues
no men of stature even to garland them. (19)

But finally the poet seems content and reconciled, in a few spare lines, to let his subject have the last word.

The assassin's pistol bore all conspiracy
oiled with logic, argument, even patriotism
but the act revealed a cunning coward
who hanged in shame for attempted murder.
The survivor is the Mahatma. (12)

This is not a great book. But it is a needed one in its own quiet way, because it is an attempt to swim against the current. Its value lies in being one of many promptings that we require day after day to remember those qualities that were of essence in the life and person of Gandhi. Or, in the words of Mulk Raj Anand's "Afterword", the poems here can "remind" us "to face the day without anger, fear or recoil against wrongs" (38). To this end, Professor Srinath's collection of poems is timely and welcome.

K. NARAYANA CHANDRAN

FISHING IN THE DARK: KESHAV MALIK'S POETRY

Keshav Mallk's first volumes appeared in the late 50's--*The Lake Surface* and *Rippled Shadow* in 1959 and 1960. (A nice detail: Nissim Ezekiel, author of two first volumes, published *The Third* in 1959 and *The Unfinished Man* in 1960. And two roads diverged in a yellow wood....) Now, Malik's *Outer Reaches* and *Under Pressure*, both of 1998, complete nearly three decades of his precious work. There is of course the other harmony of art and art-exhibitions, the editorship of *Indian Literature and Thought* etc. to which the poet owes something of his sparseness, and the sobering "non-style" of his verse. His is not the immediate clamouring voice though that calls a spade a spade and explains it at length. "Pour, someone!" he pleads, "warm love or cold scorn / over them who fail / that to which they were born" (*Ozone Layer* 15). Attitudes like that are hard to place in the geography of our brisk narratives. Malik is not afraid to pass as a commentator, a poet whose subject, we imagine, has always been the "life of letters." Which partly explains, I think, his ineligibility yet (even?) as a "minority" writer (born in Miani, Pakistan and raised in Srinagar) whose local colour compels no special-issue recognitions.

Worse, his "Sir-No-Man's-Enemy" air is apt to register more promptly than the plain phrasing that puts it down. On occasions though, Malik allows himself a small joke on being so unenviable:

 . . . is not it meet
 I bite into a truth deeper than I have?--
 Or shall I let the eye upward rise--
 Prepare some fresh
 Jason-quest? (*Ozone Layer* 12)

In a fine poem called "On Seeing Brancusi's 'Bird'" Malik seems to be intrigued by the pleasure of being so elliptical:

Primed from deep within,
As if preset on a far target
That the naked eye fails to spot
Out of the woods, this one
(Island of Mind 9)

This isolated superiority, I believe, is a poor bargain for most poets who would rather be seen than heard. For Malik, his poems are all. They don't come packaged with voices and cues. You need to try out and find ways to engage them in their true, weird, archaic feel. He usually signals the challenge of dealing with a self upon whom, say, the handles are missing:

As though there was solely you--
the one and only privileged:
as though only your heart nightly stopped
at the sight of the scarifying theatre
of scintillating star on star,
and the infinite regression
(Ozone Layer 10)

That is not the way career poets write. Some might even fault his sheer audaciousness. But then, such infinite regressions belong to the phantasmic rather than the poetic. For it is the dream whose text celebrates the death of the author. So regressed to infinite positions, the subject exults in its severance. That was how Arthur Rimbaud wrote "The Deserts of Love." If we are reluctant to grant the poet full credit for this, we ought to salute that dignified gesture and pose. If all poetic schools and their schoolchildren were to be napalmed out of existence, when much else is lost to politics, and the politics itself goes into the dustbin with the regime,

You could cry, almost as if you had died
to the world,
only to sense a satisfying tremor run down
your spine;
the face as if bathed with kisses

of blissful light,
and which in turn made you nurse
bit of a secret pride.

(*Ozone Layer* 10)

That is exactly what we are, when we are not ourselves. In our dreams.

There is, alas, no good lyric theory to be deduced from all this. But that pride is hardwon. Malik's reflections on t(T)ime are seldom detailed or deep but they let us a little into the secret of that pride:

He could almost turn time on or off
As he pleased--letting
An addictive stupefaction mount up
On him like a heady fizz. (*Ozone Layer* 31)

That is one way of "habitually turn[ing] / a page in his head" (*Ozone Layer* 31), the way he senses, all alone, the night hidden within the day. A tense-trick? Perhaps. Bridges crossed in the future will be burnt in the past. Hence "a heady fizz," if you make it decently at last to ordinary language.

All this apart, I suspect that Malik has been making a simple, personal point as well. He wouldn't, for example, publish a volume entitled *A Time to Change*. When the locus from which the voice issues forth hasn't changed, the poems can't change. His latest poems are, therefore, not necessarily "better," "more modern," or *au courant* than they really ought to be by the poet's reckoning. Textbook theories that can turn virtually any lyric into a pattern of resolved stresses are no help in reading Malik. There are three poems in a row in *Outer Reaches* suggesting that this poet, for one, has trouble "post"ing Modernism: "Post Tresspass," "Post-Confessional," and "Post-Natal." So we have Barkis's and Bartleby among our poets. Malik is a Bartleby. He wants, and insists that he enjoy, the freedom to be *not* a little more, *not* a little less, a socially constructed, historically determined creature than he might conceivably choose himself to be. Further, he wants us to know

that only the rights and wrongs have changed places, handy-dandy, not the engineers or the engines of evil; "no dear, you will not escape / the dangling rope" is an assurance he is keen to rub in during his visit to a Cancer Ward (*Outer Reaches* 47). This, I take it, is another version of E.M. Cioran's professed embarrassment in uttering "I am" in the face of a cosmic calamity. "The immodesty of the breath, the scandal of the lungs," remarks Cioran, "are linked to the abuse of an auxiliary verb. . . ." (Cioran 91)

The poem of the forked ways is charming but clichéd. We all know that a poetic meditation on roads cannot simply stop dead. It must run a whole neat course of considerations, complex negotiations, and closure. Malik's "Quandary" dramatises only that crucial interval during a fevered quest when the self summons primordial fears of being. This is not because the way ahead is unclear but because it begins to look exactly like the way one has already traversed. What cannot be spatially mended had rather be temporally ended:

Oh, what point in time is this?--
all enduring landmarks down
like nine pins,
and nothing but a creeping paralysis.
(*Outer Reaches* 50)

We are free to wonder whether one's life is worth living according to the Aristotelian objective of tragic art--to evoke pity and fear. The roads here seem to have been laid long before one set out. "Quandary," therefore, is not the exact name for this calamity of consciousness. Arjuna and Gandhari wept on the same battlefield for different reasons. Between heartbreaks is the ideal time to think. Guilt, that shameless visitor, will be at your door again, begging in that leaky voice.

The *Under Pressure* poems are generally eerie, unsettling, and even darker. Malik addresses abstractions, unnamables,

strangers, will-o'-the-wisps, subjunctives and subterfuges rather relentlessly there. "Urgency" is probably the lightest of them all. You can't quite look at or look away from a water-pill disaster. "Vertigo" breathes an unsubtle voice. And so does "In the End" whose calculated placing kills the passing show. Few among the young, again, will recognize the old brand-name of those cigarettes in "Urchin Eye," fewer still the allusion there to (or an unconscious verbal echo of?) Hart Crane's "Tunnel":

. . . the shine
of the bubble in the pavement spittle,
the silver in the Passing Show carton,
the burnt-out safety match stick
leisurely sliding down
the gleaming python
of the wide open drain.

(*Under Pressure* 20)

But never mind. A good deal of poetry is conspicuously unconsumed.

For those who want to know why, Malik offers "This Business of a Poem." Poets write this kind of a poem when they feel unwanted and their trade slighted by their enemies. They know that Poetry cannot serve plain food on a very plain level. They worry to no end that editors of *The Asian Wall Street Journal* will read Swift's *Modest Proposal* and miss its irony. Malik's worry goes like this:

The poem is simply not realistic,
has not the sense to face facts--
no ease to speak of, no leg to stand on.

(*Outer Reaches* 41)

Both the assumption that the world is always realistically inclined, and the other, that that situation marks the end of poetry, are not true, or true enough to hang yet another "business as usual" sign:

Poem?--no prettier than
What it is silent on the page.
(*Outer Reaches* 41)

Malik leaves us thus, rocking on this vexed point between his intention and our interpretation.

We have then at least a clue to this unusual poet's art. Or rather, its difficulty. This is somewhat fishing in the dark, with a stubborn thought for hook and heart for the raw bait. It is difficult for Malik not to be otherwise and write a poem more upbeat and reassuring. At least for now.

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MARIO RELICH

VISUAL REALITY AND A CRAFTSMAN'S ODYSSEY: THE POETRY OF SUDEEP SEN

Sudeep Sen's *Postmarked India*, published by HarperCollins in 1997, includes sixteen new poems, and a generous selection from eight previous poetry collections. It contains two of his very best poems, "Bharatanatyam Dancer" and "Jagannath Temple, Puri". In the former, the lines and rhythms evoke the intricate, graceful steps of the dancer, radiating into meditative ecstasy: "... the female dancer / now illuminates everything visible: clear, / poetic, passionate, and ice-pure". Anarchic couplets in the poem, which uses a combination of rhyme and half-rhyme, perfectly capture the undulating ambivalence of religious devotion. Both poems also look back to Sen's achievements so far, and are reminiscent of an early, more rhetorical work, "A Pilgrimage to Mathura".

A poem like "The Photograph", on the other hand, represents a new beginning, a charting of new territory. It hints at psychic depths usually explored by certain novelists. Here is the concluding stanza:

I realise the unaged pain of secrecy
and the power of revelation and re-discovery
that spilled guts and locked emotions enact.
I have, only remains, of recorded magnetic tapes,
exposed bromides, memory, and friendship,
but enough to reconstruct mythic bodies:
imagined, unimagined, buried, but alive.

A powerful story emerges from the poem, one not necessarily allegorical, or having anything to do with the poet's own imagination. Yet the concluding stanza can also be read as suggesting that the poet himself has intimations of greater exploratory endeavour. He is prepared to confront demons if necessary, in a blazing quest to write poems which stretch language

to its unutterable limits. This entails risks, hence the "unaged pain of secrecy", but if such risks result in the reconstruction of creative myths, then they will be triumphantly worthwhile.

Kwame Dawes in his introduction to *Postmarked India* pinpoints where the source of Sen's creativity lies:

Reviewers in India and those outside of India who have followed Sen's work generally agree that he is one of a few poets pioneering a new idiom in Indian literature. The central characteristic of this trend is a tendency to have an expansive, more global and decidedly less parochial palette from which to create. (36)

Dawes goes on to add: "It is a development that places Sen alongside other trans-national writers from non-Western countries like Ben Okri from Nigeria, Fred D'Aguiar from Guyana, Kazuo Ishiguro from Japan, Michael Ondaatje from Sri Lanka, and Vikram Seth from India, to name only a few" (*Postmarked India* 36). As a poet, Sen's "new idiom" has actually surpassed the writers mentioned by Dawes, all of whom have done rather better as novelists than poets. But let us begin at the beginning.

1

Sudeep Sen has published nine collections of poetry so far. Each collection, however, represents not just a progressive development, but a switching of gears, as it were. I would maintain that *The Lunar Visitations* (1990), his first major collection, explores a metaphorical, and very nearly archetypal landscape. *Kali in Ottava Rima* (1992) abandons such a landscape for the most part, and explores Hindu ritual and mythology instead. *New York Times* (1993), by contrast metropolitan in feeling, focuses on time as the fourth dimension in which we are all trapped. *Parallel* (1993) presents a generous hour-long selection from the first three volumes

in a powerful and moving reading by the poet himself, where new meanings emerge in the manner he reads them, and the subtle changes he makes in words, imagery, and rhythm. *South African Woodcut* (1994) seeks to find epiphanies in a time-obsessed world. *Mount Vesuvius in Eight Frames* (1994) deals with time itself, in an ossified state, and opens up the whole debate between poetry and art, burial and rejuvenation, collaboration and isolation. *Dali's Twisted Hands* (1995) is most complex of all in its handling of imagery. It explores time, memory, and above all, light. Finally, *Postmarked India* (1997) contains a generous section of new poems plus selections from all his previously published books, including very early poems from *Leaning Against the Lamp-Post* (1983), not easily available otherwise.

Rather than treat Sudeep Sen as an "Indo-Anglian" poet, or categorize him in relation to other poets or movements, my aim is to give an indication of what makes each collection distinctive, and to single out poems I find particularly effective.

2

What makes *The Lunar Visitations* exhilarating to read is that it reveals the young poet in the process of discovering the power of metaphor. This is confirmed by the American poet and critic Phillis Levin. She has discerned a powerfully intricate structure of *The Lunar Visitations* as a cycle, that links the overall narrative, framework, and the specific images of the poems. Here is an excerpt from her detailed description:

His constellations evoke both the Christian and Hindu trinity -- the triad of birth, life, and death; the universal process of creation, preservation, and destruction -- creating a drama whose players include man, woman, and child; sun, earth, and moon; a prophet, a beggar, and a priest. But many other thoughts and images populate his lines: a

moth, a broken yolk, and an eclipse; "antiquated symmetry", "tidal premonitions", and "lunar implications". The recurrent figure of the moon, appearing and disappearing throughout this volume, is emblematic of the post-modern landscape, its light illuminating the urban realities of East and West. *The Lunar Visitations* can be read as an epic whose three characters constantly change form, but whose essence remains the same. (Book jacket of *Lunar Visitations*)

The images described by Levin certainly recur in *The Lunar Visitations*, and it is very likely that the poet intended such a structure, but his individual poems I find particularly striking and memorable.

"Remembering Hiroshima Tonight" is one of the most daring of these. Here is the poem, a short one, in full:

It is full moon in August:
the origami garlands surrounding the park

glitter as the stars, plutonium-twinkle,
remember the fall-out of *that* sky.

Tonight everyone walks around the solemn arcades
where lovers were once supposed to be.

In the distance, the crown of Mount Fuji sits, clear
on the icy clouds, frozen in time with wisdom.

Suddenly the clouds detonate, and all the petals,
translucent, wet, coalesce: a blossoming mushroom,

peeling softly in a huge slow motion.
But that's only a dream.

Tonight, real flowers are blooming
in the ancient Japanese moonlight.

Mount Fuji, of course, means very much to the Japanese. It is prominent in art, literature, history and religion. It is also an image, indeed an icon, which is bound to represent Japan to most readers. Part of the remarkable power of this poem can be described (to adapt from Wordsworth's famous observations on poetry) as the horror of the atom bomb recollected, really imagined, in tranquillity. Muted in its lyricism, the poem points to the hard-won triumph of age-old accumulated wisdom (as exemplified by Japanese civilization) in harmony with the processes of nature.¹

One section of *The Lunar Visitations* is entitled "Nightscape in a Moonlit City", and the poems here stylistically borrow much from T S Eliot's early "nocturnal" poems. Like Eliot's, these poems are exercises in oblique moonlit and deliquescent imagery which foregrounds a harsh, urban landscape. The moon here acts as a kind of mistress of metamorphosis. In "The First Sight: An Invocation", the following lines, "I saw the moon, sliced and / obscured by clouds,/ through the wrought-iron grill", suggest one of the most resonant images from surrealist cinema. Who can forget the man who stares at the moon, and then proceeds to casually slash a woman's eyeball? But Sen is gentler than Luis Bunuel in *Un Chien Andalou*. His poems in this vein generally evince an almost religious reverence, rather than surrealist rage.

¹ A comment by Gordon A Craig in his review-article ("An Inability to Mourn") on *The Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan*, by Ian Buruma, provides an interesting context for "Remembering Hiroshima Tonight": "In the place where the bomb fell there is today a Peace Park, which, Buruma says, is a 'veritable Lourdes of shrines, monuments, stones, bells, fountains, and temples, commemorating the dead and offering prayers for peace'." See *The New York Review of Books*, vol. XLI, no. 13 (July 14, 1994), page 44.

"Leaning Against the Lamp-Post", for instance, is pervasive with miasmatic hallucination, yet strictly controlled by structural indications of "lighting-up time". It emerges that the "voice" behind the poem is that of a suffering beggar: "a haggard skeleton / his synovial fluid dry / cracked and crackled with time".

A poem like "In the Gallery", however, shows the poet to be equally adept at rejecting the kinds of evasion to be found in Eliot's early poems, which tend to muffle "voice" in a fog of crepuscular consciousness. "In the Gallery" also portrays a beggar, but from a completely different angle. The poetic voice is a much more direct one. It seems to be that of the Freudian ego, and the beggar a kind of alter-ego, perhaps a Jungian anima. The poem suggests a poet very much in control of his images, instead of allowing them to drift, as in the Eliotesque "Leaning Against the Lamp-Post".

The "voice" in the poem, very much a narrative one, is that of a picture-gallery visitor. It ends with the poet (the "voice" certainly seems to be very directly his) leaving the gallery, and concluding as follows:

I came out of the gallery
on to the scorching street, started
walking along graffiti-smearred
walls, stopping now and then
to read them and smell the peeling paint;
someone tapped me on my shoulder:
it was the same beggar.

The poem is one in which conscience predominates, about whether art can really transcend life. More specifically, it also appears to reject the treatment of the beggar in "Leaning Against the Lamp-Post", where he is more submerged in the aesthetic, "moonlit" pattern. The poem really probes the poet's own self-doubts, yet taken as a whole, it triumphantly overcomes them.

Ritual and mythology are at the heart of Sen's next collection, *Kali in Ottava Rima*, but his *manner* of treating ritual is far from traditional. Yet, as the title itself indicates, his poetic equivalent of the religious reality behind ritual lies in traditional poetic form. The title poem exploits "ottava rima" very much as Byron did in *Don Juan*. Byron, moreover, would have enjoyed the sensual, the *apparently* satiric elements in the poem. The subject, Kali, is the most fearsome goddess in the Hindu pantheon, yet also associated with creativity. Here is how the poem, in its entirety, pictures her:

Kali's curvaceous long lecherous tongue woos
Shiva as it hangs loose, while she
tramples Him, stamping her beloved's breast, who
lies passive under her feet, breathing still, as he
watches her wild, swinging with her own devil
Ashoor
draped around her neck. As she frees
herself slowly, crusade-ridden, victorious,
bedecked, dripping thick in blood and luxurious,

she wallows in a crimson fashion,
electric, juggling in hysteria her many-beaded
half-alive heads that adorn her aquamarine bosom.
Resting arms, she wipes her triple-eyed brow,
tinted
blue, her body prepares to make love, passion
gliding as she dances on Shiva, the *Mahakaal*
emptied
of infinite Time, while she guards her Time's own
womb.
Kali's rufous tongue woos Him, as it hangs loose.

The poem is also pictorial in that it reminds one of the sharp outlines, and dynamic graphics, of a "Kalighat" print. Such prints, originating

from Calcutta, were cheap and aimed at devotees of Kali during the nineteenth century, and the early part of the twentieth. The poem itself is not precisely an "ottava rima", but a "double ottava rima", thus playing skilfully with that form. It thereby poses a challenge to the reader, particularly the Western reader, both in terms of form, and in terms of its religious content. Some readers might be disturbed by it, but most are likely to find it boldly Byronic, amusing and exuberant. "Villanelle for Shiva", another poem in this vein, is equally enjoyable and challenging.

In another poem, "Durga Puja", sinuous, serpentine alternating rhyming couplets allude to, and quite likely make use of, Sanskrit poetic forms, the *sloka* in particular. Here are the opening three couplets:

Through the swirling fumes of the scented incense, the *arati*
echoes
as the priest hums, and the *Chandipaat* chants in a
scriptural rhyme.

From the bamboo pedestal she stares through her painted
pupils, frescoed
and tinselled, the three-eyed *pratima* of the Goddess
Durga--

resplendent, statuesque, armed with ten hands on her roaring
chariot,
her glazed clay demeanour, poised, even after the mythic
bloody war.

Sensuous and leisurely paced, in some ways remarkably reminiscent of Swinburne, the poem makes Hindu ritual come vividly to life, yet by purely aural means, employing a definite incantatory tone. It is a miracle of technique, and the reverential attitude behind it has seldom seemed so exciting.

A rather more personal poem, "Dadu", has the poet recollecting his grandfather's penultimate heart attack, as he "convulsed fiercely fighting for life". The consolations of ritual are completely absent in this stark, but very moving poem. His close involvement with his grandfather's fatal seizure is particularly intense in the third stanza:

The dreaded moments, struggling, gasping to
live. I was just as drenched as he was. I saw:
His eyes closed, he lay there silently with his
heaving chest rise and fall
as all the sweat beads rolled down his sides.

The poem ends with a pained reproach from the poet's grandmother:

"All our grandchildren except you saw him,
you weren't here, to save him, this time."

The reader may or may not sympathize with the grandmother's reaction, and it is really her grief that is speaking, but the poem itself is a life-affirming act of redemption. It is, in fact, dedicated to Didu, the poet's grandmother.

4

"Dadu" affords a rare glimpse of Sudeep Sen as a deeply personal poet, but his stance is usually more detached. Sen, in fact, is also a documentary filmmaker, but apart from the detachment which is usually associated with documentary filmmaking, it is evident that his imagery is akin to filmic ones. As one reviewer has pointed out about the dominant voice in his third book, *New York Times*, " 'I' is to some extent a camera, in other contexts an objective mediator" (Clement 70). The poems in *The Lunar Visitations* were characterized by fluid imagery reminiscent of filmic montage, but the imagery in *New York Times* is much more accelerated in its montage. I would go even further. Although the silent-film comedian Harold

Lloyd never materializes in *New York Times*, the presiding spirit in this book is certainly Lloyd hanging on from a gigantic clock-hand, as so many of the poems ring true to the rhythms of time in the great metropolis. The title poem itself is very much about how the city-dweller can become a prisoner of time. The sense of meaningless scurry is particularly captured in the following lines:

... In this city, I
count the passage of time only by weekends

linked by five-day flashes I don't
even remember.

Hectic, and accelerated in tempo, the entire poem dazzles with its jazzy rhythms. The overall 'abxba cdxdc efxfe ...' rhyme-scheme that Sen has invented for this poem (five-line stanzas corresponding to the city's five boroughs: Manhattan, Brooklyn, Bronx, etc., with the central 'x' rhyme mirroring both the other lines) is unique. It could easily be a homage to Piet Mondrian's "Broadway Boogie-Woogie". Other poems like "Rain on Hot Concrete" and "Night in Times Square" seem variations on images from Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*.

Time is viewed from a different perspective in "Treading the Season's First Snow", a prose-poem. The following paragraph/stanza stands out in the manner in which it blends historical information about Greenwich Village together with the poet's own personal history:

I decided to go toward Fifth Avenue. This is where the more affluent Villagers reside. The Salmagundi Club built in 1853 near 12th Street is the last of the imposing private mansions that once lined the avenue. I passed one of my *alma maters*, The New School for Social Research, which looked rather shut at this point of the night. I did a diploma in 16mm film production there a few summers ago when I made a short feature titled, *Woman of a Thousand Fires*. The school

offers a wide latitude of courses, everything from fixing a faucet leak to ethnomusicology.

"Woman of a Thousand Fires", in fact, is also one of the poems in *The Lunar Visitations*. (Both film and poem are based on the same source, the ethnographer Chick Strand.)² Isolated, the autobiographical facts mentioned in the quoted extract seem random, but in the context of the prose-poem it shimmers with delight at the minutiae of life, and how the past, whether recent, or more remote, enhances and enriches the present. Even the poet's taste for *Famous Ray's* pizza becomes an epiphany: "I'll vouch for every slice, my favourite being the hard crusted ones with meatballs and spinach, topped with extra cheese".

One section of *New York Times*, entitled "Seven Sonnets" plays against and in juxtaposition with this traditional poetic form in a manner similar to the poet's formal experiments in *Kali in Ottava Rima*. As one reviewer (Calder) puts it, "he darts and floats between 'free' and 'formal' verse". Two of the "Seven Sonnets", 'Penumbra' and 'Leafed Cynosure', however, are nearly true ones. Neither deal with urban subjects, but in both the rhythms of time and nature are prominent.

In 'Penumbra', the very act of writing poetry, its inspirations and evanescence, its transience and permanence, are explored with evocative power and subtlety. Here is the sonnet, in full:

The sun quite unexpectedly came back out
from behind the deep-folded rain clouds

² This is how Sen introduced the poem in his CD/audio cassette, *Parallel*: "This poem is based on a ... particular ethnographer, a Latin American ethnographer's (Chick Strand) work, ... where he found that in a specific tribe in Latin America, when a woman is found to be barren, she is supposed to kill herself". The CD/audio cassette was released by The Scottish Poetry Library, Edinburgh.

after many days of ruffled uncertain
light. It emerged robed in tethered linen,

just the way I held the sky in my hand
like a piece of crumpled paper. Bands

of deep blue didn't seem to interfere with
the whites, and the cotton patches, which

were so transient, moved at the slightest
hint of breeze. I released the paper from my fist,

tried to iron out the creases and to rearrange,
but couldn't. The folds had created a new terrain

just as the clouds in the sky never
repeat the same pattern over, ever.

In 'The Leafed Cynosure', the delicate intervention of human agency is highlighted: "... a woman tenuously cared / for each leaf, each twist of a twig, watching how it fared". The sonnets, both traditional and experimental, provide a pleasing contrast to the other poems in *New York Times*.

5

South African Woodcut (1994), a slim collection, resulted from a visit to South Africa. Paradoxically, however, instead of directly immersing himself in the turbulent politics (his visit was six-months before Nelson Mandela's election victory) of that country, Sen has come up with poems like freeze-frames, in which epiphanic moments of time are captured. The first poem, "97 6th Avenue, Mayfair", meticulously describes a meeting with Stephen Gray, South African poet and academic. Here are the opening lines:

Under the strong shaft of the Johannesburg sun,
you sit in the old chair of your study, stroking
your cat, tiding the unsaid loneliness with your fingers

that know the beauty of rhythm, enacted variously
under arc-lights and real light. . . .

These opening lines, to echo Conrad, *make us see*, and give us a strong inkling of Stephen Gray as a person. The poem as a whole is also about memory, and how it transcends the limits of space and time, as in the following lines:

Across hemispheres,
both North and East, I carry your thoughts,
replay The Poet Speaks, hearing the gentle cadence

of your voice, your voice that reverberates
even now, just as strongly as it did from behind
the posters at The Market Theatre, listing your cast.

The above lines celebrate memory as a reinforcer of friendship, but a reading of the entire poem reveals that both poets, since they have met at such a crucially historical moment for South Africa, must have been full of foreboding even while enjoying each other's craft and company.

None of Sen's poems are tendentious, but tense with quiet intensity. The political is not overtly obvious, but emerges obliquely, as in the following couplet from "Daguerreotypes": "Afrikaans is as far apart from English, / as Xhosa is to Sotho, and that to Zulu". This poem ends philosophically with a startling image: "Can one arrest the . . . restlessness of the sea?"

The title poem of *South African Woodcut* needs to be quoted in full:

Live township theatre smeared in blood and soil has
carved *more* in this delicate piece of wood than
what's played out in innumerable scripts, repeated
for years. The hollows of these eyes stare, animated
and frigid. Through its chiselled pupils appears
a sight, a vision that condenses years and years
of unequal struggle. Thick lips, now too mute to
protest once again, giving in this time, to
trade. But this mask, masks much more: the glaze
of the rural varnish and the herb-paint's
primal colours preserves the ritual, anointing the
face, charting history's altered course. On the
new stage, this face has more power in its passivity,
more emotion in its muted, saintly serenity.

This sonnet sums up the seismic changes which were in the process of accelerating while the poet was in South Africa. Ritual and history merge in the penultimate couplet, but it is the haunted look suggested in the second couplet which indicates that Sen's sympathies are never far from the suffering subject of an otherwise seemingly impersonal juggernaut of history.

Not surprisingly, therefore, a distinguished historian and literary critic, Angus Calder, has perhaps paid the greatest tribute so far to Sen's artistry: "At 29, he's probably as good as Louis MacNeice was at the same age, and he often reminds me of MacNeice, of 'the drunkenness of things being various'."³

³ Sudeep Sen repaid the compliment in "Over May Day" in *Dali's Twisted Hands*. The Epigraph of "May Day" actually quotes the same

Personally, I find Sudeep Sen a more controlled kind of poet, so much so that, to revise the great "philosopher of History", Hegel, in his poems most blazingly "the visual is real, and the real, visual". Homer knew more about history than Hegel, even if only relying on the instinct of a great poet, because for him the visual was real, encompassing much more than the merely rational. Sen shares something of this epic insight.

6

Mount Vesuvius in Eight Frames is highly visual in a more literal, but equally luminous way. This long poem in eight sections, plus prologue and epilogue, works as a companion piece to *Pompeian Idyll*, a series of eight etchings by the well-known Edinburgh artist, Peter Standen. Here is the third "frame" from the poem:

That evening unfolded naturally
and quietly, as deceptively

as the view's receding perspective
drew them to the mountain peak --

to its air, the snow, its dust, and fire.
Fire engulfed their bodies, their

fingers, burning nail-tips, furrowing
lines of passion on each other's skins.

MacNeice line. The poem itself is not only a tribute to Angus Calder, but also to Edinburgh as a city where culture and conversation flourish. This is further evidenced in *Mount Vesuvius in Eight Frames*, where we see reflective inspiration and interaction between the Scottish artist, Peter Standen, and the Indian poet, Sudeep Sen, who is himself so familiar with Scotland. The other relevant Scottish poems would include "Single Malt" and "Trossachs" (and the current book-length poem-in-progress, *Distracted Geography: An Archipalego of Intent*).

The accompanying etching has a man kneeling beside a woman reclining on a couch. There is, however, a striking time-lapse between the lines and the etching, itself, of course, composed of graphic rather than verbal lines. As a result, the poet's lines are no mere illustrations to the etching. The etching makes clear that the man and the woman are about to make love, but the lines describe them in the throes of passion soon to be engulfed by the erupting lava which destroyed Pompeii.

The poem's interactive structure and form can be found in the buried clues in the text itself. Here is a part of the "eighth" frame:

The dead: All neatly packed
in small square groups, and

in even multiples of eight,
nailed, framed, and glass-encased.

Even the new grave-diggers pay,
the elderly mountain pays

too -- in twos, fours, and eights.
Pompeii remains, uncontained.

Numerologically "two" corresponds to the couples and the rhyming couplets, "four" to each of the frame's four sides and corners as well as to the seasons, "eight" to the number of etchings in the series, and so on. One has to read the entire sequence, as well as examine the etchings themselves to appreciate just how dynamic, dialectical, and visionary the collaboration between the poet and artist has turned out.

7

Richness of visual imagery is even more prominent in the collection entitled *Dali's Twisted Hands*. The title poem, at one level, is about hurt and betrayal, but ultimately very much about how a poem comes to be written. The following stanza, for instance, works as a metaphor for the dynamics of the poet's imagination. As an

image, it could not be more startlingly clear, and yet instinct with mystery. Here it is:

Now from amidst the ravaged landscape
of my past which resembles the melted hands
in the twisted unexplained terrain of Dali,
one clock unsprung setting time for a new time.

The point here is not that the poet opts for some vague surrealism of style, but for exactitude about the evanescent. Sen identifies with Dali, I would maintain, because his famous surrealist paintings, such as "Persistence of Memory", may be dreamscapes, but every detail in them (e.g., the melting watch hanging from a bare branch) is painted in an exact, even "*trompe l'oeil*" manner. The poems in *Dali's Twisted Hands* literally explode with a visual translucency analogous to spring flowers suddenly blooming.

Nor are all the poems necessarily dense with implicit meaning. "Musee D'Orsay, Paris", for instance, is airy and breathes spaciouly, visualizing the French capital as a city of labyrinthine elegance. A labyrinth is certainly at the heart of the following lines:

One of the
higher floors opens onto a terrace by-pass
where the winds from Seine bring gently, the
wet, settled on encased pyramids of glass
of higher art, from the grand palace across the
city's Louvre.

The poem contrasts most vividly with "New York Times", and reminds one how different Paris is from Manhattan, yet also how modern.

At the heart of this collection is a section titled "Line Breaks", a long poem sequence in 14 parts that originates from a

writers' rural retreat in England. Austere verbal ingenuity is displayed in the two alternating voices that are structured in spare minimalist lines. Ostensibly, they play with metaphors linking milk and proofreading, but eventually the narrative evokes and suggests the juxtaposition of beauty and horror, real and surreal.

The poems in *Dali's Twisted Hands* differ radically, on the whole, from Sen's previous collections, though the turning-points are already evident in *South African Woodcut* and *Mount Vesuvius in Eight Frames*, in that the poet's vision shifts from the archetypal to the historical. The "hidden glint of a 5th Century Gupta coin" in "Sun's Golden Sands", for instance, is most exciting as a find in an archaeological dig, the very opposite of remote and dusty. But the deepening of the poet's vision is most characteristically evident in "Govind Dev Temple, Vrindavan", certainly one of the finest poems in the collection. Here it is:

Pink-buttocked monkeys leap from one lichen-layered eave
to another, as the parrots' plumage splashes the deep red
of the wall green in patches: resident bees drone
from the hives stuck to the ceiling, and the screeching
bats echo, flying in and around, tracing arced orbits.

Govind Dev stands steadfastly, propped with monumental
blocks of red and ochre sandstone, where solidity and
finery
of architectural execution are married in an art,
both Islamic and Hindu, high on the hill in the centre of
Vrindavan, rising above everything around.

In 1590 when Emperor Akbar's general Man Singh
supervised its creation, his cavalry bowed as they marched
past this splendour on the hill enroute from Delhi to Agra.
Now, the surrounding tenements invade, inching their way
into
every square of the courtyard space, and the pilgrims' walk.

Here, under the old sanctum, Krishna's idol was found,
celebrated, worshipped, *rasa-lilas* sung by Chaitanya,
his followers, and people. Through four hundred years
generations of devotees, bats, parrots, and monkeys
have lived here, prayed here, and changed hands,

but one fact has remained constant:

Every year, on nights when the moon appears full
for the first time, its incipient rays streak through
the main archway, lighting Krishna's forehead faint blue,
and the empty temple halls echo--"*Radhey, Radhey*".

Like "A Pilgrimage to Mathura", the poem highlights the individual search for truth and, like "Durga Puja", it pays tribute to ritualistic communal values; but it reads like an incandescent synthesis of the two seemingly divergent aims.

Another poem, "The Garland of Stars", fuses poetry and friendship in its concluding couplets:

And at the end, my only gift to you both will be
that of a humble craftsman's tools and epepee --

I want to weave for you, in crystal stills,
my very own garland of stars, that never wilts.

"Epopee" is a more obscure (or very rare, according to OED) word for "epic", and what it might forebode is that Sen's achievement would be considered as a kind of epic in the course of time. In that case, his pilgrimage will be like that of Odysseus; not so much Homer's, as Tennyson's Ulysses, with this injunction: "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield".

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DAVID C. BUCK

HOW TO READ CANKAM POETRY

Perhaps it is proper, when translators feel themselves unequal to the task of presenting the emotional contexts of the poems they are translating, for them to provide a guide to the reader, a small set of "things to remember" while reading the poems. The point is that while an individual poem may be rendered well enough into English, readers may nonetheless feel at sea, and consequently lose interest in an interesting poem, if they find themselves stuck very often on that most legitimate of literary questions: Why did the author say that?

This introduction is an attempt to provide such a key to Tamil Cankam poetry. The idea is for readers to keep the boldfaced items in mind as they consider the poems, sort of in the way that some people keep mottos or other aphorisms in mind as they work their way through life: when you feel a poem leading you down a useless path, it is my hope that reference to one or more of these key items may clarify the reason the poem was constructed in the way it was. If one does gain access to the reasoning behind a poem, its inner world will open and the critical task of understanding the stuff of the poem from all its angles can begin. Here then are some points to keep in mind in reading Cankam poems.

--Every poem is complex. It is a given in Tamil Cankam literature that each word, each image, each sound intertwines with the rest of the poem in contributing to an overall theme. Nothing is wasted, or added just to fill out a line. Suggestion: Don't succumb to the temptation to think any of these poems is disjointed.

--Every poem is uttered by one (and only one) character. These poems are speeches; never do we encounter the European mode of poetry in which the poet muses aloud for the reader to overhear. In

this sense, each poem is a short monologue lifted, as it were, from a play. In fact, some of the poems could be read extremely differently if they were understood as having been spoken by characters other than those indicated. It can be instructive to try recasting poems, to see how they would sound from the lips of another character. A Cast of Possible Characters (DRAMATIS PERSONAE) is listed below for easy reference. Suggestion: Keep clear in your mind exactly who is speaking, and who is listening.

--Every poem is uttered in a specific context. Behind all of these poems is the general plot line of a play. All the poets knew the theme, as did all their listeners. It would be nice if we could catalogue all the Possible Situations, but they number in the hundreds, and that cannot be done; suffice it to say that it is a story of Boy meets Girl, with many ramifications of their continuing Love and Married Life. It is always assumed (even when the poems might lead us to suspect otherwise) that the principle characters are upright people. Fortunately, each poem comes equipped with a Colophon which details its situation. Most of these colophons date from a period several centuries later than the poems themselves, and hence may well not be the work of the poets; as a result, commentators have occasionally felt free to suggest alternative situations for poems, as can be seen in the fact that a few poems have double colophons. It can be instructive to imagine a new situation for a poem, although it probably would be unwise to insist on departing from the one given by the old authorities. Suggestion: Spend a moment to clarify the dramatic situation in your own mind, and keep that scene in view as you read the poem.

--Natural imagery counts in the message. Poets drew on a complex organization of natural imagery in which certain birds, landscapes, flowers, types of water (waterfall, river, ocean, etc.) and so forth identify a general classification for the poem's dramatic

situation. While a description of this classification is a long task,¹ much of what needs to be deciphered can be realized by careful attention to the actions of nature and natural creatures in each poem. The five-fold scheme presented below can be used to provide cues from the images themselves as to the overall tenor of the poem. Suggestion: if you're in doubt as to the overall tenor, select some of its natural images, and compare them to the five-fold scheme.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

(The People who Appear in Cankam Poems)

To understand the characters who utter Cankam poems we must first realize that they all contribute to the development, complete with pitfalls, of love between two idealized lovers. A typical story begins when the lovers are teenagers, and continues through their courtship and marriage, to their struggles to cope with various kinds of separation from one another. The characters are clearly divided between those of His Camp and those of Her Camp:

His Camp: The Hero -- young lover who courts and marries the Heroine, grows older, and is tempted (sometimes successfully, sometimes not) to leave in search of his fortune, in service of the king, to visit courtesans, or for other reasons.

¹ Perhaps the best description of this arrangement of images remains the Afterword to A. K. Ramanujan's groundbreaking classic The Interior Landscape (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967). A full-length translation of the earliest, and still most complete, Tamil exposition of Cankam literary conventions, Iraiyanar Akapporul Urai, is forthcoming from the South India Saiva Siddhanta Works Publishing Society, Madras.

His Friend -- a man of the same age as the Hero, who shares his joys and sorrows as though the two were one. In many ways these two share a bond much stronger than that between the Hero and the Heroine.

His Charioteer -- driver of the Hero's chariot, he is addressed in some of the poems spoken on the Hero's return from a job which took him away from the Heroine.

Bards -- troubadour-style musicians who occasionally carry messages on behalf of the Hero.

Her Camp: The Heroine -- young lover wooed and won by the Hero, who has to live with restrictions enforced by her parents and the gossip of townspeople, and has to deal with the various activities of the Hero.

Her Friend -- a woman of the same age as the Heroine, who shares her joys and sorrows as though the two were one. In many ways these two share a bond much stronger than that between the Hero and the Heroine. In fact, according to some old commentators, the Heroine was raised jointly by her own mother and the mother of Her Friend, who may have served as a wet nurse for the Heroine.

Her Mother -- the mother of the Heroine, who is from a well-to-do family.

Her Foster Mother -- the mother of Her Friend, who in many ways fulfills the function of a mother for the Heroine as well; some of the poems leave it ambiguous as to which of the two "mothers" is meant.

THE POEMS AND THEIR LOVE STORY

True, these poems are old. In fact, they date from the first few centuries on either side of 0 AD. They are newly translated from their Tamil originals, however, and they are young in another sense as well: many of the characters who populate them are young.

Of course you are invited to read the translated poems straight out, and dispense with these introductory comments; but the poems do conform nearly perfectly to a very involved set of poetic conventions, to the extent that most of their literary appreciation in Tamil concerns precisely the fine tuning of each poem's presentation of the conventions in its own new, fresh light. Our purpose here is not to become nearly as specific as that, but to present a quick picture of the idealized story of love between two young people that lies behind the poems.

Every one of these ancient Tamil poems--called Tamil Cankam literature after the politico-artistic body that regulated their production--presents a single frame in this love-movie; each poem is, in fact, an attempt at lines for the script. Thus the poems have, instead of titles, colophons indicating who is speaking to whom, and under what circumstances.

The story goes like this:

Boy meets girl. This scene may occur in a number of ways, ranging from his rescuing her from forest dangers to their simply seeing each other. In any case, their first meeting and falling in love must occur against a wooded, mountainous backdrop, often with peacocks and waterfalls used in the imagery. As spin-offs, we find them arranging day trysts and night trysts; sometimes we find her suspicious parents keeping her closely guarded at home; we find him travelling dangerous paths to meet her at night; we find her best friend asking him indirectly whether marriage wouldn't be a much better way to continue the

relationship; we find him communing with his heart over her beauty; and, we find many other situations tied in with their passionate first love.

Lovers pining in separation. While passionately in love, they often find themselves locked apart from each other's embrace. These scenes invariably occur against a seashore landscape, often with sand and surf drawn integrally into the message of the poem. Reasons for their separation range from the hero's quest for his fortune to the barriers erected by inquisitive and noisy neighbours. Here again we sometimes find the heroine's friend hinting at marriage as a way out of their predicament. Many of these poems promise the return of the hero, driving his chariot across the beach, or through a seaside grove of trees.

Lovers suffering the pangs of a duty-driven, prolonged absence of the hero. While there are technically six possible reasons for him to leave for a prolonged period of time, only two of them play much of a part in the poems presented here: his quest for his fortune and his service as a noble in the king's army. The imagery for these poems is that of a hot desert wasteland, perhaps home to some scraggly trees or dried out bamboos, but utterly inhospitable. If some of these poems fail to mention the reason for a hero's trek through the desert, it is correct to assume one of the two noted above; since the backdrop was conventional, not all poets felt constrained to repeat it in poem after poem. This class of poems also leads into a particularly beautiful set of similar poems: those in which the hero has completed his allotted task and urges his charioteer to speed home to his beloved, which actually fall in the next category.

Matured love between the two. Poems of this class take place against a wooded backdrop, and portray the pleasures of married life in scenes such as their shared joy in the antics of a child and their satisfaction at home after the Hero's completion of an arduous task.

Marital problems. The bulk of these poems are spoken by characters reacting in their own ways to the hero's betrayal of the heroine by having liaisons with courtesans. Many present the reply of the heroine or her friend when the hero, or an emissary of his, requests that he be allowed back home; in some poems she lets him in, in others she does not. Poems in this general category are set against the busy life of an agricultural city, and frequently refer either to the local irrigation reservoirs and canals, or to artistic centers.

It is my hope that, despite the volume of words that have been written during the past couple of millennia attempting to analyze these poems, the foregoing synopsis will be sufficient to enable a reader new to the joys and intricacies of Tamil Cankam poetry to catch the flavor and savor the poetic juices that flowed so long ago through those courtly veins.

SAMPLE

To get started, I offer the following poem, with a few comments.

Clumps of gleaming mastwood buds
open and release perfume
like the fragrances we use at festivals:
it covers over the stink
in this noisy old village
where fishermen spread
their huge nets on fresh sand
when they come in from their toil
and scatter out hundreds of fish
to cure in the sun. The whole
stupid village is so unfair!
I'm afraid our mother
will place us under strict surveillance

as our complexion turns mottled
in our relationship
with the lord of the seashore
where a horse with head high
gallops like lightning
across empty salt pans
and bathes from its flanks
both its mud and the flowers
knocked over it by birds,
down in the backwater pools
delivered here by ocean waves.
Will this relationship die out
as our complexion withers?

What Her Friend says
while the Hero is Within Earshot, to
Inform Him of the Family's Close Surveillance

by Uloccanar

Since the imagery is from the seashore, we can conclude that the general tenor of this poem is the aching suffered by the Heroine--and by Her Friend, the speaker of this poem, since the two are as one--during a period of separation from the Hero. Notice that Her Friend uses the plural pronoun "we" to indicate that she and the Heroine feel exactly alike. Further, we realize, both from the colophon and from the poem itself, that this separation is due to a restriction of the Heroine's movements by her suspicious family; they correctly attribute the changes they notice in her physical appearance to lovesickness.

Notice that the colophon cues us into a further dimension: Her Friend has an ulterior motive in communicating the Heroine's predicament to the Hero. Although the Heroine has no access to the Hero, and although even Her Friend would arouse suspicions if

she were to speak directly to him, she finds this method to tell the Hero that he dare not come for any further trysts.

But there is more. We all know that there is a way out of the dilemma: the Hero could come clean with a marriage proposal to the Heroine's family. He knows this, and it is on that fact that Her Friend really plays in this poem. She is actually throwing him an ultimatum: propose soon, or never see her again!

Commentators have gone so far as to suggest the following specific allusions: As the mastwood fragrance covers up the stink, the Hero's arrival with a marriage proposal should destroy the town's gossip (...noisy old village...). And just as the horse washes its mud off in the water, she will wash away the withered nature of her complexion in their union after the wedding.

Referring to the boldfaced key points, we see, first, that the imagery is tightly knit. I have not analyzed how the birds, the nets, the fish, etc., might be understood; I leave speculation on these points to you, but I hope you realize that such speculation is more than reasonable in the context of Tamil Cankam poetry.

Secondly, we see that this poem is uttered by Her Friend, and that regardless of its direct audience, it is the Hero, meant to overhear, who is the important audience. Colophons for some other poems, incidentally, will specify who is the direct audience as well. Of course, most of the poems really are spoken directly to someone, without depending on anyone else overhearing; the colophons explain this situation clearly.

Thirdly, this poem is uttered during a period before marriage when the lovers are kept apart from each other. It is worth noting that having Her Friend do the speaking here solves the problem created by the fact that the Heroine has no direct access to the Hero. Further, the Heroine is released from possible charges of being too brazenly forward if she were to have hinted at marriage

on her own, a question that would certainly be raised in the Cankam context.

And finally, as noted above, it was the seaside imagery that enabled us to assign the particular tone for this poem; we know, for example, that the Heroine's withered complexion cannot be due to anxiety about courtesans, since the imagery is wrong.

Clearly these observations on this poem are more detailed than a new reader could hope to develop; yet by the same token they are much less detailed than those of a traditional commentator. My hope is that readers will mine each Cankam poem as deeply as possible, and return with as much ore for refined analysis as they can. There is a lot here; regardless of how much one succeeds in understanding these poems, rest assured that more ideas will always be lurking behind the next image.

AKSHAYA KUMAR

"CONTEMPT DISGUISED AS CONCERN"

Orientalist Reconstruction of Home/Nation in the Poetry
of A. K. Ramanujan and R. Parthasarathy

Exile is the predicament of an Indian poet writing in English. English as the chosen medium of his poetic output distances him from his immediate native milieu and sensibility in an irrevocable manner. Instead of countering or resolving this in-built contradiction in his poetic enterprise by way of undertaking an inner journey into the cultural complex which he as a post-colonial has inherited from history, he goes outwards. The English-connection takes him to the First World, the abode where he can sell his product and be intimate with the English gods. Later on he makes an issue of this self-invited displacement by invoking rather strange and bizarre images and metaphors of his native home and nation that feed the Western construct of Orientalism (Said 150) all the more. Derek Walcott, the Caribbean poet, exposes this politics of expatriate writing thus:

You spit on your people,
your people applaud,
your former oppressors
laurel you.
The thorns biting your forehead
are contempt,
disguised as concern,
still, you can come home now. . . .
every child is born crippled,
every endeavour
is that of the baboon. . . .

(Walcott 88).

Let us not be oblivious to the fact that what we receive today in the name of Indian English poetry is pre-eminently poetry written by expatriate Indians or Indians who are settled abroad, or

still Indians who have spent considerable periods of their life in the high West. The cultural configurations of this poetry therefore are much more complex and intricate than hitherto accepted or read. The reconstruction of home as a metaphor of nation or nativity becomes quite central to the very creative/ cultural dynamics of this poetry. This reconstruction is exceptional and rare, something which one does not encounter in other streams of Indian literature. This is reconstruction from outside by an insider, one who has lived and experienced the lows and highs of both the worlds, the developed First World and the developing Third World.

In this short essay I intend to focus on the poetry of two leading poets of Indian English, A.K.Ramanujan and R.Parthasarathy, to theorize the politics and poetics of home in contemporary Indian English poetry. First I shall endeavour to reveal the underlying strategic similarity in the responses of these two poets towards their home/ nation by bringing forth subtle sub-textual interconnections between Parthasarathy's *Rough Passage* and Ramanujan's poetic edifice. Thereafter an attempt would be made to explore the reasons that make this convergence of responses possible in this so-called culture of distraction or dissent. Is this convergence merely co-incidental or does it point towards some deep-seated cultural politics that goes into the very making of contemporary Indian English poetic discourse?

To begin with, both Parthasarathy and Ramanujan, even when they look back at home/ nation as the proverbial last straw that can possibly stem their drift and dissipation, tend to present home as a stale site of the archaic and the traditional, where life as a whole degenerates. To Parthasarathy home is nothing more than a corpse, a dead and defunct construct that putrefies in the open, unattended and unlooked after:

To live in Tamil Nadu is to be conscious
everyday of impotence.
There is the language, for instance:

the bull, Nammalvar took by horns,
is today an unrecognizable carcass,
quick with the fleas of Kodambakkam.

(Rough Passage 48)

This is more a contempt than a concern for the native space. As the very epicentre of Dravidian culture, Tamil Nadu has a vibrant and living history of more than five thousand years.

In Ramanujan's poetry, too, home is good enough just to provide a perfect breeding ground to insects. In the sleepy space of this human habitation, in the absence of real human activity in the form of frequent family get-togethers, only insects lend life and momentum:

Unread library books
usually mature in two weeks
and begin to lay a row

of little eggs in the ledgers
for fines, as silverfish
in the old man's office room

breed dynasties among long legal words
in the succulence of
of Victorian parchment.

(Collected Poems 96)

Here "Unread library books" in "the old man's office room" become the poet's chosen tropes for the decrepit home. Home, a traditional referent of stability and security, stands inverted as a referent of stagnation and unhealthy stasis.

Home, hitherto regarded as the dynamic centre of culture, is underplayed as an eventless site of inertia. As against the challenges of exiled living, it offers the luxury of doing nothing.

The following lines from Parthasarathy's poem underline this inactivity attributed to home:

I have even kept letters unopened for days.
I don't have to complete anything.
Now I spend most of the day

plucking grey hair from my forehead.
Once in a way I light a cigarette. Follow
the smoke as though it were a private tour.

(Rough Passage 60)

By showing exile as challenging enterprise and home as a complacent space, the poet indirectly undervalues the social significance of the latter. In Ramanujan's world-view too, home is almost a static and customized domain where women "who come as wives/ from houses open on one side/ to rising suns, on another/ to the setting" become "accustomed / to wait and to yield to monsoons. . . ." (*Collected Poems* 97). In the closed ambit of the home, human beings are reduced to impotent and helpless watchers.

To both Ramanujan and Parthasarathy, home is a kind of a prison or just a ghetto one is eternally a captive of. Its centrifugalness is too tyrannical to allow an individual any independent or free thinking space. Far from being an institution of self-fulfilment and self-recovery, it is presented as an institution of self-curtailment and self-erosion. A feeling of resigning to a narrow landscape dogs Parthasarathy constantly: "I have exchanged the world/ for a table and chair" (*Rough Passage* 56). In the confines of the home even the time stands still: "yesterday and today/ don't add up to tomorrow" (*Rough Passage* 62). Its stillness tends to subsume everything that comes to its fold. To Ramanujan it is a kind of black hole that swallows all the (p)articles that fly around it: "Sometimes I think that nothing/ that ever comes into this house/ goes out. Things come in every day/ to lose themselves among other things/ lost long ago among/ other things lost long ago. . ." (*Collected Poems* 96).

Home is more a refuse than a refuge. "Nothing stays out: daughters/ get married to short-lived idiots;/ sons who run away come back..."(*Collected Poems* 98). Even the songs of the beggars keep on re-visiting this home: "A beggar once came with a violin/ to croak out a prostitute song/ that our voiceless cook sang/ all the time in our backyard"(*Collected Poems* 98). Here the word "prostitute" has serious semantic connotations. It at once relates home to some kind of a brothel visited and re-visited by its clients, namely the family-relations, to get an emotional kick now and then. Home, which otherwise is taken as the site of permanent everlasting emotional bonds becomes the cheap site for ephemeral one-night relationships. This prostitudinal value of home ruptures the noble notion of home as the sacred space.

Home is reduced to a cultural junkyard where "ideas . . . / once casually mentioned somewhere/ . . . come back to the door as prodigies . . ."(*Collected Poems* 98); and where "Letters mailed/ . . . [find] their way back/ with many re-directions to wrong/ addresses and red ink marks/ earned in Tiruvella and Sialkot" (*Collected Poems* 97). Its only functional value is that it provides one a "permanent address". It is a rarefied confession box where the poets can easily shed off their sins without any fear of backlash or accountability. They tend to take home as an innocent space--a space too inane and sentimental to counter-argue, to lay its own demands on its inhabitants. Parthasarathy while back in the cosy confines of his home turns confessional: "However, there is no end/ to the deceptions I practised on myself: / I have, for instance, lived off friends./ Told the usual lies . . ."(*Rough Passage* 60). There is a tendency to take home for granted. To these poets home perhaps stands for abstention or easy escape from life. When high modernism of the West impinges upon Ramanujan, he prefers to retreat back to his "particular hell only in my [his] hindu mind" (*Collected Poems* 34) not for cultural recuperation or cultural assertion as such, but for temporary relief and respite.

Indian culture is basically riverine. More than just a romantic symbol of refulgent life, the river forms the very hub of local culture. Its invocation in poetry brings into play the dynamics of culture that thrives along its banks. Both Ramanujan and Parthasarathy draw vignettes of rivers that run through the native landscape in shades not very different. In Parthasarathy's vision the local river, Vaikai, is no better than "a sewer" that holds little promise for any living being: "Kingfishers and egrets, / whom she fed, have flown/ her paps. Also emperors and poets/ who slept in her arms"(*Rough passage* 54). The local river, very much like the home, is stale and filthy; for children it is no more than a plaything, for men it is a site of washing dirt and cleansing their arse: "With paper boats boys tickle her ribs/ and buffaloes have turned her to a pond . . . a man on the steps/ clean(s) his arse" (*Rough passage* 54). It does no longer comfort anyone: "No one has any use for Vaikai,/ river, once, of this sweet city" (*Rough passage* 54).

In Ramanujan's native landscape too, "every summer/ a river dries to a trickle in the sand,/ baring the sand-ribs . . ." (*Collected Poems* 38). If there is "eaglewood in her [Parthasarathy's river] hair/ and stale flowers" (*Rough passage* 54), Ramanujan's river too is clogged by "straw and women's hair/ . . . at the rusty bars" (*Collected Poems* 38). If in Parthasarathy's poetry the river represents decadence, in Ramanujan's discourse, it becomes destructive too. When once in a year the river has "water enough to be poetic", it "carries away/ in the first half-hour/three village houses,/ a couple of cows/ named Gopi and Brinda/ and one pregnant woman/ expecting identical twins . . ."(*Collected Poems* 39). River as a trope of nativity and nation does no longer sustain life; during summers, it stinks, and during rainy season it overflows ominously to swallow the whole range of life on and around its shores.

Home is presented as an exotica of the Orient where old rituals keep re-visiting; where "Every evening,/ . . . bells roll in the forehead of temples . . ." (*Rough Passage* 54). Ramanujan would

like to define these rituals/ cultural practices as "conventions of despair" (*Collected Poems* 34). In Parthasarathy's native landscape, "Rocks dream in stone" (*Rough Passage* 55). The very image of "Mother's turmeric days/ in Nanjangud" culled from "This sepia landscape" (*Rough Passage* 53) is overtly orientalist in its tone and tenor. The poet re-constructs the scene of his mothers wedding thus:

Rustic in the extreme,
Uncle ensconced on her lap, the image
reveals a sort of celluloid

fright in the crooked, stiff fingers.
(She was only twelve then,
and married to a second cousin.)

(*Rough Passage* 53)

Such image(s) of mother befit only the travelogues of foreign travellers who constructed India as a country of snake charmers, royal princes and mysterious saints.

Parthasarathy's home is atypical Third World space. Either it is too banal to offer any respite, or too chaotic to soothe the sophisticated self: "It's a dogfight/ all over. Noises, noises" (*Rough Passage* 57). Ramanujan's "Smalltown, South India" is crowded with cows and buffaloes: "Temple employees have whiskered nipples./ The streetcows have trapezium faces./ Buffaloes shake off flies with a twitch of ripples" (*Collected Poems* 100). In fact "Buffaloes swatting flies/ with their tails" (*Collected Poems* 81) is one of those many stock images that appear in the poetry of both the poets as signifier of passive Indian mindset. In Parthasarathy's *Rough Passage*, instead of buffaloes, it is "the bull" that is surrounded with "the fleas of Kodambakkam" (*Rough Passage* 48). Bulls and buffaloes, the prime movers of agrarian Indian society are looked down upon as beasts of idleness. The "Bulls and bulldozers/ block each other/ on the road to Chidambaram" (*Collected Poems* 246). By clubbing together the bulls with the bulldozers, the poet

associates the attributes of destruction with the holy bull. Home/nation at times, besides being the venue of destruction, becomes a grand site of defecation too. In Ramanujan's "Poona Train Window", as "I [the poet] look[s] out the window", he "See[s] a man defecating/ between two rocks, and a crow" (*Collected Poems* 80).

Back home, both Parthasarathy and Ramanujan, as privileged postmodern nomads, undergo a feeling of alienation and self-estrangement. After experiencing the momentum inherent in exile, turning back to the "immobile" rooted home is nothing short of an anti-climax. If Parthasarathy discovers a stranger in his own mirror image, Ramanujan too comes across the image of an estranged self in the mirror. Parthasarathy after his brief honeymoon with the West confronts "a stranger/ in the scratched glass, older perhaps,/ who resembles my [his] father" (*Rough Passage* 52). In moments of intense self-doubt, he would admit "I am no longer myself..." (*Rough Passage* 61). Ramanujan's "Self-Portrait" is not very different:

I resemble everyone
but myself, and sometimes see
in shop-windows,
 despite the well-known laws
 of optics,
the portrait of a stranger,
date unknown,
often signed in a corner
by my father.

(Collected Poems 23)

This feeling of estrangement permeates the poetry of the two poets, particularly Ramanujan, as a subterfuge for creativity, a pre-text for poetic speculation, or what G. N. Devy calls "the very stuff of his (Ramanujan's) existence" (19). It is made a fetish to a level where it becomes an end unto itself. This overlapping of image and idea

in the work of the two poets reveals not just a harmless homogeneity of response; it is a part of a larger design that informs the very politics of expatriate writings.

III

The orientalist projection of the native home as a space of the obscure and the clichéd raises serious doubts about the post-colonial credentials of Ramanujan and Parthasarathy both. In their double-edged poetic discourse, home is raised and erased simultaneously. It is desired and shunned in the same breath. It is resurrected as a saleable metaphor of poetry only to be deflated later on. The poets lack empathy and conviction, necessary to understand the subtle cultural currents that go into the very making of a home or a nation, as vital co-ordinates of human civilization. In their topsy-turvy vision, stability becomes a synonym of stagnation; security, a semantic equivalent of complacency; tradition, an excuse of not-to-change.

With its definite foregrounding in tradition and history, home alienates them from contemporary fads of postmodernism. Its rootedness uproots them from the regime of globalization and multinationalism. Home is never their possessive space, at best it is a kind of a hell to be made livable. They are, no doubt, nostalgic about their homeland, but their nostalgia is playful and derisive. It is selective, as it remembers only the oddities and fissures within this primary stricture of belongingness. To belong is an emotional compulsion, but one which takes them backward. Throughout their poetic discourse, belongingness is presented more as an existential compulsion, than a real inner cultural urge. This reduces home to no more than a middle-class house, a site of survival, rather than a reference of continuity of existence. It becomes more a site of "civic and class belonging"(Smith) than a site of living culture and tradition.

The contemporary Indian English poetry, as the analysis of the poetic discourses of Ramanujan and Parthasarathy amply reveals, therefore fails to visualize and narrate the multiple functions of home as a living institution of culturization and hectic family pursuits. In Manohar Malgonkar's image home comes off more as a museum, or an archival space where artifacts of tradition are displayed for the gaze of the Western mind. It is this museumification or mummification that has made home a construct of exhibitionist significance only. The irony is that Indian poets in English, instead of countering it, end up in giving a native testimony, an insider's seal of approval to this Orientalist construction of the home/ nation located in the so-called "strange" and "savage" Third World (Nandy 17).

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Ranjit Hoskote, who writes from Bombay, has published Zones of Assault, a first book of poems; A Terrorist of the Spirit, a translation of Vasant Dahake's Marathi "Yogabhrashta" poems; and Pilgrim, Exile, Sorcerer, a critical biography of the painter Jehangir Sabavala.

Aniket Jaaware is Reader in English at the University of Pune.

Tabish Khair is located at the university of Copenhagen, in Denmark. In addition to his novel, An Angel in Pyjamas, he has published three volumes of poetry: My World; A Reporter's Diary, from his days of work with "The Times of India"; and The Book of Heroes, a collection of light verse.

Gopi Krishnan Kottoor, Editor of the literary magazine Poetry Chain, has published drama, fiction and translation, in addition to poetry which has won him several British Council awards. His current work is in the Department of Supervision, Reserve Bank of India, Trivandrum.

Akshaya Kumar, of the Department of English, Panjab University, Chandigarh, writes from his area of specialization in comparative Indian Poetry, and is currently engaged in a major research project on "mapping India through the co-ordinates of Indian English, Hindi and Punjabi Poetry".

Darshan Singh Maini, formerly Professor and Head of the Department of English, Punjabi University, has published research on the novelist Henry James, as well as several volumes of poetry that include A House of Dreams and The Aching Vision.

Keshav Malik, the subject of a review article in this issue of KB, has lived in London, New York, Dublin and Vienna and Currently lives in New Delhi. He has published prose writings, short stories,

translations and ten volumes of poetry. In 1991 he was awarded the Padma Shri for literature in English.

Hoshang Merchant, Reader in the Department of English, University of Hyderabad, has published ten volumes of poetry, including Flower to Flame, Yusuf in Memphis and Talking to the Djinns.

Bibhudatta Mohanty teaches English in a college in Puri District, Orissa, and has published poems and translations in several Indian journals.

Vihang Naik, who lives in Ahmedabad, has taught English in colleges affiliated to North Gujarat University. His poems have appeared in his own volume City Times and in many journals.

Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih, lecturer in English at Sankardev College, Shillong, has been Editor of the English-language daily newspaper, Apphira, and has published two volumes of his own poetry, Moments and The Sieve.

Bibhu Padhi has taught English at Ravenshaw College in Cuttack, Orissa, and has published four volumes of poetry, the latest of which is Painting the House. His most recent magazine appearances include poems in the Contemporary Review.

N. Poovalingam is Lecturer in English at Manonmaniam Sundaranar University in Tirunelveli, Tamilnadu.

Moin Qazi is an officer in the State Bank of India, Warora, Maharashtra and lives nearby in Nagpur. His published poetry has appeared in his volume A Wakeful Heart, as well as in many journals of India and overseas.

P. Radhika is Lecturer in the Department of English of F.M.N. College, Kollam, near Trivandrum. She is the author of Story-Teller to Visionary, a book on Angus Wilson's narrative craft.

Kavya Bharati 1999

Rahul Ranchan writes from his home in Sanjauli, adjacent to Shimla in Himachel Pradesh.

Krishna Rayan, resident of Mumbai, has published many articles and reviews in Indian and overseas journals, and is known especially for his book The Burning Bush: Suggestion in Indian Literature. He has taught in India's National Defense Academy and in universities in Zambia and Nigeria.

M. Relich, who resides in Edinburgh, Scotland, has followed the career of Sudeep Sen over the years and has reviewed his poetry for many journals.

Roger Robbenmolt, of Pleasant Hill, Tennessee, U.S.A., has written poetry responses to an intensive month-long trip to South India in early 1999. He has published five volumes of his other poetry in the United States.

K. Satchidanandan is secretary of the Sahitya Akademi. His published volumes include How to Go to the Tao Temple and Other Poems (Reviewed in *KB* 10) and Summer Rain, translations from three decades of his Malayalam poetry.

Sanjeev Sethi describes himself as a "media person", because of his extensive work in newspapers, radio and television. He has also published a volume of poems, Someone.

Molshree Sharma writes from Chicago in the United States, where she continues to study at the Chicago campus of the University of Illinois.

Rabindra K. Swain, who writes from Bhubaneswar, has published poems in many journals as well as in his own volumes, Severed Cord and Once Back Home.

Smita Tewari is Reader in the Department of English at the University of Allahabad in Uttar Pradesh.

BOOKS RECEIVED

Each of the following collections of poems has been received recently in the *Kavya Bharati* office. A book listed here may also be the subject of a review in a future issue of *Kavya Bharati*.

Banerjee, Laksmisree. *Fire Offerings*. New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 1997. 87 pp. Rs.150/-.

Betab, Pritipal Singh. *The Third Strand*, translated by Bhupinder Parihar. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1999. 77 pp. Rs.200/-.

Chopra, Meena. *Ignited Lines*. New Delhi: Virgo Publications, 1996. 59 pp. Rs. 80/-.

Dhanavel, P. *Poetry of Life*. Ranchi: Writers Forum, 1997. 38 pp. Rs.50/-.

Dhanavel, P. *Muse Time*. Maranda (Palampur): Poetcrit Publications, 1998. 41 pp. Rs. 50/-.

Ghosh, Sabari. *Illuminated Moments*. Calcutta: Biswa Jnan, 1996. 23 pp. Rs. 10/-.

Gill, Stephen. *Shrine: Poems of Social Concerns*. Benson, Arizona, U.S.A.: World University Press, 1999. 166 pp. US\$ 12.50.

Gujral, Shiela. *Canvas of Life*. Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1998. 62 pp. Rs. 100/-.

Khullar, Ajit. *Plus Minus*. New Delhi: Virgo Publications, 1996. 64 pp. Rs. 90/-.

Merchant, Hoshang. *The Birdless Cage*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1997. 66 pp. Rs. 80/-.

Nagar, Anupam Ratan Shankar. *Pain and Pleasure*. Ranchi: Writers Forum, 1997. 38 pp. Rs. 40/-.

Kavya Bharati 1999

Nair, S. Jagath Simhan. *Rainquake*. Rajivam, Attorr: Privately Published, 1998. 35 pp. Rs. 50/-.

Orange City Muses 1997: An Anthology of Poetry, ed. Om Biyani. Nagpur: Paraskar Publications, 1997. 86 pp. Rs. 25/-.

Pal, K. S. *The Broken Beat*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1998. 48 pp. Rs. 80/-.

Sadarangani, Neeti. *The Serpent of Slumber*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1994. 72 pp. Rs. 100/-.

Singh, Charu Sheel. *Creation Cocktail*. Varanasi: Vishwajnana Adhyayan Sansthan, 1997. 185 pp. Rs. 100/-.

Singh, Kanwar Dinesh. *Thinking Aloud: A Collection of Mini Poems*. Delhi, Shimla: K.K. Publishers, 1999. 113 pp. Rs. 175/-.

Sinha, Ravi Nandan. *Harbour Lights*. Ranchi: Writers Forum, 1998. 47 pp. Rs. 60/-.

Swarup, Sunanda. *In Grey Circles*. New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 1997. 65 pp. Rs. 150/-.

Tejdeep. *Five Feet, Six and a Half Inches*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1997. 70 pp. Rs. 70/-.

Tharakan, Anniyil. *Quester by the River and Other Poems*. Notre Dame, Indiana, U.S.A.: Cross Cultural Publications, 1997. 117 pp. Rs. 300/-.

Tripathi, Manjul Rani. *Prayers and Compilations of a Daughter*. Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1998. 45 pp. Rs. 80/-.

CHANDRABHAGA REVIVED

Chandrabhaga, a highly respected journal published from 1979 to 1985, is set to resume publication under the guidance of its former Editor, Jayanta Mahapatra. *Kavya Bharati* joins many other poetry lovers in celebrating the "rebirth" of this publication, after its absence of more than a decade. The first issue of the new series is scheduled for March 2000, and may already be available when you are reading this announcement.

Jayanta Mahapatra, one of India's most revered poets, published fourteen issues of *Chandrabhaga* during the years of its previous existence. Some of India's finest writers contributed to that series--primarily poetry, critical articles, and translations along with an occasional short story. The regret when this journal ceased publication was widely articulated and genuinely felt.

In an age when it is increasingly difficult to sustain publication of such a high quality English medium poetry journal, all readers can be grateful for the courage required to begin *Chandrabhaga* again. A venture of this kind deserves the utmost support from all readers who cherish poetry and want to encourage its writing and its reception.

Subscription for the new *Chandrabhaga* can be sent to its Editor, Jayanta Mahapatra, at Tinkonia Bagicha, Cuttack, Orissa 753001. The subscription cost of Rs.100/- may be sent by Demand Draft, money order or cheque, drawn in the name of Jayanta Mahapatra, with Rs.10/- for banking charges added to personal cheques. Submissions, to *Chandrabhaga* may be sent to the same address.

We celebrate the renewal of *Chandrabhaga* and hope all readers will join the celebration by subscribing to the very first issue in its new series.

NEWS FROM THE WEB

Kavya Bharati welcomes and will try to publish, as we receive it, information from important journals and programmes, related to Indian poetry in English, that have gone into the Internet.

SCILET WEBSITE: www.scilet.org

(Study Centre for Indian Literature in English and Translation)

Website Contents:

SCILET's *Library Catalogue*, giving details about its complete library holdings, is available to be browsed by any user. The *Library Information* page tells about formalities for using the library in person, and through the distance user method. The *Programme Information* page informs about the occasional workshops, seminars and lectures which take place at SCILET. The *Contact Information* page provides telephone, FAX, email, and conventional mail addresses for SCILET. The *Recent Arrivals* page lists some of the latest new books that have come into the SCILET library. The *Journal Listing* page gives information about some of the important journals available in the SCILET library.

THE BROWN CRITIQUE WEBSITE: www.browncritique.com

Website contents:

The website includes *Editor's Choice* concerning *Writers and Others*, and *Time OUT* by Gayatri Majumdar. It provides information regarding various *Brown Critique* publications, tells about forthcoming books from *tbc*, and announces competitions, including contests for poetry and short story writing. The Website indexes back issues of *tbc* and informs about distributors of *tbc* publications. There is also a *Guest Column* and a *Collector's Issue* for poetry, art and fiction, along with information regarding Gayatri Majumdar, *tbc* editor, and comments about the reception of *tbc* in the media.

SUBMISSIONS

Kavya Bharati welcomes contributions of poetry in English, review articles and essays on poetry, and translations of poetry from Indian languages into English: from resident and non-resident Indians, and from citizens of other countries who have developed a past or current first-hand interest in India.

Authors should submit two typewritten copies of each contribution, preferably on A4-size paper. In the event that handwritten submissions are considered and later published, *Kavya Bharati* can take no responsibility for discrepancies between its printed text and the author's intentions. Manuscripts of essays and review articles must conform to the latest edition of the MLA Handbook.

All submissions must be accompanied by sufficient bio-data from the writer, such as her or his current work, place of residence, previous publications, other relevant literary activities, and pertinent extra-curricular interests. But for a fuller range of appropriate bio-data writers should consult the "Contributors" page of this issue.

All submissions should be sent, preferably by Registered Post, to The Editor, *Kavya Bharati*, SCILET, American College, Post Box No.63, Madurai 625 002 (India). Writers must also include their clear and full postal address, with Postal Index Number in every case. An E-mail address where possible will also be welcome.

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Kavya Bharati assumes that all its contributors will submit only writing which has not previously been published and is not currently being considered for publication, unless the contributor gives clear information to the contrary. This assumption is consistent with all reasonable publishing decorum. Aside from this statement, *Kavya Bharati* cannot be responsible for inadvertently publishing material that has appeared elsewhere.

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SCILET

AMERICAN COLLEGE, MADURAI

The Study Centre for Indian Literature in English and Translation, better known by its acronym, SCILET, has one of the largest data bases in Asia for Indian Literature in English. Its seven thousand books include texts by five hundred Indian and South Asian authors. From other books and from more than seventy-five current journal titles and their back issues, critical material regarding almost two hundred Indian authors is indexed and included in the database.

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