

OPEN SPACES

50 POETS

50 POEMS

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For private circulation

This publication draws from the content in 'Talking Poetry' on the website of Open Space, a civil society outreach programme that encourages discussion, debate and action on social justice, sustainable development and human rights issues. Open Space is an initiative of the Centre for Communication and Development Studies.

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"Words are the only jewels I possess,
words are the only clothes I wear,
words are the only food that sustains my life,
words are the only wealth I distribute among people."

– Sant Tukaram, 17th century bhakti poet, India

" I took the shortest route through Belief's sad country
where archangels, on the Word's command, slew my word."

– from My Word by Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001)

This anthology is edited by Priya Sarukkai Chabria

The Old Debate of Don Quixote vs Sancho Panza - Priscila Uppal
The Waiters - Adil Jussawalla
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My Lover is Like the Sea - Jane Bhandari
The Monologue of a Silverfish - K Satchidanand
Round of the Seasons - Keki Daruwalla
Martyr - Jalal Malashah, Translated by Omid Varzandeh
Psalm: From Black Sea Sonnets - George Szirtes
Flight: 4: After the Empress Eifuku - Priya Sarukkai Chabria
Borges - A K Mehrotra
Ghazal - Nakul Krishna
Hummingword - Sampurna Chattarji

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Introduction

The two verses on the previous page, in a sense, express the contradictory positions which most contemporary poets negotiate: a sky of fullness reflected in a sea of loss. And sometimes, even the reflection is indistinct.

The primary purpose behind this mini-anthology *Open Spaces: 50 Poets 50 Poems* is to reflect these contemporary contradictions and to celebrate the diverse voices of the poets who have made possible the Talking Poetry section of the Open Space website (www.openspaceindia.org), managed by the Centre for Communication and Development Studies.

In the spirit of openness, the poets invited to feature on the website were asked to 'donate-a-poem' as artistic venture capital. The idea is to take the 'high art' of poetry into the spaces of the everyday. And so hold dialogues with readers who might otherwise not have heard its subtle, persistent sounds. And hopefully, the reading of poetry will become as natural as switching on a light at dusk.

In the same spirit, this anthology is being distributed at cost price, and in unconventional spaces: through friendly art galleries, at college utsavs, through friends and well-wishers' word of mouth and, if permitted, at other people's book launches!

Open Spaces: 50 Poets 50 Poems is a sequel to the 26-poem *All Poetry is Protest* booklet that we published in July 2006. It flew off the shelves. The present publication marks little over a year of the website's hectic online life and its release is timed with a seminar-utsav Open Space is organising with the Sahitya Akademi. It is on *The Image of the Writer in Literature*.

The choice of poems happened to serendipitously coincide with the theme of the seminar-utsav. For, on re-reading all the poems on Talking Poetry I was struck by the volume and intensity of verses on the art, craft and act of writing poetry, allusions to other writers and a construction of the image of the poet or writer. It could perhaps alternatively be titled: *Poets on Poetry*.

You will find some poems – for instance, that of the exceptional George Szirtes -- don't necessarily fit the theme outlined above, as this was not the initial criterion of Talking Poetry. But, as editor, I made a conscious decision to draw only from the website's contents.

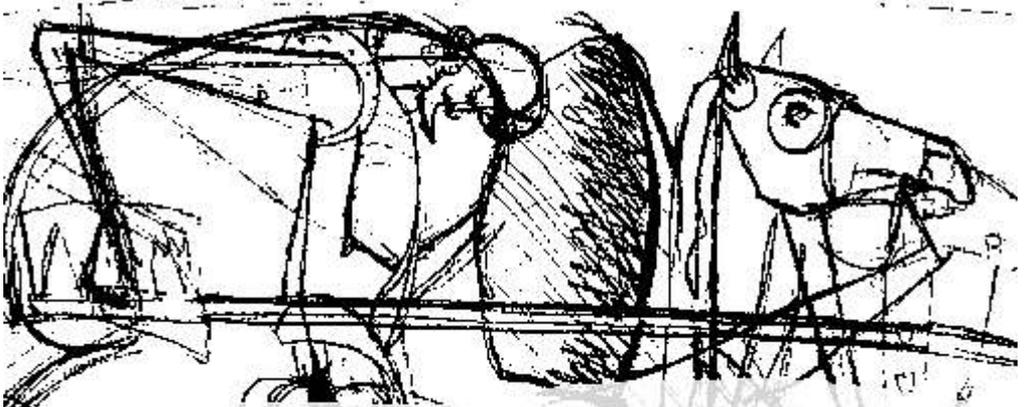
We have the new contributions from Pakistani poets Alamgir Hashmi and Moeen Faruqi. Perhaps a future anthology will include more work from across our borders. And, alongside the work of the more celebrated poets, you will find a strong selection of 'emerging' voices like Arka Mukhopadhyay and Nakul Krishna who will soon have published collections of their own.

In the meantime, the Talking Poetry section on our website continues to grow, and the Internet continues to play a pivotal role in increasing the accessibility and readership of poetry as a creative and joyous cultural expression.

I end this introduction with words without irony, with words that pare down writing to its cell and skeleton. In his *On the Arts of Writing and Painting* from the *Ain-i-Akbari* of ca. 1590, Abul Fazi says, "The written word looks black notwithstanding the thousand rays within; or, it is a light with a mole in it that wards off the evil eye. A letter is the portrait painter of wisdom; a rough sketch from the realm of ideas; a dark night ushering in day; a black cloud pregnant with knowledge; the wand for treasures of insight; speaking though dumb; stationary, yet traveling; stretched on the sheet, and yet soaring upwards."

Well, maybe you don't agree with all of it. But I hope the reader experiences some of this in the poetry that is captured from fluttering light and stretched on the following pages, yet soaring out. Maybe even to a sky of fullness.

Priya Sarukkai Chabria
Editor
Talking Poetry



The Old Debate of Don Quixote vs Sancho Panza

The men in this family
are much stupider than the women, my large-armed uncle says.
But the women all go crazy.

They go crazy because they read books.
They write books.
They learn languages and go to artsy movies.

The men like to work, to do.
We are happy walking for hours into the woods to cut down a tree
or transporting boxes from one garage to another.
As long as there is something to carry, an object to touch
and exchange, we feel less alone in this universe and know our place.
We know how to play beach volleyball,
how to fix cars and airplanes,
how to enjoy the feel of the sun on our foreheads in the sweltering heat.

The women in this family
are never happy. Always thinking, thinking, thinking
about this and that, that and this,
they know only thoughts running in circles, circles,
until exhausted and dizzy.
The women are too smart for their own good.
The books worm out holes in their brains.

They are unhappy in every language they learn.
And so maybe the men in this family are much smarter than we think.

– Priscila Uppal

The Waiters

Blacker than wine from the loaded grapes of France,
Blacker than mud their Tamil minds recall,
Dark skins serving dishes to the fallow
Sweat more night than grapesblood has. All
The long summers they abjured, for chance
Of better prospects, change, a sun of contrast,
Stick in a language their clients won't allow.
Must button up their manners with the past.

Grow expert on the epicure's stuffed heart,
Polite of speech, punctilious, guarded, kind.
As guardians of good taste, these waiters know
The soiled and cluttered kitchens of the mind,
The rancid oils where sweeter dishes start,
Cooked, like a pick-up's words, the soot-black roof
Behind our pasted smiles: their darkness grew
To insight in their day; they stand aloof.

But slacken in their service after eleven.
Guarding the day's unending appetites,
Grow shifty-eyed, avoid our munching faces,
The spit and polish of our eating rites.
Then closing time: they dream of a foodless heaven,
Shrug off their coats like priestly cloaks of pity,
Day's ministry complete. Slip to their sleeping places
In the throat of the feasted, pink-faced city.

– Adil Jussawalla

Lines On Water

The shore vanishes.
Under a lowering unfamiliar sky
the constellations reveal themselves
in short, incomprehensible bursts.
We are lost

to the waves, to the chasing spray,
the tossing horses
and to the country we have left behind.
To ourselves,
lost.

Ahead, a wild chase
we don't yet know what
wealth: gold, ivory, pepper,
we hope.
I say, geese. Sheep. Dung.

On different shores now
we have drawn lines on the water
and this is where
the ink runs out:
where fingers darker than ours
clutch shiny glass beads

and where through the sudden night
a trumpet sounds our banishment.

– Sridala Swami

A River

a river
once ran

through
my girlhood

bearing boats,
and fish,

and laughing
broods

of naked
children

browned by
365 suns

solar days
of innocence

unsullied
as its water.

today
the river

has met
the ocean,

its pure
white foam

bears
treasures

of lost
islands,

fruit of
the womb

and shoals
of kinship.

the river
is now ocean,

the ocean
is sky,

the sky
is my skin

a nimbus
of light.

– Bina Sircar

Ultima Multis - The Last Day for Many For Walter Benjamin

We gather news from the globe each morning
Yet we have taken refuge
Dwelling in rooms untouched by death
And poor in stories
We have become dry dwellers of eternity
Stowing away our mothers and fathers
in hospitals and sanatoria

Walter Benjamin,
Where is History's new angel?
We look at the debris at our feet
And angels take flight
Their wings weighed down with dust
As the storm rushes them to heaven,
The day has come for us to prey
On the wreckage of ruined houses
And in the graveyard
We come together to turn the fallen tombstones
Looking for inscriptions
That will stop the future turning into empty time
Our feet shuffle over bones
To drain the once upon a time
Make a chink in the time of the now
So that the dead might waken
Mouth open
Wings spread
Eyes staring.
We reach for history's new angels
To rescue the flame of life
Touch the sparks that glow
And the stories that rush
Contrary to expectation
Through the strait gate
Every second of time

– Stephanoes Stephanides

Still Life, Basque Country

Skies laced in white clouds,
no birds on their wing

Hills green as meadows
with fences in between

Winterprint of fossils on the branches
The skyline lines the skeletons of trees
which wait by a white house
for cherry-white to spring

The sheep forget to nibble and to graze
The wind leans and stops for a breeze

I stand on my bi-pod,
at Olavera,
put pen to paper
and the tripod for this photo
is complete.

– Aman Nath

For Children in Wartime

This is the art class.
The theme of the lesson
is Sarajevo in springtime.
On a sheet of A4 appears a street
with its men and women

scattered
on their backs;

red balloons
from their insides

pop
on the pavement.

Cars in the background
are shot full of holes.

The artist is twelve and a half.

In her neighbour's piece,
a zigzag across the window
is perhaps a smashed windshield.

The roof is literally flying
off one house,
a twist of orange flame
spiralling upwards.

A hush descends as twenty
small heads bend over
a fresh set of drawings.
Doors, closed,
have the faces of people frightened.
Trees weep out tears the size of snowdrops.

A pair of spectacles lies on the street,
next to a man with closed eyes
looking very dead.
But that's not me, hearing still
the mortar level the walls,
sniper bullet hit
somewhere across the courtyard.
Cities are going
but what's to hold up a wax crayon?
Children know
that pictures cannot be stretched too far.
School's in progress
as if it were a prayer
about how it was supposed to be.

Just six feet from me
the lawn's growing wild
below the daily reticent
jasmine;
each blade an argument
of this season's excesses.
Without raiders, this street is fine.
But, alas. I too can't
write from the point of view of grass.

— Alamgir Hashmi

(First published in The Pakistan Times)

Mawlai

For seventeen years we passed through Mawlai in a bus
saw waxy red flowers in the pomegranate trees and a man
pegging brilliant white napkins on a clothesline against the wind.
We didn't live there and those who lived there didn't care about
the buses passing through at all times of the day, right up against the
mauve beef hanging in its pockets of fat, and the shops with shiny strips
of tobacco showing through shadows, and the new houses and the
old houses where the same sort of people lived, or at least that's
how we felt, passing through in buses for seventeen years.

But we won't be doing it anymore – looking out of a window
at a patch of maize in its copper earth, eggs in a wire basket,
hand-painted signs near open doorways that remind us
of sunlit drawings in children's books about places that grow
sad in their unreality with every passing year, simple signs in
white paint – hangne ngi die tiar, hangne ngi suh jainsem.
We'll forget what they looked like, the rough golden clapboard shops
with their unwrapped cakes of soap, the windows in houses no
bigger than a man's handkerchief, and it will be difficult to remember
where each of the cherry trees stood because they flowered so briefly
before lapsing back into their dark green anonymity.

The graveyard on a gentle slope, the fence weighed down with roses!
We'll want to urgently tell someone, if we ever happen to return,
that we knew this place, passed through in a bus for seventeen years,
but having said that we won't know what else to say about Mawlai
because we never really got off there or bought things from its shops
or stepped into someone's boiled-vegetables-smelling house
to watch the street through the netted curtains. We'll keep quiet then
and try to ignore that sense which is not pain but has pain's cloudiness
and its regret and its way of going and returning.

– Anjum Hassan

Tale of the Young Bride

Born in nineteen hundred and sixty eight,
in the crowded bustee of Dabirpura,
she wed one, born in nineteen hundred and thirty four.
Nineteen hundred and thirty four? Why him, you ask,
had she no dowry, no jewellery, no land?

Some men collect wives, this one, no different.
Concealing her in a burkha (truly believing
she was his), he collapsed — she on his lips, and God.
Her skin snow white, nipples peachy pink,
she was claimed by another, younger,
born in nineteen hundred and thirty three.

Some men die suddenly, this one, no different.
Unveiling her (truly believing she was
cursed), they flew her back to Dabirpura.
That must be her good fortune, or so she thought.
Returning home, she faced the wrath:
Had she robbed master? Killed him?
Pink nipples were offered to the highest bidder.
Bought by one, born in nineteen hundred and thirty two.

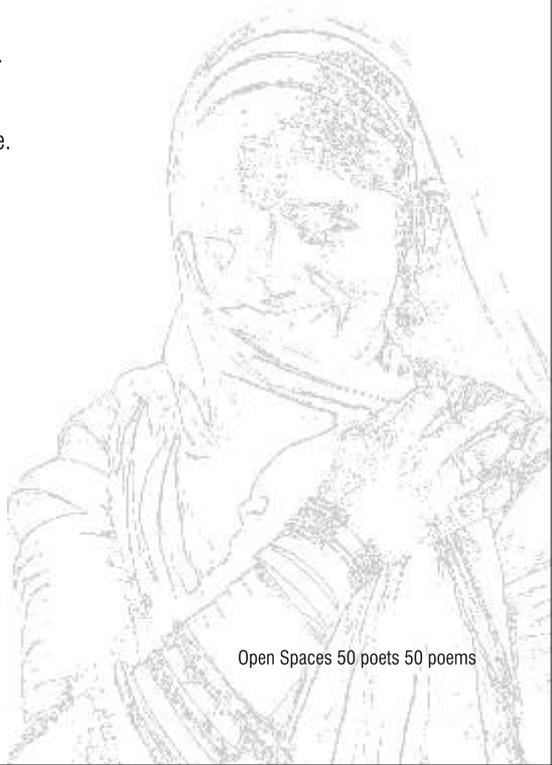
This is no tale of sorrow, for sorrow has now hope.
The police rushed to her rescue, slipping by her bedside.
“What big guns you have,” she said.
“What pink nipples,” said the wolves.
Back to the beginning, as in Hindi films,
round and round in circles, she roamed.
Her cheeks turned pale; alas, the pink nipples glowed!
Soon she was picked up by another,
born in nineteen hundred and thirty one.

Some old men do business, this one, no different.
Adorning her in a mirrored choli (truly believing
prized possessions should be exposed), he walked
her up and down the streets around their home.
She lost count of days and nights,
he kept full account, for her benefit, of course.

This is not a tale without an ending, for all tales end.
One night, she disappeared in a crowded bustee,
never to be found, never to be sold,
never to return, or to be returned again.

Post script: Why do old men lust, you may ask.
Why not? Don't young men too?

— Anju Makhija



Sat by a Poem

I sat by a poem
That was bubbling with glee
Blazing in anger
Melting in love
Shattering in total madness
Burning with jealousy
Candid in hatred
Stagnant in grief
Dissolved in compassion
Glowing in incandescence
And vanished in total absence.
Now I sit alone.

– A J Thomas

Lost Etymologies

Through my half-opened window frames,
A single slice of night,
Dripping with moist despondence.

A bough of bougainvilleas
Tremblingly measures out
A violet minuet.

Echoes of rain linger
Like an inverted image,
In the leaves whispering to the night.

Tonight the city sleeps still,
Its dreams washed clean
Of the day's detritus

Perhaps beyond my framed view
The sky is turbid, sullen;
A brooding red

Like a muddied river
Dreaming of horizons once known,
Dotted with the white silence of mountains.

But I see only the flaking wall-yellow
Shivering leaf green, street-lamp white
And transparent silence.

Yet that red river in the sky
Murmurs of the terminals of all the hours
Where I've had my days stamped.

Again the sky begins to weep
Half-unheard rain music
Like Beethoven's Fifth Sonata.

Rain-music crawls, quietly, quietly
Across my windowpanes
Into the pores of memory

And tells me that my days
Are now full of words
That have lost their etymologies.

— Arka Mukhopadhyay

Because

Because his life was like that
Because his love was like the stone
In the bed of a river now dry
Because what he remembered
Made sense only if he lived twice
Because the milky-way opened mirror doors
Into small rooms where the phone
Rang like an alarm no one attended
Because water brought him shadows
Of his childhood fleeing like killers
From their past.
Because the calendar showed
Only Good Fridays
Because men who knew told him nothing
Because women he knew didn't know
Because the sea cried for all the world to hear
And the world heard nothing
Because a dog bit him in a haunted house
And the doctor injected him with a dog
While a nurse patted his ass
Because the spider of his thought
Spun a web, trapping far in the centre
The sun of his joy
Because everything he did led to death
Because everything he gained
Was a way of gaining everything he had lost
Nothing new or nothing more
He wrote.

– C P Surendran

A Pearl within an Oyster

There is a place
Where jewelled cobwebs
Dot the hillside
My father's smile
Never wavers
And the rocks
Feel solid beneath my feet
The mist swirls in the valleys
A potent sea
Spewing stories
Which my brother
Conjures out of the vaporous void
A magician
Spinning a different web each day
And yet it is I
Who tell tales now
Fishing in that timeless sea
Of the past
Finding
Old shoes
A rotted corpse
But sometimes
A pearl within an oyster...

– Deepa Agarwal



Study of a Vase

In the end it is only something that can break,
this fragile porcelain vase in delicate blue
with a gilt edge. Carefully I take
it from the topmost shelf of the cabinet, and into
my room and set it down upon my desk. Now here
it stands, eight inches high, cylindrical; and I,
sharpening my pencil, suddenly find it clear
I do not wish to draw another lie

of what is and what is not. Art destroys
the sureness of the thing. Perhaps this small
chip off the rim will stay unseen; if drawn, a choice
addition or faithful flawism- and yet all
create a symbol that forgets the symbol that this
has been, found in my grand-aunt's wooden chest,
holding her letter to a child born dead. It is
a sign of the dying that seek the dead's long rest;

yet, put quite plainly: nothing. I can forget
the past and have the will to leave behind
vases and words that were or could be. Yet,
something sometimes compels the desperate mind
to understand the nature of itself;
seek an image from the light that shows a shape
filled with colour borrowed from a shelf,
as if to other blues one could escape.

Man in white T-shirt looking at a vase,
holds it to light, eyes focused on despair,
seeks Image and remembers how to pause
and smile to find himself reflected there,
unclearly in its varnish; tries to choose
medium and message for his study's sake;
taught in tradition, schooled in how to lose
though at first it only seemed a thing to make.

– Deepankar Khiwani

Of Sea and Mountain

When at a friend's exhibition of paintings
The works are wonderful
And the crowd substantial
And you feel a sinking boredom
Which you would not have felt
Had the paintings been yours

Or at a friend's exhibition of paintings
The works are not wonderful
But the crowd as substantial
And you feel pity and anger
For and at your friend
For and at the crowd
And at yourself

And on both occasions you rush from the gallery
On to the road
To fill your lungs with air
That is not bitter with your imperfections

Then O sea I think of you
Your unbroken chain
Of deep salt waters.

Or when a tired ageing woman
Turns her back
On my examination table
And I see the knuckles of bone
Over which her coarse skin
Stretches the beaded spine
From neck to tail, I feel
The blows this back has taken,
I know the exhaustion
These ribs still try
To keep at bay,
And I know that this back
Is mine, that tomorrow
I, like her, will fail to withstand
The endless burden, and will allow
The brave tensility at last to fold
Into a permanent hump.

At such times, O mountains
I long for your structure
Your seemingly immutable
Rise and fall.

– Gieve Patel

This was Nattu

This was Nattu
I said sifting through
The ashes and bones

No, said Gopi,
His lifelong friend,
Only something
To remember him by.

We cast a leaking pot of memories
Into the ocean
Right next to the sanctuary
He had made his own

Like waves in the ocean are we
Said someone
Always there
But only for moments
For ever and almost never

The rest of the ashes
We carried in a plastic bag
To the hills he so loved
And immersed in the holy river

The plastic bag retrieved
At the last minute
("Let us not add to the pollution")
Had some traces of ashes still

Nattu always wanted to live life to the full
Till the end

We washed the bag out
In the cleansing waters
Hope he breaks free of the chain
Someone said
As the river rushed to meet the ocean

So that was that

Why are they holding this havan
Asked Poonam
Why are we talking of him
As if to remember him
Is an effort

Four years have gone by
And finally gone
Are the dark circles
So cruelly painted
Around her eyes

Why are they praying
For his soul
And our peace
When he is here with me
As he always has and will
Poonam asked
In bewilderment

He is here
And that is that

– GJV Prasad



My Lover is Like the Sea

My lover is like the sea, she said
As he rose above her like a wave
And fell upon her.
Like sand, she received him,
And afterwards
Only a sheen remained,
The last of the wave
Drying in the sun.

The sea
Calmly continued to glitter
Beyond the window,
And the waves
Rose again and again,
And fell upon the sand,
Leaving a sheen
That dried in the sun.

– Jane Bhandari

The Monologue of a Silverfish

I was born in an aristocratic family
that ate only the Classics.
My great grandfather's
very beginning was
with the Mahabharata.
Now, for the last two generations,
we are living off the Ramayana.
I had wanted to have sundara kanda
but by the time I came to be
the pattabhishekam* was over.
What I got was
just the Uttara Ramayana* .
My empathy was with Sita.
I expedited
her vanishing underground.

My wife's family is
more discriminating.
She says
Vallathol* tastes very sweet
and Vyloppilly* is bitter.
Our daughter likes
modern poets.
If she has indigestion,
diarrhoea, fever or fainting fit
we'll know whom she had eaten that day.

Our son doesn't savour Malayalam
His speciality is Shakespeare's Hamlet .
He eats Hamlet from both sides.
Till his accursed vacillation
is over and done with.
He says
silver fish
must not fall prey
to sentiments.

Humans believe
Classics are immortal.
This is a myth
made up by none other than writers.
We are the best critics.
Slowly, we eat up everything.
We compel the world
to change its values and standards.

Slowly, slowly...

– K Satchidanand
– Poem translated by A J Thomas

*1. pattabhishekam - The coronation of Rama.

*2. Uttara Ramayana - The second part of the Ramayana where Sita is abandoned in the woods.

*3,4. Vallathol, Vyloppilly - Two eminent Malayalam poets who are no more

Round of the Seasons

(In the footsteps of Abhinanda and Yogeswara)

Vasanta (Spring)

I tire of superstitions:
the asoka blossoms only
at the touch of the beloved's feet;
the bakula must be splashed
with rinsed wine from her mouth;
the tilaka must be hugged
and the amaranth should get a glance from her
before the leaf turns green
or the petals colour.
I quicken into flower
at the memory of your touch.

2

It is the season for illusions:
night mists turn to dawn haze,
frost becomes dew, though sharp.
The night-jar still coughs.
The black-bird is heard sometimes
but she hasn't been seen.
The scent of the mango-blossom is there
but not the mango-blossom.
A bird alights on the leafing lotus bed
thinking it is an island.
Bathing on the ghats,
shawled in mist, she finds
bees moving towards her breast-tips.

Grishma (Summer)

Kama, in this torrid simmer
Let some things remain cool:
her eyes, reflecting the waters,
the smell of jasmine in her hair,
her body dripping with the cold river
as she steps out on the ghats.
If you need tapers at your altar, Kama,
let her ardour burn.
Let thoughts burn within the cool forehead.
Let the cheeks be cold
but the tongue within all fire.

2

From the mountain's shoulder to its groin,
from nether regions
to the lip of the escarpment,
forest fires rage simultaneously.
Bark and bud crackle and rain down as ash.
The trapped antelope does not know where to run
as the four directions, wrapped in smoke,
converge on him.
Such is my fate, beloved,
in the forest of your limbs,
under the black rain of your hair.

Varsha (The Rains)

The rain gods betrayed us last night.
The thunder woke her parents,
lightning showed her stealing from my door.
Such a commotion there was
that despite disturbance in the skies
I heard wooden doors unfastened
on neighbours' doors,
and saw women peeping out.
The rain has stopped today
but the village drips with her escapade.

2

They are all there,
the paddy-straw covered by a cotton rug,
the white smoke-tendril
uncoiling from an incense stick,
the air outside sharp with drizzle,
the night sharp with the moorhen's joyous cries.
Only my flank is empty,
only she isn't there.

Sharada (Autumn)

Shrawan has gone with its singed
smell of lightning,
and the jasmine flowers
are not starred upon the trees
but are a crescent upon her dried hair.
Is lightning necessary
for those smitten by lover's lightning?
Is rain essential
for those wet with each other?

2

The water-lily bleached
under a septembril sun.
The paddy-straw crackling
under the fires of their love.
A bangle breaks as her arms
pummel his back.
Who says lovers must move
only to the beat of rain?

Hemanta (Early Winter)

It is a season for departures:
the clouds have gone
like wild geese from the lake.
Lightning stirs now
Only in Yogeswara's verses;
And the flood waters have left with the boatmen.
Yet it is a season for arrivals:
the lover comes to your door
like the night heron.

2

She, who caught her
stealing back at first light,
said, 'There is mustard-flower
on your back, be careful,
it is getting to be winter.
You may catch cold.
The peasants who spend their nights
with scarecrows in the fields
are already warming their hands
on chaff fires.'
'You don't know the fires of our love',
she answered.
'For us it is still shrawan.'

Sisira (Late Winter)

There was some coming and going
on the machaan that night
during his vigil over sugarcane.
The wooden platform,
spread over a fieldbreak,
creaked on, disturbing
the night owl on his perch
and the lapwing in its shrill concentrics.
He never shouted even once,
but wild boar kept away
from the phalanxed cane
while the stars wheeled round them.
His envious friends said later
that the wild boar never came because
his machaan creaked through the night
with their love-making.

2

There was no din in the guava grove
except at first light when parrots
raised a curve-billed cacophony
over half-bitten fruit.
He still slept soundly. The rope
tied to a can perched on a tree fork
lay in his hand, gently clutched,
as if it were a braid of her hair,
the one that had slipped from his string bed
light as a dawn breeze,
the colours of the east
streaking across her love-bitten face.

— Keki Daruwalla

Martyr

– Jalal Malashah (1950–) Irani Kurdistan

The white dove
was carrying a peace letter
From: A Wounded Land
To: History

when the hunters came
and threw a net
of arrows.

Suddenly
the earth screamed.
The sky awoke.

The dove's blood
fell over the world,
drop
drop
drop

– Translated by Omid Varzandeh

Black Sea Sonnets

Palm

There is the sea, we say, as the wind
pushes it to and fro, and each time it lays
another open palm before us
it whisks it away. One day is like all days,
the same phrase sung by the same chorus.
In the distance the lights and cries
of a wedding, stray dogs in loose family groups.
It is as if the night were pinned
to the sky insecurely, not quite the right size.
And what might lie behind it? Brilliant loops
of naked stars cavorting and a moon full
of bad luck growing ever more silver. There
is something in the water beyond the pull
of tides, something released into the air.

– George Szirtes

Flight: 4.

after the Empress Eifuku

To be in a poem of old, to say:
the moon rose too quickly,
dawn is cruel, morning
found us undressing as we dressed ourselves,
I wear your fragrance still...

To be in a poem of today that goes:
call me on my cell; wait,
I'm held up; wear the purple G-string;
or, to slip into tepid slang – can't
get enough of you, baby.
These drifting thoughts
that unzip body and soul.

– Priya Sarukkai Chabria

Borges

Before the Ganges flows into the night,
Before the knife rusts, the dream lose
Its crescent shape, before the tiger runs
For cover in your pages, Borges, I must
Write the poem. Insomnia brings lucidity,
And a borrowed voice sets the true one
Free: lead me who am no more than De Quincey's
Malay, a speechless shadow in a world
Of sound, to the labyrinth of the earthly
Library, perfect me in your work.

– A K Mehrotra

Ghazal

Your voice fades out of earshot. Then I die.
I hear the chirping of the wren. I die.

I fear your letter will get no reply.
My hand can no more wield the pen, I die.

Your black-brown eyes are dictatorial.
Again you look away, again I die.

Why did I trust you so? Now all alone
and naked in the lion's den, I die.

Sundays I sit and plan my funeral
and wonder if you'll be there when I die.

They said there was a half-chance I'd survive.
But like a thousand other men, I die.

Three wires: red, blue, green. I cut the red.
A timer. On the count of ten, I die.

– Nakul Krishna



h
u
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n
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w
o
r
d

Hummingword

There is a certain kind
of listening
that brings it closer
to my straining heart
pulse ruby in my throat.

Patient,
tuning to that invisible pitch,
one octave higher
than silence.

Blood rush of cochlea
and tympanum,
hush.

It will come
with a flapping of wings
a whirring of little beaks
a stirring of tongues.

Twelve-sixty times per minute
it will beat in my uncurled fist,
my quickening skin.

And in that moment
of perpetual motion,
it will turn visible
at last.

Small, perfect,
a flying jewel,

my hummingword,
longing for nectar, thirsting
to burst into song.

– Sampurna Chattarji

A Farewell Letter of Cherries

(For Professor MB)

Dear friend, this is a letter
of cherries, this is a poem
born of cherries and my affection
when the town is pink
with their blush.

This is a poem
born when summer greets winter
under a compassionate sky
like two old-timers
like you and me
before we go our separate ways.

This is a poem
born of sadness
for the cherries will yield
to a blasé green
and the cold will finally conquer.

This is a poem
born of consolation
for the business of man
is not to possess
and the only part you can keep
of things that come and go
is that which you have photographed
with your mind.

Dear brother, we live in our memory
in the memory of the world:
stoking that memory with fondness
is all that we can do.

We can do no more
we can do no less.

– Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih



Selection from Echolocation: The Word

The world is no more than an old word. You can go from dedication to deadication, from host to ghost, but I can carve you out of the air again, unearth your shreds, float my eyelash back into the old oceans.

How did you think you would stop talking to me, I never hung up the telepath.
I have not remembered you, but I have not forgotten you.

– Mani Rao

Echolocation. Hong Kong: Chameleon Press 2003. ISBN: 988-97060-2-4.

Four Friends

Makram who loves the wild horses of Jebel Marra,
Tesir and Prakash

Remember me, the girl with a scar on her knee
The oldest of three sisters

Who fled a white house in Hai el Matar,
A girl who came to school too young and couldn't sleep?

At night I dreamt a sailboat on the Nile.
The boat caught fire, we perished together

Four friends lost in that underworld pharaohs sought.
We reached for each other

Through the torn petals of our mother tongues.
Now my sorrow and my love smoulder in a foreign language.

I am she come from where I crave again to be –
Beatrice, girl who died too young,

I read those words thumbing through stacks of poetry
In a library by the Nile. The books have vanished

From the window ledge where I placed them a century ago.
Have they burnt the library?

Nostrils of the wild horses of Jebel Marra
Are filled with ash.

In a city where two rivers meet
Makram, Prakash, Tesir, remember me.

– Meena Alexander

(Published in World Literature Today, 2006)

Ass

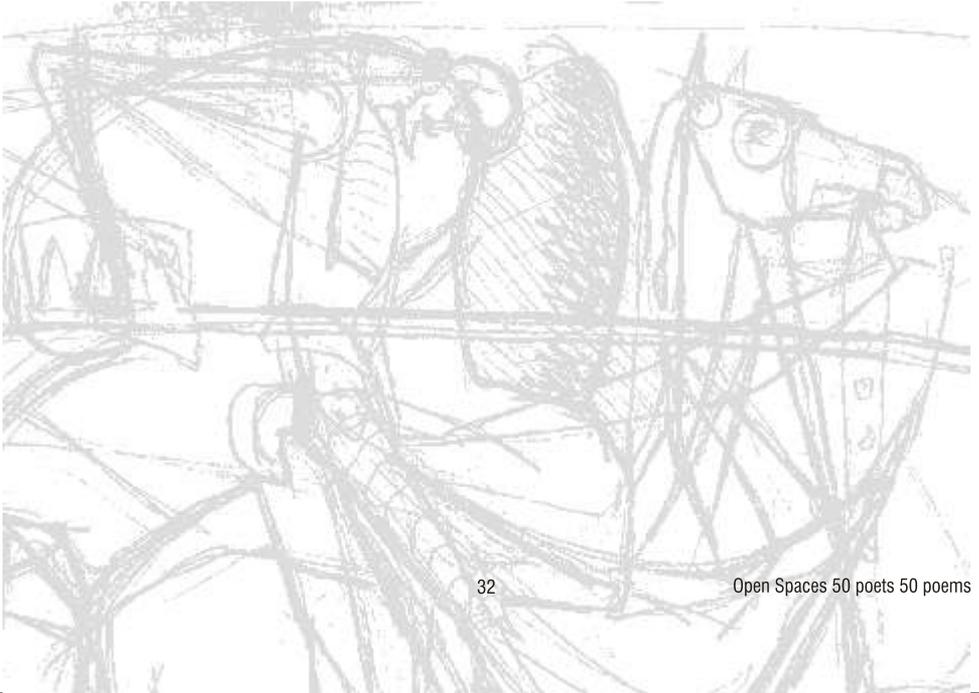
Like Don Quixote
He rides an ass and thinks he's
On a stallion.

– R Raj Rao

Pandava

Five Pandava bums
Screwing seven days a week
Five Pandava bums.

– R Raj Rao



My Fat Aunt

When my fat aunt
sits me on her lap,
it's better than my water mattress.
Her arms are like elastic bands.
If they hug, you stay hugged.

You get tingled up and down
for chuckles. Long loud laughs
start slowly, in the stomach,
ballooning up the breasts
and like a roller-coaster,
zoom into the throat.

My aunt throws back her head
and laughs.
Cutlery sings and crockery dances.
She cuddles me,
and I find answers
to so many things
that other grown-up people
have forgotten.

When we laugh together,
she and I,
everything feels perfect.

– Marilyn Naronha

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NEW YORK SUNDAY, AUGUST 20, 1995

Mixing Technology With Matchmaking

By PENNY SINGER

To grow, high-technology companies need to find qualified people. Reconfiguring this and other two computer experts and entrepreneurs. Eighteen months ago, Richard F. Harrison Jr., 39, and Richard Levine, 37, who speak the language of their clients' needs at TransAtlantic Technology Partners, a risk-management and placement company. They said, the goal was to become the most comprehensive technology-recruiting company in the world.

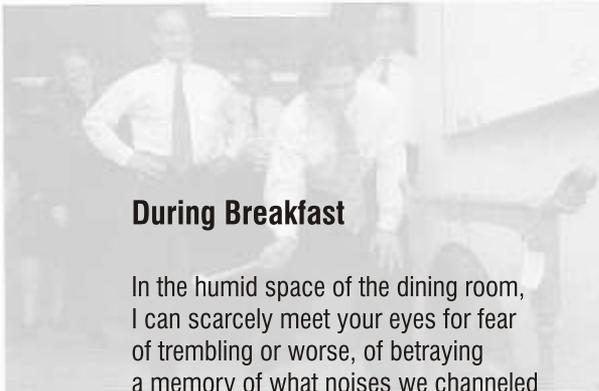
Helping start-up growth, TransAtlantic was not that fast.

The company started in a two-room office in the World Trade Center, with an annual investment of \$250,000 going for two computer and start-up expenses, and the two founders as the sole employees. TransAtlantic, part of the TransAtlantic Group, has opened 14 offices nationwide, with more than 200 employees. The partners are planning to open additional offices in Europe. Mr. Harrison said, adding that he expects gross revenues of \$10 million by the end of the year.

"What makes us succeed is that our companies are interested in technology roles can clearly distinguish our clients' business and technical needs," he said. "The placement side of our business has really taken off and accounts for most of our revenues. The demand for qualified technical professionals far exceeds the supply of available people."

Detailing the company's placement activity as "talent acquisition," Mr. Harrison said. "We need not be black and white technology after we joined the business, because we found a niche. Companies demand for good technicians was exploding, and we were filling a very special need. In the business world of computers, we had placed 100 people and we got additional offers as long as we kept placing the resumes."

"Before making any personal recommendations, our people go into the



During Breakfast

In the humid space of the dining room, I can scarcely meet your eyes for fear of trembling or worse, of betraying a memory of what noises we channeled

last night, of how you shuddered in afterglow, barely perceptible, spine-curling currents rippling a wad of sheets, my fingers in yours, your thighs on mine, the curtains drawn.

I drag a fork through eggs, shift in my seat, blow on my coffee, so as not to remember too fully what rapture we conjured, how you gasped piano when I took you

too greedily into my mouth, how I groaned against your arched, woolen instep, no, these thoughts will not do, not now, not when I sit next to someone creasing

open the New York Times while someone else asks me if I saw Mars last night. Why yes, I don't say, I visited the red planet, plus a few other galaxies besides.

— Ravi Shankar

Richard F. Harrison Jr. (middle) helps direct a group at the offices of TransAtlantic Technology Partners in New York.

client's step, he says, to fully understand Harrison said. "I'll recommend the best person and, when it's all said and done, we'll be glad to be part of it."

TransAtlantic's success has been a surprise, and this year will be a record for what Verrill, 40, says, "We've been successful in the past, but this year has been a real surprise."

A job-placer talks the language of the computer age.

Richard F. Harrison Jr. (middle) helps direct a group at the offices of TransAtlantic Technology Partners in New York.

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Richard F. Harrison Jr. (middle) helps direct a group at the offices of TransAtlantic Technology Partners in New York.

Speaking a Dead Language

I trespass on sentences that ash has muffled,
the lichen overgrown; then re-ignite 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.

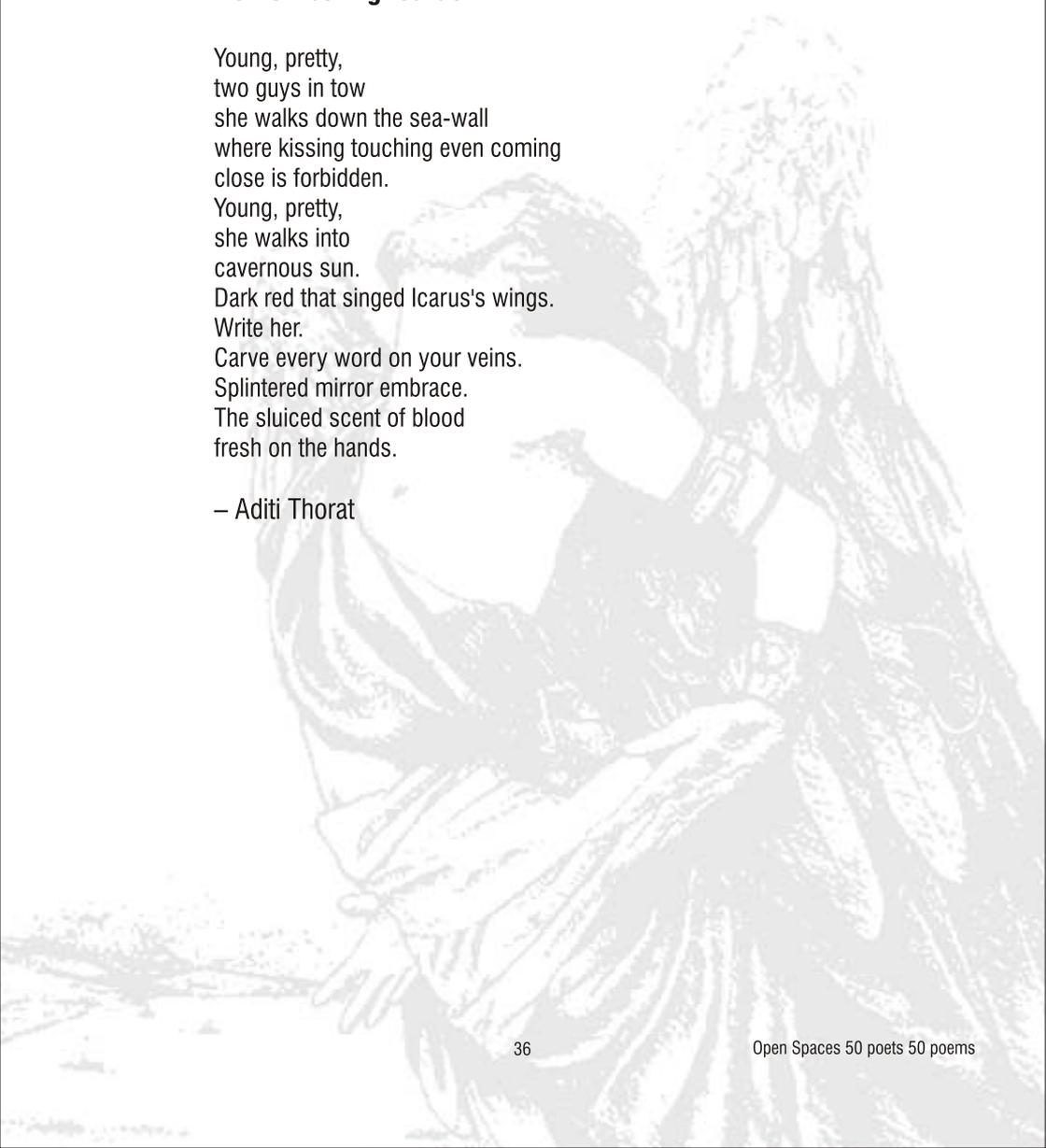
I flatten the continents on a table
and read there of our love,
not lost but translated,
its cadences learned again
in other countries by other tongues.

– Ranjit Hoskote

Remembering Icarus

Young, pretty,
two guys in tow
she walks down the sea-wall
where kissing touching even coming
close is forbidden.
Young, pretty,
she walks into
cavernous sun.
Dark red that singed Icarus's wings.
Write her.
Carve every word on your veins.
Splintered mirror embrace.
The sluiced scent of blood
fresh on the hands.

– Aditi Thorat



Jacket on a Chair

You carelessly tossed
the jacket on a chair.
The assembly of cloth

collapsed in slow motion
into a heap of cotton
cotton freshly picked

from the fields
like flesh
without a spine.

The chair's wooden
frame provided a brief
skeleton,

but it wasn't enough
to renew the coat's
shape, the body's

prior strength,
or the muscle
to hold its own.

When one peels off
one's outer skin,
it is difficult

to hide
the true nature of
blood.

Wood, wool, stitches,
and joints
an epitaph

of a cardplayer's
shuffle,
and the history

of my dark faith.

– Sudeep Sen

[based on Cezanne's Jacket on a Chair,
graphite and watercolour on paper,
47.5 X 30.5 cm, 1890-92]

EXILE

Rangzen: Exile House

Our tiled roof dripped
and the four walls threatened to fall apart
but we were to go home soon,

we grew papayas
in front of our house
chillies in our garden
and changmas for our fences,
then pumpkins rolled down the cowshed thatch
calves trotted out of the manger,

grass on the roof,
beans sprouted and
climbed down the vines,
money plants crept in through the window,
our house seems to have grown roots.

The fences have grown into a jungle,
now how can I tell my children
where we came from?

– Tenzin Tsuendue

Notes On Chris Hani's Funeral

Hear It:

abrupt tear in the afternoon, CNN serving biscuits
in famished living rooms. The bullet was not heard here –
only your undead voice. Rises, catches, bush fire
in the jointed bone-stem, in the cerebellum.

Megaphone hour. He feels the sun its sting
and his arm it needs that motion familiar,
hand holding brick, hand letting go:
this is the tenses chasing each other,
these are the bodies they left behind.

You sit

in the boat while Wordsworth rows in the sea of the skies;
the republicans have brought revolution to the heavens!
The world imagined, someone said, the ultimate good.
Down here your absence wanders restless, things ricochet
too rapidly, the grieving townships spiral
into the gold-heart with the force of collapsing moons.
Chris: the night comes to dissolve the dialectic,
the morning sings of broken storefront glass.

[An earlier version of this poem appeared in New Quest 134, April 1999.]

– Vivek Narayanan

Diwali (Bundi, Rajasthan)

how your love still takes
me by surprise,
a journey that never ends

like coming home
to light
votive candles on steps,
faces forgotten now seen,
gods disappearing
through doorways

my sins
serpents at dusk
crossing the pathways
of an abandoned fort

the broken palace
quarried from green
sandstone,
its black chambers
filled with murals of battles
and lovers' trysts

memories
deeper than the confluence
of streets
amidst the walls of the
bazaar

sweet children urging
my son to buy fireworks
so that they can teach him
how to light them

how your love still takes
me by surprise,
a hundred skyrockets
shining in the night

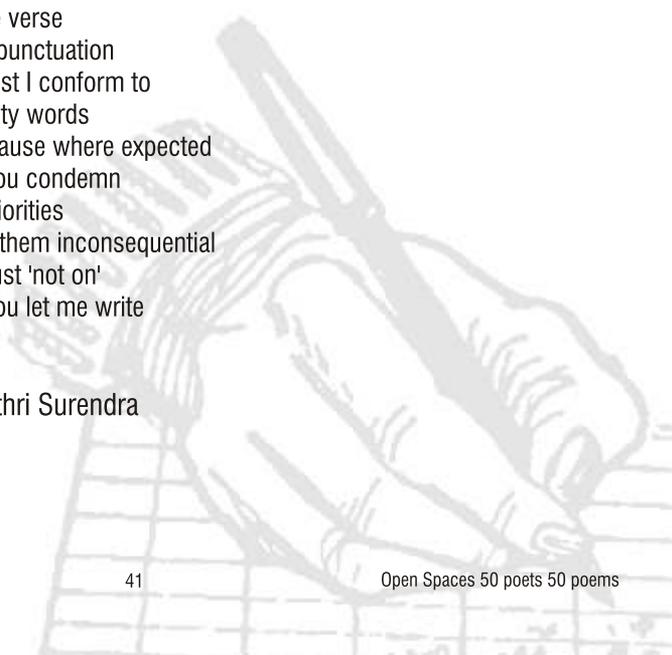
our world
a rooftop of possibilities,
each illumination
of darkness
another realm to explore

– Barry Scott

Will You Let Me Write

Will you let me write
Or must it be in perfect
Rhyme
Could I write in thought
Or must I conform to reason
Ought I to write of themes
Or can I
Be impassioned about
Aberrations
Perhaps
Articulate myself
In the language of
The stammerer
What if my subjects
Were bald men
Suffering incontinence
Or must I poesy
On the beautiful and the
Trauma of acne
Will you let me write
In free verse
Sans punctuation
Or must I conform to
Weighty words
And pause where expected
Will you condemn
My priorities
Label them inconsequential
And just 'not on'
Will you let me write
Or not

– Mythri Surendra



Life of the Imagination

So much is left to the imagination,
Dreams and their coming true,
The love once sought acquired,
Places visited that really do not exist.

It is tiring and full of ennui
For the body to feel no pain.
Only the mind reacts, argues,
Laughs and loves. The body merely

Draws the map of the intellect's
Fancy wanderings. The latitude and
Longitude of an event on the
Horizon of possibility. Cry,

The tears are scratch marks;
Laugh, the sound is echo to a profile,
Seen like some mist solidified into
A talking person. Only when love

Intervenes, much as the inevitable
Wall of all lives, do the bounds appear.
The circular logic of fancy reveals
The inner limit of body and soul.

– Moeen Faruqi

The Inquisition

I see them now,
pale ancestors, wrapped in loin-cloth,
a tuft of hair for a cap;
bare-chested, defeated devotees of
a one time family god.
The papal bull castrated a race,
ripped a religion from the soul.
Solemn Jesuits in eagle-wings
flit in black processions
watch the holy aquatic conversion
of wisely man given to heathen ways
to rootless being of civilization.
My ancestors, used to Vedic hymns
had long surrendered the fight.
Their untested yogic will
broken like an ox at plough
fielded a pliant nod.
After all they sold themselves
for a little bread and wine.

Four centuries, I bear
the scar of their silent crime.
I have an Iberian family name,
A Mediterranean culture, a religion
to keep it all in place.
Now my blood rivers at spate
have found a valley to stay at home.
Against scythic tongues, explosive words,
I hold my own. I have pained
to find this place. I will not change.
Lead me gently to the stake to burn.

– Santan Rodrigues



To Roethke

I found you at the corner of a dark shelf,
Taking a cadence from Yeats and about
To give it back again; in darkest doubt
You sang the slow glide and descent of the self,

Yourself too alive in things around;
The heron's swift dive, a quivering minnow,
The high, impulsive flight of the wren- and though
I knew you for one rooted to the ground,

Your dark music carried me where-
Not asking why and beyond all reason -
Time lent my eyes their darkest season
To see what otherwise they would not dare;

I heard myself in each darkening tone,
Your voice my way of moving on,
I moved in a motion not my own ;
My bones flutes children played upon.

– Anand Thakore

The House Next Door

for Phil Blosser

Poetry and thought, each needs the other in its neighbourhood. It is well, therefore, to give thought to the neighbour.

Martin Heidegger, 'The Nature of Language'

A philosopher brings the good news
Poetry resides in the dwelling next door.
Philosophy can sense the presence of Poetry
But not its nearness. It can be heard, singing
Above the whistle of the kettle.
It can be seen, dancing from room to room.
When spicy aromas travel from Poetry's table
To stir the neighbor's appetite, Philosophy thinks
It is time to make the call. It steps out
To run smack into Poetry and feels upon its skin
The breath of rock, water, plant, and animal. Here,
In this shared space, words can speculate, play,
Or break out into song. If this encounter were
Enough, Philosophy would return enriched to its fold.
But how much sweeter for Philosophy to want
To taste the French kiss of Poetry!

– Saleem Peeradina

Stone-People From Lungterok

Lungterok
The six stones
Where the progenitors
And forebears
Of the stone-people
Were born
Out of the womb
Of the earth.

Stone-people,
The poetic and politic
Barbaric and balladic
Finders of water
And fighters for fire.

Stone-people,
The polyglots,
Knowledgeable
In birds' language
And animal discourse.
The students,
Who learnt from ants
The art of carving
Heads of enemies
As trophies
Of war.

Stone-people,
The romantics
Who believed
The sun can sulk
The moon can hide
And the stars are not stars
But pure souls
Watching over bereaved hearts,

Here below
With their glow.
Stone-people,
The potters and weavers
Planters and growers
Hunters and carvers
Singers of songs and takers of heads,
Gentle lovers and savage heroes,
Builders of homes and destroyers of villages.

Stone-people,
The worshippers
Of unknown, unseen
Spirits
Of trees and forests,
Of stones and rivers,
Believers of soul
And its varied forms,
Its sojourn here
And passage across the water
Into the hereafter.

Stone-people,
Savage and sage
Who sprang out of LUNGTEROK,

Was the birth adult when the stones broke?
Or are the stone-people yet to come of age?

– Temsula Ao

The Witness

(Charles Bridge in the rain, Prague, on the eve of the Velvet Revolution)

Flowing under the bridges of Prague,
Blatava, you go on;
Dream-filled, death-filled,
Floating with geese and swans,
Ducks carrying the faraway fragrance
Of wilderness, of peaceful lakes
In peaceful lands
Where dreamers gather wild flowers,
And evening as gentle as Sabbath
Drops like water on shells of ears.

River, you have witnessed
The first man, the first spade,
The first sheaf of grain,
The first spear, the first shield,
The first love, the first hate;
River, you saw bridges and castles built,
You saw the coming and going of history;
You have witnessed and you are silent.

Speak to me of the severed tongue,
Of the man with no hands,
Of the silent music makers,
Of real gods who live in your real homes,
Of the real dream, of the real song.

Speak to me in the language of Holan
And the condemned Bartusek,
Speak to me in simple words,
Words that aren't trapped in indifference...
Those that are full-fleshed and truthful.

Blatava, flowing under the bridges of Prague,
Witness of history, speak.

– Randhir Khare

To Baudelaire

I am over you at last, in Mexico City,
in a white space high above the street,
my hands steady, the walls unmoving.
It's warm here, and safe, and even in winter
the rain is benign. Some mornings I let
the sounds of the plaza – a fruit seller,
a boy acrobat, a woman selling
impossible fictions – pile up in a corner
of the room. I'm not saying I'm happy
but I am healthy and my money's my own.
Sometimes when I walk in the market
past the chickens and the pig smoke,
I think of you – your big talk and wolf's heart,
your Bonaparte hair and eyes of Poe.
I don't miss you. I don't miss you when
I open a window and light fills the room
like water pouring into a paper cup,
or when I see a woman's white dress shine
like new coins and I know I could follow
my feet to the river and let my life go
away from me. At times like this,
if I catch myself talking to you,
I'm always surprised at the words I hear
of regret and dumb boyish devotion.

– Jeet Thayil

Rumi and the Reed

Listen to the song of the reed flute:
 It sings of separation.
Torn from the leaf-layered, wind-voiced
 Banks of the pond,
It is joined to sorrow and joy
 By a slender sound.
Who, asked Rumi, can understand
 The reed's longing to return?
 Let its raw lips rest then;
 Let all words be brief then.
And I, O Believers, cried Rumi
 (Having lost the man he loved),
I who am not of the East
 Nor of the West, un-Christian,
Not Muslim or Jew, neither
 Born of Adam nor Eve,
What can I love but the world itself,
 What can I kiss but flesh?
 Let my raw lips rest then.
 Let all words be brief.

– Tabish Khair

From a Deep Dwelling

1

you watched me go by outside.
"You've yet to reach fulfillment," you said.
I have no such certainty.
Having overstepped so many boundaries
I'd long ago come to think
no boundaries mattered at all.
Always on the way, always expecting to arrive,
till arrivals lost all meaning.

2

I used to think: before searching
for the skylight above the highest books
let me relive the past.
It was always a tremendous jumble,
volumes crashing down without warning.
Now the shelves are nearly bare,
workmen lugging out the last crates
brimful of becalmed waters.

What harm if by mistake
they've carried out the skylight, too?

3

Hot mornings I spend on a high balcony
sipping black tea.

Time and again have I turned
the hourglass upside down.

A breeze through the hallway
the doors someone forgot to close
are restless on their hinges.

– Steven Grieco

Sky Song

The evening is
the greatest medicine maker
testing the symptoms
of breath and demise,
without appointment
writing prescriptions
In the changing script
of a cloud's wishbone rib,
in the expanding body of the sky.

We left the tall trees standing.
We left the children playing.
We left the women talking
and men were predicting
good harvests or bad,
that winged summer we left,
racing with the leopards of morning.

I do not know how we bore the years.
By ancient, arched gates
I thought I saw you waving,
in greeting or farewell, I could not tell;
when summer changed hands again
only the eastern sky remained;
One morning, flowering peonies
swelled my heart with regret.

Summer's bitter pill was a portion of sky
like a bird's wing, altering design.
A race of fireflies bargaining with the night.

Attachment is a gift of time, I know,
the evening's potion provides
heaven's alchemy in chromosomes of light,
lighting cloud fires
in thumbprints of the sky.

– Mamang Dai

At the Rodin Museum

Rilke is following me everywhere
With his tailor-made suits
And vegetarian smile.

He says because I'm young,
I'm always beginning,
And cannot know love.

He sees how I'm a giant piece
Of glass again, trying
To catch the sun

In remote corners of rooms,
Mountain tops, uncertain
Places of light.

He speaks of the cruelty
Of hospitals, the stillness
Of cathedrals,

Takes me through bodies
And arms and legs
Of such extravagant size,

The ancient sky burrows in
With all the dead words
We carry and cannot use.

He holds up mirrors
From which our reflections fall
Half-battered existences,

Where we lose ourselves
For the sake of the other,
And the others still to come.

– Tishani Doshi



Fire's Goal: For the Sage Sharabhanga

The Ramayana reports
your self-combustion
as an act of devotion;
since Rama could not go
to heaven with you,
perhaps out of loneliness
you burned yourself;
flames came from within,
and everyone stared.

Eighteenth-century newspapers
told of women who drank
alone in their room
found burned from within,
while the furniture
remained untouched
by the flames.

Longing for god,
longing for company:
if desire is not met
by substance,
it turns back on itself
and the subject burns

breath becomes smoke,
flesh becomes flame,
as the body disappears;
despair finds relief
in a perfect balance
of its elements

– Laurie Patton

A Farewell Letter of Cherries (For Professor MB)
- Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih
The Word: Selection from Echolocation - Mani Rao
Four Friends - Meena Alexander
Ass & Pandava - R Raj Rao
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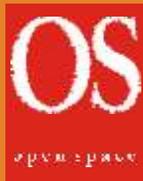
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