

Four Poems by Amarjit Chandan

To Father

As you taught me to write the first letter
of Gurmukhi – the Punjabi script
holding my nervous hand in yours
you taught me to hold the camera
to focus on faces in the pupil of the eye
and to press the button holding my breath
As if it were a gun
loaded with bullets of life.

Where are you now father?
Can you take some time off from death?

I'd like to take my self-portrait sitting next to you
with a glint in my eyes.
Remember that photograph you took with the self-timer
of us together many years ago
you holding me cheek to cheek?

The photograph doesn't show the lump in your throat.

We'll exchange pictures I have taken
of faces you haven't seen
and of places you never visited
and you can show me yours taken in the valley of the dead.

[Originally written in English]

The Bird

The jay sowed the seed of oak in the soil
the seed of the fruit of the tree.

The bird planted a tree.

In the seed are hidden
sunshine shadows suns and moons
clouds dewy nights
the threshold of the house of the squirrel.

The bird sowed the fire
which bakes the bread warms the bodies.

The bird built its nest.
It came back home.
It all happened out of script
When the bird sowed the word.

[Translated by John Welch and Stephen Watts]

At the Riverbank

The stone was washed by water
the water by the sun.
The tree on the riverbank
stood in silence.

A child skimmed a pebble over the water
it skipped on and on
then disappeared.

A bird in flight descended
to check the skipping pebble,
it kissed the water, resumed its flight

[Translated by Ajmer Rode and John Welch]

The Paper

Man made the first ever paper with the skin of his soul.
That is why it is blessed.
Nanak scribbled the word on it.
May you be forever paper.
May you be forever the papermaker.

A tree is sacrificed to bear the paper.
So many nests lie in it.
All the birds' names are inscribed on it.
In it you can hear the wet rustling of green leaves.

The paper sees with the eye of the pen.
It speaks with colours.
It hears with alphabets.
The language is the soul of the paper.

It is a piece of the sky
 lying in the desk.
Even when it is burnt and reduced to ashes
 the alphabets still remain.

It is a strange bird
Who has landed in my lap to rest.

It evolved out of stone.
It was *tarhpatra* tree bark, the leather and the tusk.
I feel we are one family when I see the paper.

The paper is the window to the present moment in time.
It is the gateway to the possibility.

When there was no paper, poetry was there.
Where there was no man, poetry was there too.
A blank paper challenges
 like the woman lying naked.
It pulsates like the temples of the aroused man
 and shakes like the bodies coming together.

The paper -
A kite flying for the first time
A passport of no return
The cards the prisoners play
A letter lost on the way to its destination
A newspaper of the century thrown on the street.

([Translated by Julia Casterton])

Poetry tough and guff – Remembering Nadim

M. L. Raina

Place: Lal Mandi Garden near Srinagar museum. Occasion:
A mushaira of Urdu and Kashmiri poets held on a summer
day in early fifties of the last century. Dina Nath Nadim
rises to recite the poem that was to become a battle-cry of
all the green-horn revolutionaries like myself: “Wushun
Wozul, Wozul Wushun yi khoon myon – hot and red, red
and hot rushes my young blood”.

There is something magnetic about the man. Tall,
sloping presence, hanks of black hair matted over a broad
forehead, voice resounding through the microphone - the
man holds us in thrall for better part of the evening. Children
of poverty and deprivation, we respond with an approving
roar. To a stripling of sixteen he comes over as the
culmination of a dream of redemption. From that day
onwards I became his acolyte.

A fortnight later I took my poem for his *iislah*. Written
in English and disdainfully returned in the book in which I
had presented it to my long-yearned-for classmate, Nadim
looked over the paper and pronounced his judgment: “All
guff, barkhurdar, all sob-syrup. Love poetry doesn't have
to be a suicide note. The lover should be tough, ready to do
battle”. With fallen face I slink away from his presence. Had
Nadim Saheb been Dr Johnson and I the poet Denham, he
might as well have retorted: “If he woos her in Latin verse,
he deserves to lose her”. My fate sealed, I gave up writing
verse in English and took to Urdu prose instead.

At a meeting of the Kashmir Association of Writers days
later, I read a story based on my father's experiences as a
school teacher (Nadim himself was a school teacher). Nadim
Saheb was stern but affectionate: “Your prose leaks emotion
like a mud wall dripping water. Cut out the crap and get