

Sasenarine Persaud

Horace on Poetry

It might have been attempted
Or even accomplished
But we had never seen it done;
How do you paint the throb
Of a heart, or flickering leaves
Signaling a passing hurricane
The thrum of vina strings
Ignited by Saraswatie's fingers?
Horace's the pronouncement
Of a colonialist: "Poetry should
Reproduce the qualities of painting."

This Life

We will take from this lie
A mockingbird imitating a thrush
In the Indian orchid's shade
A wren in the rainrich grass
Sparkling stars for a hungry sun
Bulbs blooming pink and white opening
To the sky purple bora flowers about to fruit
A lone dwarf rose's red wine
A blue jay strumming the cypress swamp
And your screen, your page, your heart.

Memoir: Mother of My Mothers

Ah, Mr. Walcott,
Four years after we cried,
Some in joy some in rage
And the world said: America
You're truly great, truly

Had we gathered those million
Tears we'd have had a new sea
As sparkling as dew on dasheen leaves.
Ice caps still melt

The ocean still rises. The Midwest
Still plunged in drought
The economy a fish in a castnet
Being hauled ashore. It wasn't me.

It wasn't me. But if you give me another
term, I will give you The Great American
Memoir: Mother of my mother's mother.
And some would nod: Mai, Mai, Mai.

Tiger Tiger

(for Shivnarine Chanderpaul – WI cricketer)

Toes clutching sand on this ocean's edge
Canefield brown with Brazilian condiments –
Silt from the Amazon – stumps in saltwater

Left-handed Shiv or right-handed
Shiva, I'm dancing one-legged at creases
In fire, even with a floating bone
In my foot – no matter, I born
To play ball like Hanuman swallowing
Sun for a fruit, Chalisa at forty is forty

Peers in pavilions drinking whiskey and rum
I have no equal but the Bengal cat's
Waiting at land's end for tossed spheres

Stitched in leather; no hook on the floor
No bottoms on dust, no gazellelike grace
gliding over grass, no elephant trunk

Swilling and skirting water on an ocean's
Edge, I'm tiger stalking cork ensconced in
Leather, tiger striking Wisden with willow.

Soul

Like sea, you say
Salt and rank and
Another day, weeds.
It is not wind
We smell but sea
A breeze apprehended
In dust swirling
In trees gyrating
In rearing breakers
Debris twisted from barns

One understood
Only through another.

Chalkboard

Chalk dust flying off blackboards
When what where or a duster
Laden if you sit in front and volunteered
Or if you were tall enough to erase
Everything your teacher said, wrote.

*

Nasir Kazmi

Introduced and translated by Gurupesh Singh

Nasir Kazmi died young, but his poems did not. In fact, they are growing in stature every passing day. He was published more after his death than during his lifetime. Majority of his poems appeared after he died in 1972 and ever since have become the voice of millions of sensitive souls who find this world too much or too little to their liking. You can call him a downright romantic, a melancholic, a brooding loner or a child who loses his sand castle in the evening tide and hopes to find it with the rise of the sun. To me, he is a bridge that connects me to our past, a portrait that mirrors my age-lines, a voice that I hear after the thunder of the day is done. His imagery speaks of loss, alienation, nostalgia, grief, fickle love and inhospitable environs.

*Meethe the jinke phal wo shazar kat kataa gaye
Thandi thi jinki chhanv wo devar gir gayi*

Trees that bore sweet fruit have been hacked
The wall that offered cool shade has collapsed

His lexicon is romantic, at times folksy and prosaic, but speaks less of romance than it sounds. Romance is a lost metaphor and Nasir, left anchorless in the new age, laments its receding power.

*Juda hue bain babut log ik, tum bhi sabi
Bas itni si baat pe kya zindgi haram karen*

I've seen people split up, let it be so with you too
For such a small thing, do we put our life on stake

Nor is he very keen on the metaphysical dimension of love that is the staple of most Urdu poetry. The otherworldliness is a mere luxury of imagination, an unattainable quantity that distracts us from the grim realities of this world. The great sufi poet Ghulam Farid says, *Yaar Farid milam dil bhanda, mele ves uttaran* (the lover Farid longs for a meeting with the beloved, he needs to change his soiled clothes). Nasir on the other hand writes:

*Naye kapre badalkar jaon kahan aur baal banayun kiske liye
Vo shaksh to shebr hi chhod gaya mein bahar jaon kiske liye*

Why should I dress up and make my hair
The one I wanted to see has left the town

It is difficult to say who established Nasir Kazmi as a niche poet: the critics or the musicians. It is no mere coincidence that Nasir is one of the most sung of Pakistani Urdu poets. He is the darling of almost every celebrated ghazal singer. His poetry instantly strikes a responsive chord with a delicate mind.

*Shehar sunsaan hai kidhar jaen
Khak hokar kabin bikhar jaen*

The city is deserted, where can we go
Let's turn into dust and down we flow (Abida Parveen)

*Apni dhun mein rehta hun
Main bhi tere jaisa hun*

I remain lost in myself
Like you do in yourself (Ghulam Ali)

A contemporary of such Pakistani stalwarts as Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Munir

Niazi, Ahmed Nadeem Kasmi, he succeeded in making a distinct place for himself due to simplicity and directness of his phrasing. If after Adam, any poet has earned a distinction in short meter (*chhota behr*), it must be Nasir Kazmi. In one rare case, he has written a collection of 25 ghazals in that form on a single rhyme.

Nasir Kazmi has a close connection with Indian Punjab. Before migrating to Pakistan in 1947, he lived in Ambala, where he was born and educated. That may also explain his interest in *doha* and Hindi *bhakti* poetry whose influence can be seen in his ghazals.

Jo paya hai vo tera hai
Jo kbaya vo bhi tera tha

What I gained belongs to you
What I lost came too from you

1

Gham hai ya khushi hai tu

Grief or joy, what are you
Though life of me are you

In times of trouble and pain
A moment of peace are you

The light in my darkness and
A good night's sleep are you

I'm eve of the autumn end
The blooming spring are you

Amid camaraderie of friends
The spirit of geniality are you

What I regret most in life
Is the absence and loss of you

I am not my same old self
Same though forever are you

'Nasir' in this wide wilderness
How like a stranger are you.

2

Woh dil narwaz hai lekin nazar shanaz nabi

He can console but not read my eye and tell
My doctor knows little what will get me well

There are questions wreathing on my tongue
Who should I ask, is there a capable one?

Even on a royal steed my heart goes down
I am not used to the luxuries of the Crown

The few moments close to you that I spent
Are gone forever leaving no trace or scent

Going by these terrible times, the heart may
Survive for a day but sure not all the way

It may be the end of my longing, as I know
For long have I not felt cheerless or low

3

Woh is ada se jo aaye to kyaon bhala na lage

I don't know why it felt good the way she came
Meet her a thousand times, yet it is not the same

With kindness, she can give a myriad illusion
With her indifference a feeling of persecution

Her naive, artless ways strike like lightning
Her intimate concerns make signs of loving

Take a look at the scars of love and be kind;
Listen the tale of our parting if you don't mind

You are innocent and the world full of guile
God spare you from the city's wind and vile

Lest this relentless misery makes me give up
Say something that will sting me like a whip

Don't bother about homes that were devastated
Make sure that the garden does not get isolated

I have all forgotten the world's tyranny to me
But not the deep wounds that lie buried in me

With blood running in veins the heart takes hues
That makes this world a spectacle of statues

My boatman charms me with a dreamy lore
To make sure the boat lands not at the shore.

A call keeps me going 'nasir' all the times
Though it has no footprints or visible signs

4

Ishq jab zamzama pairan hoga

When love turns a songbird in all resplendence
Beauty stands mesmerised in its attendance

On hearing the chained footsteps of a breeze
The doors of the trapped blossoms did release

For times to come the world is here to stay
If not us, other will be here when we fade away

Who on earth will look up to the rising sun
When every dust particle's eye will have one

After forgetting all of you I am sitting pretty
Can you imagine someone as pitiless as me?

Glowing embers I see in my barren imagination
Far away, a cloud must have burst in profusion

At the crossroads of a thousand thought stream
The heart stands alone, bewildered in a dream

The sudden magic of a morning full of delight
Will rise up from behind the curtain of a night

A cry would have moved a stone in tremor
A spark would have burst in flames in a flower

Since evening I have been contemplating right
Where would the moon choose to descend tonight?

5

Tere khayal se lo de utbi hai tanhai

A flashback of you has lighted my solitary existence
Is it a lonely night or a celebration of your presence

What is it that drives you mad about journey's end
Think of those who went into last sleep on the bend

Ring the caravan bell to herald dawn of a new day
For long in darkness your followers have gone astray

On the highway of life, I have managed a few crises
Though your love is something I could never harness

Disasters like this have happened in love too often
When eyes well up at a casual greeting of someone

My heart gets restless even now remembering her
Who deserted me and made me a fool everywhere

6

Araishe khayal bhi ho, dilkusba bhi ho

Where is the beauty of thought that charms you
And where is the pain that my heart craves too

It is the same sorrow and the same hope everyday
Can i have an end to this unending run, if i may

What fun! it is the same dull monotony each day
Shouldn't there be someone other than you, i pray

I wish someone breaks the spell of my daily musing
Can there be a new face in the vast overcrowding

Of late, a crazy longing has possessed my mind
I should be in a house without walls but confined

There is no house in the world except heart where
Robbers can cause no harm even if you lay it bare

Every particle is a carrier of the desert's desolation
I can show it if there is one to make an inspection

There are voices calling behind the veil of stillness
Who will but listen unless he is after me in likeness

Listen in leisure the verses that new blossoms sing
These are not words that a poet would ever think

Intense poetry demands equally involved audience
Peacocks cry only when they are in green ambience

7

Jab zara tez hawa hoti hai

When there is that fierce wind, how quiet the all around is

We have seen that dark stillness, when every breath a cry is

My heart after you left, feels like a deserted house that it is

I too can cry but I know, how very humiliating for love it is

Get up early morning and see, how fresh and moist breeze is

Lost in the sea of weird thoughts, I see how furious the wave is

On the unlit highways of sorrow, how blissful a solitary ray is

Walkers of love street know, how blistered their foot's eyelet is

A blossom in mind's garden opens up, when moonlit the night is

When beauty of a night flower shows, wrapped in dew it is

Before autumn, the fragrance leaves the flower, how sad it is

A new wave prospers on the death of old, that is the way world is.

When seemingly Nasir has no regrets, a rattled heart his fate is

8

Ga raba tha koi darkbton mein

I heard someone croon in the trees
I fell asleep night before in the trees

Rising from the depths of horizon,
The moon fired a near blaze in the trees

The dry leaves with pattering of rain
Kicked up an orchestra in the trees

Was it the wind or a flash in my head?
I heard someone call me in the trees

Here in our homes we got restless
Far away a gale erupted in the trees

There are colonies beyond the cities
Go have a close look in the trees

Blue, pale, white, red and emerald
You can have all hues in the trees

The cheerless princess of lost fragrance
Met me last night in the trees

The radiance of her eyes for long
Bestowed brilliance in the trees

Walking on the neon-lit streets
How did I find myself in the trees?

The natives of the woods were alarmed
There was a man last night in the trees

9

Dyaare dil ki raat mein chirag sa jala gaya

Someone lit a candle on the dark threshold of my heart
With a brief appearance, what if, left soon to depart

The end of friendship into rivalry left one thing wanting
It took away the bittersweet pleasure of small nagging

The separation sores were healed by other pains of life
You went to sleep and I too found solace in strife

I cry for leisure and the feeling of bonhomie we had
How did the earth swallow it or the heavens made it bad

When I look at the grey mornings and the pale noon
The mirror asks me 'where have I moved to so soon'

What happy sands are these where our pains take rest
Where are the wild waves and why do I lie here caressed

How long will you be wailing for the dead old days
Mourners! Wake up, the sun is up and has spread its rays

10

Saaz e basti ki sadaa gaur se sun

The clarion call of life, listen with care
Why does it make noise, listen with care

Don't you take the days' uproar lightly
What lies behind the night, listen with care

See the promise that the rising sun makes
The plea of the dying day, listen with care

Why do rivers calm down by the sunset
Stir the strings of your soul, listen with care

You who sleep under the shade of sorrow
Rise, hour-bell is ringing, listen with care

Each moment is a hunter's net to trap you in
Those new to disasters, listen with care

Why does it shudder in last hours of the night
Put your ears to your heart, listen with care

All partings and meetings find an end here
Travellers with boiled sole, listen with care

Lodged in this nook is both a temple, a mosque
Is your heart a love icon or god, listen with care

Why is there no one in the mosque, priest
Take your hands off your ears, listen with care

The meaning and mystery of life and death
Come to my gathering and listen with care

*

John Brandi

Seven Poems

A Chapel on Havana Bay

In sifting rain I board the ferry behind a lady whose dress is all pockets: blue candles, zinc amulets, pink gladiolas. Across the bay a chapel sits like a tavern entombed with salt, rum, votive wax. When I bow to the dark saint in her alcove of honey and white sails, doves burst into a wine-colored fan. Here nobody is more than anybody else. The bride purifying herself on the kneeler wears see-through lace. A man bent like a weathervane creates a breeze with his supplication. A niña half-hidden in her mother's folds gives me her eyes, and with them her poverty. Back on the sea, my head turns in circles, triumphs with doubt, holds close these moments where one soul becomes another and a new self embarks.

In Each Presence a Poem

Waving adiós to the tré player who improvised a three-peso serenade in the Lluvia de Oro, I slip on a wet marble step. Instead of cracking open my head I open my eyes to his refrain: 'I don't sing what I see, I sing the blow that hits me like lightning.' That's it! Each flash a resurrection of sound, color, incident. Moth against glass. Gold under the fingernail. Reina lowering her key on a string from the balcony. Mario carving Yemayá into a cigar-box lid for tourists. Two breasts doing the rumba under a pink blouse sequined with 'Keep Wishing'. Two whiskered domino players on Calle Juventud shuffling their

bones on a metal table. In each presence, a poem. In each poem a revelation: Cuba's heat. The essential pulse!

Lorca in Cuba

Sip a mojito in Dos Hermanos Bar across from the customs house and remember Federico García Lorca. His culture was in his veins. He saw though doctrine, let walls collapse, let surprise open into desire, sought the spark beneath the obvious, and found his own symbols to make the world new. Verde que te quiero verde! Trees begin to sway, dance halls fill, the chapel does a cha cha cha. Ladies' fans open with the smell of musk, lemon drifts from the black capes of their suitors. Lorca sat in this tavern once, calling up the smooth-grained labia of calla lilies wreathing La Dolorosa. How they roused the duende from the blood. How the lacquered fish became a compass of light around her face. He divided the glare of the sea through the saloon-door slats into stanzas, one for each river of a street he walked to meet the luminous boats in the harbor, the carnal tide, the aroma of struggle, the quick whisper of sorrow.

Reality & the Surreal

A town with its toes sticking out of the sheets, the white foam of the Atlantic. Hard hit by hurricanes, it makes no attempt to rise. Tumble-down theater, bank with its eyes poked out, toppled gargoyle staring up your legs. San Fulgencio's caretaker says 'during the last cyclone the church doors left their hinges, the clock lost its numbers, the stations of the cross left the walls—except for the crucifixion.' The sea has hammered the old mansions. Skeletal balconies, blank

interiors: each beckons new mercy, a shot of love, the miracle of Lazarus. Walls of aubergine, rusty tea leaf, washed-out iodine: a de Kooning. Shattered mirrors, clink of cufflinks, creak of porch swing: Thelonus Monk. A window peeks through somebody's head. A stairway goes up but doesn't come down. Reality has taken on the surreal. Imagination sleeps. It has no work to do. Why do I return to Lorca? Because he notices what is absent in what is present.

A Rose in the Teeth of the Sea

A little girl in white chiffon pinned with the Sacred Heart skips through hopscotch squares, her feet two asterisks in the lemon-colored rain. And she is how it would look, I imagine, my own soul if it could escape my coat and walk this world of bells and peeling facades. Passing José Martí on his marble horse, she reaches the Pier of Light and joins the queue for the Casa Blanca boat. Green air, green eyes in copper faces. Engine oil and carnations on the breeze. With her head tilted to the opal moon above Havana, she fills me with the fragile liberty, the innocuous grace of Cuba—a poise, a coolness in the face of adversity. As the boat puttters off, the girl in white becomes a heatwave, a star lost among ball caps, backslap, spandex hips, thick chatter of politics and apocalypse. In the ringing and shuffling she is there with that perfect look of a transparent diamond, a rose in the teeth of the sea.

The Cuban Word Brigade

Byzantine light off the guitar-shaped bay through the tall colonial doors of a workshop where ladies of the Word Brigade stitch poems

between rough-cut covers of one-of-a-kind books. Musicality to their effort. A chiming sparkle to each hand-sewn verse. Red iron-oxide brushed on moth-wing parchment dusted with crushed seashell. Fish scales gleaming from freshly-glued spines of Neruda and Mistral. Emily Dickinson wrapped with ribbons and hearts. Block-print lyrics above the silk-screened fiddle of a troubadour. A twig-etched line from Lady Murasaki. Polychrome leaves relieved of their sap, dried and engraved with the wisdom of an old Cha'n master. Under cover, beyond headlines, above the chain of command, these women, hands to the task, bring light from the word. Into the night they print, sew, collate and bind until the fidgety lamplight dims, the sun rises over the rusted drawbridge, the bicycle vendor warms his hands around a too-thin baguette, and the moored city awakes.

Back Country

Cruising the Ciego de Avila back country in José's '53 Chevy I sense I've been here before. His car was my first car: a 2-door surf-green Bel Air. Windows down, wheels turning, my sensory rotors are whirling. Save for the sugarcane, this could be the hilly sea of inland California: salt air, citrus, bougainvilleas over tiled eaves. The ride is smooth, no stopping for gas to break the journey. José has replaced the old Chevy engine with a Hyundai 2.4-liter diesel. Between us Yadeny straddles the gear shift, her golden hair that of my first love, her tan legs, too, lazing from shorts so tight they leave nothing to imagine. The road curves and narrows into fields and hamlets as did my own back then. Low moist clouds, radiant honey in the hive, a girl at my side waiting to reveal her worth. 'The clarity of Cal,' said Kerouac, 'It'll break your heart.' He could have been writing about Cuba.

A Note on the Poems

These poems were penned during a 3-week visit to Cuba in November 2014. The focal point of my travels was to enjoy spontaneous dialogue with Cubans from all backgrounds, which was always spirited and informative, beyond anything newspapers, tv and the internet could offer. I also wanted to visit small-press cooperatives, as well as places haunted by one of my favorite poets, Federico García Lorca, who lectured in Cuba in 1930.

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Harkirat Heer

Translated from Hindi by Gurdev Chauhan

Captive Love

Sighs rose and fell
Swirling around the stones
the river struggled with
the bounds of shores
Today the words fell silent
Just the unrequited love
knocked its head against the rocks

Pain

The creases of my palms
have tamed my pain
have folded it in.
Now when I open the palms
the pain just refuses
to leave

Your touch

Today, after years I opened the box
and touched the duppata

I felt your touch
still breathing on it

Bitter words

By grazing my wound
I have turned it malignant
You had drilled
the words so deep

The wound

I had the last page to write on
You had lots of wounds
of words to inflict
All of them
I have borne
in my heart

Language of the eyes

You have never read my love
hidden in unsaid words
I don't know
It was a fault of my eyes
or you could not understand
the language of my eyes

Empty palms

Love's all words
begin and end with you
It is another matter
that in my efforts to hold
them
my palms come empty
every time

Suicide

Every day I return to the same spot
from where I had run away hiding
Every day I return
to the same window
jumping out of which
my desires have
so many times
committed suicide

Relationships

Relations are not made
just residing with someone
Love itself
binds you in relationship

Definition

I learnt by heart
the definitions of love
When love knocked at my door
I myself became the definition

Life

Life is not got
turning the pages

It is a flower embroidered
on the kerchief
the lovers get
as a gift.
(Only those who love live)

The dying love

Often, the time between
the questions and answers
was very difficult for me
I would write my answers
in the language of silence
and he would forge his questions
on fire's tongue
The silent love would keep
breathing its last
slowly, slowly

Woman

Some cloudburst.
The sigh of a flying bird
was upon the earth
its cry reverberating in the sky
The game of death
was played with life
all around, the crowd had gathered
Suddenly
the shroud was lifted from the body
and the fetters on the feet
began to dance
The crowd fell silent.

*

Usha Kishore

Immigrant

A country stretches across my wings,
at times a burden, at others a blessing.
I have learnt to live with it, its silhouettes

of waving palm fronds seizing my dreams,
its myths spread eagled on my verse, the cry
of its peacocks haunting my silent nights.

I feel its goddesses in the feminine flow
of my form, I whisper its twilight prayers
in my sleep. My country grows with its roots

penetrating my bones, it binds the culture
of distance into my heart. Its paraphernalia
of blue gods, red demons and sun festivals;

its skies screaming with the wild colour
of a thousand autumns; its aching moons
scattering my forlorn thoughts in desert storms.

Its laughing avalanches dissolve into the rivers
of my blood, its westerlies echo the swirling cadences
of my soul, adding yet another story to the history

of migrant birds. Time flies with me on the back
of a wingèd cloud and I wrap the retreating monsoons
closely around me, like a shimmering pashmina stole.

I fly in monsoon skin that thunders in an alien sky.
Sharp shards of lightning from my feathers rend the new air.

Postcolonial Sonnet

I do not have a language to claim as my own
only an irrevocable parental pledge made
on the pyre of a deceased empire to dye me
in the colours of invading eloquence; ubiquitous
force that even time cannot conquer. Island born
linguistic code mapping out its domain on land,
sea and air; accent and dialect breeding like wildfire.
An imperial dream to enrich, to educate, to engender
vehicles of superior literary expression; a civilizing
mission advancing through meandering rivers
and majestic railroads to monopolize over rude,
indigenous vernaculars. Restive, my thoughts
wait in the wings to appropriate the colonial tongue
and versify a postcolonial *weltanschauung*.

Grandmother's Portrait

I study my Grandmother's portrait –
She sits staring in bewilderment
from the *imprimatura* of arid Indian summers.
Her ebony skin bleeds in shades of ochre,
reflecting a chiaroscuro
of dreams on her maroon silk *sari*,
richly embroidered with *zari* work.
Her ruby earrings, as unfathomable as
Homer's wine red sea; her diamond
nose-ring, a distant star.

Gold bangles encircle her slender wrists,
like the rings of Saturn.
Her jet black hair, sprinkled with grey,
coiled at the nape of her neck, a serpent
that had shrunk with the years.
She carries the turn of the century
in her eyes as dark as the night.

At primary school, her eight year old
consciousness was dyed
in the rainbow shades
of an alien tongue,
only to be erased by marriage
that walled her tender years.
She had witnessed Gandhi's endless fasts
and the setting sun of the British Raj.
She had woken up one morning
to the peal of freedom
and a new dawn, totally
illiterate in a new language.
Her face never lost
its bewilderment hence.

Absent Sky

(*Manasarovar*)

Snow dyes the mind, freezing the myth
of time. Passing clouds wax astral batiks
into the fabric of still air, *mandalas*

and *yantras* for wandering souls.
Thought translates into blue eternity,
veiling the kneeling earth in immortal hue.

In the paling distance, on a mist-clad
rock dome, jewelled in glacial ice,
a celestial spirit, wearing the crescent moon

on his head, contemplates the world.
Day and night merge into cosmic dreams
as winds gasp between sound and silence.

Rainbow flags flutter in tranquil prayer
and a twilight *mantra* rises on wings of fire,
as the mind lake meditates on an absent sky.

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**Manasarovar (translated from the Sanskrit as Mind Lake) is a freshwater lake on the Trans-Himalayan Tibetan plateau. Resting on the foot of Mount Kailas, the lake is associated with Indo-Tibetan myths and religious beliefs.*

Yantras and mandalas: Symbols used in Hindu and Buddhist religious art.

Uncle Charlie

My uncle's eyes were blue but one was glass,
And glass the green lamp in his little room,
That room perched eyrie-like above the house.
All the house was lit up by his stories,
Stories of Cossette, Theseus, Odysseus;
An Odyssey his life, still journeying
With brief sojourns, U.P., Burma, Delhi -
In Delhi's quiet back-lanes gathering friends,
Gathering children, gossip, papers, books -
Marooned in books I see him, magnified
By time, magnifying glass and map in hand,
Sailing seas of rhyme, a perfect blue.

April Surprise

April will surprise you yet, she said.
Surprise a plain dish with a wondrous core.
Hard to recall the life that these supplied,
Consuming violently its own undoing.
Not joy but dread the midnight call now wakes
The positive report, the heart besieged,
Impetuous loss that must break down the door,
The phone unanswered ominously ringing.
Take me not captive, April, let the field
Lie fallow, growing daily grass and weeds,
Show me familiar things, no dazzling light,
Comfortable darkness, less, not more,
Before the long-expected last surprise.

Fauzia Rafique

“What Will You Teach My Child in Karachi?”

Inspired by Pop Queen Madonna's Sept 28 tweet about her dream school.

“The revolution of love
continues in Pakistan!
The Dream School is finally
finished. 1200 kids
attending. Knowledge...”

.
US pop star Madonna.

.
What will you teach my child
in your dream school
in Karachi?

Will you teach her
what was taught to kids
in the native indian
residential
schools—? Torture a method
of academic instruction
hunger, death
estrangement; electric
chair in school equipment,
some lessons
perhaps in that
humanitarian*
system of savage
salvationism.

What will you teach my child
in Karachi?

Will you use the knowledge
created to teach
what was taught
in your black/white
segregated
schools—? Establishing your
racial superiority
over children in this
democratic*
system of equal
opportunism.

What will you teach my child
in Karachi?

Will you teach her
what is taught to kids
in your
neighborhood
schools—? So they continue
to feed your greed by courting
a future of minimum wage, disparity
cage, desperation rage in this
charitable*
system of corporate
profitism.

What will you teach my child
in your dream school
in Karachi?

Classroom Chorus

Hail the generous queens
of the rich creamy crest
Always representing
the democratic civilized best
Yes the same who were here
to tame the wild wild west.
O Mad
onna! Angel
ina! E
ve! Tere
sa! Eliza
beth! Victor
ia! Much
Grate Ful
ness thank You
for bringing
all your Revolutions
of Love over
to us. We'll see you
at your next noble
gig/s flashing
the ongoing victories
of your ever advancing kings
through the valleys
of our deaths the mounds
of our lives.
Revolution of Love!
Love White Love
Cold White Love
So Much Love
Continues to Continue!
On and On!

This Poem
is Dedicated to
This Shirt

'In Honour of Residential School Survivors
and in memory of those who did not'
Orange Shirt Day
Sept 30, 2014

'Left-leaning'

We, the Left-leaning
people
keep leaning to
the left, collecting
middle class high-end salaries
brand new car, another home
sweet home
that flat-screen tv—
Till the Rightists explode
another bomb killing
another two dozen
non-Rightist non-Leftist
low-class people—
In a flurry
of activism
we wail, cry, a sense of
outrage
is expressly expressed
in favor of homeless
jobless

victims of religious
terrorist attack—
A sermon or two
on the nature
of capitalism, extremism
fundamental Islamism, talebanism—
While jumping to hail
the stooges propped by
the Almighty You-Knighted
States of America—
A moment before
bouncing back
to collect
our middle class high-end
salaries, to stay ahead
of the stead. We,
the Left-leaning
people
keep leaning to
the left

*

Translated by Gurdev Chauban

Heart

The heart beats
Because of it
the body beats
Also, the atoms of the earth,
the air, and the sky

Tired or sick,
the heart never stops
till death,
beats on and on
doesn't tire

But we humans are heartless
We lose heart while still alive
or else we start
thinking with our head
instead of our heart
But the head never
keeps us company

Magic

How much magic
is hidden in my body

I didn't know much
before I touched you
O' magician!
What kind of magician you are!
You don't perform magic;
you enkindle it

The Birthday

At the break of dawn
the wife said,
Happy birthday to you!
Then she said,
Congratulate me also.
I said,
About what?
She said,
*It seems as if I were
also born today.*

Grains in My Lap

The earth spreads
its lap
to hold the grains
slipping our hands

We spread our lap
to take in the grains
dropping from husks

I sow grains in earth
Then I spread my lap
before earth

Love

Love is
that forms out of our flesh
a seed grown off the fruit
of our own seed

A draught of water
for the thirty
but not the water
brought home without
the river's permission
Nor is love a word of thanks
learnt in the childhood
it blooms when it blooms.

Love is not a morsel of bread
begged from someone
even if conferred
with compassion
big as the Buddha's

I can turn a beggar
to meet with you
but I can't ask for your love
like a beggar

Love's Water

I drenched my feet
in love's waters
The bodies of waters
raised themselves high
to invite me

I let myself go
I recognised the shores
I had jumped from
but the shores where I landed up
were other

The one who
entered the bodies of water
was another
who came out of the water
is someone else
A lot of my own
has been carried away
by the waters
against my wishes

Finding remorse in my eyes
the waters say,
*Dear, we had called you to
go deep into the waters
but not to drown.*

The Head

What would my eyes
see where my feet would go
what my hands would catch
That says
where my head is

Sometimes it is between my knees
Sometimes between my hands
Sometimes upon the earth
Sometimes on my shoulders

When the head is
in its full senses
only then it knows
what not to look at
where the feet should not go
what the hands should let slip

*

Deepti Zutshi

Home

Last night, I met my friends
Over dinner and drinks
We had a great time chatting
'bout silly little things
Until they caught me completely off-guard
By asking a question I'd never been asked.

One by one they started discussing memories of their hometown
Distant memories of belonging to one place, of being tied to it forever.
Thinking about my turn I was filled with panic,
How could I ever explain where I belonged?
Making a mental note to get a bunch of new friends
Who asked better questions
I pondered the answer over and over again
I sneaked into my heart and strolled deep inside
To dig out a name I had cautiously hid there
And kept it sheltered, away from all harm –
The place celebrated as Switzerland of the East,
As Paradise on Earth,
The beautiful Kashmir!
The place to which I owe my notoriously long nose,
My complexion, my light eyes
My fat-laden, spice-loaded food
And the perfectly embroidered patterns on my *phirans*.
But how will I ever explain to them why despite being a born Kashmiri
I never set foot in Kashmir?
They would laugh at me if I told them,
I didn't want to visit it as a tourist who couldn't wait to return.

That I wanted to go there when I could call it my own,
Even a tiny inch of its land to carve my initials on.
Wouldn't they make fun of me when I disclosed,
I visited it in my dreams each night,
Played in the captivating valley nestled quietly in the Himalayas
And absorbed the beauty of its snow-capped mountains
Got lost in the lush pine, deodar and *chinar* forests
And its deftly designed waterfront gardens,
Cherished the brilliance of its silvery streams and sparkling waterfalls,
Slid down fragrant slopes of bright, vibrant flowers.
Oh, how I relished luxuriously cruising around the Dal Lake in a
Shikara
Or stealing a silent sleep in an exotic house-boat!
They wouldn't know how often I imagined wrapping myself
In the spell-binding beauty of the picturesque Pahalgam
And the splendour of Gulmarg and Sonamarg,
Or drowning in the magnificence of Srinagar's marvellous orchards
and lily-laden lakes,
Being immersed in the gentle hues of its four fabulous seasons.
No, I wouldn't be able to explain to them
What it meant to be tied to a place you've seen only in your dreams!
Because the Paradise was plundered over four centuries ago,
When Satan marched in with his entire legion
Not subtle as the serpent this time,
And definitely not alone.
He abducted the Eves, mutilated the Adams
Snatched from them what Nature had gifted willingly
Until they chose exile over death and dignity.
No, they could never understand what it meant
To belong to a land that can't belong to you.

So when my turn came, I quietly answered
I don't have a home, there's nowhere I belong

And as they laughed heartily at my anomaly
And moved on to the next glorious narrative of a distant home
I went back to reflecting upon the lost paradise
And revising my mental note of getting a bunch of new friends
Who asked better questions!
Some people spend their whole life trying to be perfect, others are
born Kashmiri!
Endless woes of an endless Kashmiri nose!

So, exhaust your rightful wrath, old mate
Terrorise me with dreams of home
And when you have forgiven me, at last
Come visit me again, I beseech you
At my new home
In my new bed
Awake since the night
I left you behind.

*

Hide and Seek

Why do you elude me so, dear sleep?
Why do you continue to torment me
With unsolicited dreams?
What did I do to deserve your choler, sweet friend?
How did you end up on the other side, and when?
I loved you fondly as a guiltless child
And you treasured me too
As far as I recall
You visited me each night
On my warm, secure bed
And sometimes at a slothful morning hour, too.

Is that it, dear sleep?
Is that why you are so distant now?
You do not find me in my convivial bed anymore
You search through my home in vain
Oh, I do not blame you for your apathy!
I do not judge you at all
I did depart unceremoniously
On the deceitfully serene night
When I deserted my warm, secure bed.

Kavita A. Jindal

Faucet

A woman
may buy a tool-kit and know how to use it
may change the washer, adjust the stopcock
swap the ball bearings
fix the leaky spigot with a spanner.

A woman may suggest to Nature
that for the next millennia
men become pregnant
a facetious fractious suggestion;
the woman knows her pleas
are just venting, as ineffectual
as hammering water.

A woman may not drive in Saudi Arabia
may not bike unless in a ladies' only park
may not be seen in public without a male protector.
A woman must also be fertile
dribbling out male heirs;
she may spout songs in private
and dance in full Dior, smeared with make up
for her mirror and other ladies to see.

A village panchayat in Punjab declares
that mobile phones given to girls
lead them to pre-marital sex;
boys can have cell phones and call for help
when they're in trouble, but females,

young things, must take it on the chin,
remaining on the drip-drip of advancement.

A woman there thinks: what if instead of aborting
the female foetuses, the nozzle was turned off
as if by a spell, a sorcery; no infants were born
to the women of this village, then the new elders
all men, would die out without replacement
and further afield too the taps would be fixed just so
by the women who knew how.

(After 'Woman' by Arun Kolatkar)

Katra

May 2014

My sisters
you have been strangled and hung
from the mango tree.
For international papers
you've been
a horrific story

until the next disaster and outrage elsewhere.

My sisters
don't forgive us
our broken world
our exclamations and excuses
our failure to educate
menfolk in decency

our not being able to provide you safe toilets.

You didn't need lavatory buildings
commodes or toilet seats
you needed safety,
be it in fields
or walking the lanes
around your home.

You needed no one to believe they were better than you.

You needed no one to assume
you mattered so little
that you could be killed
you could be child pawns
of punishment and disgrace
and the police would think nothing of it.

My sisters, it was not you who were shamed.

It was everyone else.
Perhaps you were raped
perhaps you were spotted talking
to a male friend
perhaps you were abducted.
None of this is your shame.

It is ours
that it can even be said
that two teenage girls
should be strung up
silenced
by their own *dupatta*.

We failed you in so many ways.

My sisters
don't forgive
bequeath your souls to the breeze
so the perpetrators hear you
carrying with them always
your unforgiveness.

Don't let them forget; don't let us forget.

March Misery Poem

Pigeons are strutting fatly on the lawn
The people you depended on have gone

A woodpecker continues its zap-drilling
The breeze of pleasant surprises is stilling

Spring bulbs peek out for squirrels to maul
The engine of luck, if that's what it was, stalls.

*

Zohra Zoberi

Labour Pains

Short lived is that excruciating pain
Pleasures from the 'outcome'
everlasting

First cry of the baby, music to her ears
First smile, like a bud in bloom
First spoken words bring new tunes
Those tiny steps taken
like a miracle is performed
First day of school a source of joy and pride
The awards and degrees achieved
as though she herself conquered the world

How time fast forwards itself to
the day when
another sweet dream is to be realized
Music, glamour and glitter
the commitment of lifetime being signed
As she hands over her offspring to another
praying for lasting love
joyful companionship
she comes to realize
that a woman actually delivers a child twice

Of longer duration may be these
contractions of apprehensions
interchanging with anticipations
but now...

She herself has to be reborn
and learn
the steps of *controlled spontaneity*
of *revised approaches*
Let someone else take the front seat
of share and care
Selfless is her love
After all
A mother delivers a child twice

*

Gurdev Chauhan

Village poems

1

I go to my village.
The village is now for me
an old school bag
lying in some obscure
corner of the drawer of a chest
in my worn out home
the bag even
the chest has forgotten.
The bag's belts are torn
pockets bust,
buttons gone.

In this worn out bag
my school is closed shut
my childhood
frozen like a child's game.

Many summers and winters after
when I hold the bag in my hands
my past flutters in it
like a wounded pigeon
I miss my breath:
the bag is still breathing!

I open it

peep into my childhood
uncap the inkpot
turn in my mind, one by one,
the pages of my childhood

2

I grope my village
with finger-tips of memory
scan entries of days and nights
in the logbook of my past village
times sieve twilights and afternoons
visit evenings
etched in memory
weave the web
of school days like a weaver
collect the scattered words

I had come to the city
with the village trailing
behind like dust.
I remember the first
chapter of its unwritten book
I had been very reckless
with the leaves of grass
with green relationships.
I hurried to leave
the village for the city.
The village had come
to bid me farewell
The sun hid its weeping eyes
in the wilds.

The village cowered
under its fond ordinariness.
Another of its sons
had gone astray.
Like an old man, the village
turned to soak in old glory.

3

Perhaps my village too
is living one of its cycles of life
It goes from seed
to flower to fruit
Everyone knows, the city
eats the fruit of the village
The village now monkeys the city
and forgets its own walk.
Perhaps the village
wants to do a peacock dance
with the wings of a duck
The village tries hard
to stay as a village

The old shepherds help
it in doing this
Women with veiled faces
used to do the same.
The cowherds
used to bathe in the *talab*
with their buffaloes
They washed off the backs of buffaloes
hard clay and came out from

the clay-colour water
with their buffaloes.

4

Everything has passed
Only the memory is left
of the game of hide and seek
We used to hide sometimes
behind a door panel
Sometime behind the spinning wheel.
That girl with thick hair
knew wonderful hiding ways
She enjoyed hiding more than we did
She would reach the core of the dark
as if it were her home
as if the dark got a door to open to it
She would reach the belly of the dark
the belly button of the game

Today there is only the bare sky
Everything is off colour
the evening, the morning
no fear of being late for things
no fear of father and mother
so no enjoyment
in the game either
no joy in reaching home late
no joy in going to watch Ram Leela
without parents' knowing
no joy in doing something
no joy in regretting
not doing something.

5

waiting turns
the spinning wheel
age sews the patches
young girls attend the *trinjan*
childhood washes the *phatti*
old age waits for the stale roti
clothes drying on the clothesline
wait for young bodies
lathis want young sons
poverty sows fear
and reaps violence
sometimes,
walks on a belly
some unknown bullet
seeking own bleeding
own breathing out
own death

6

I listen to the village
from the drawing room
morning here comes before morning
at dawn an earthen stove is lit
everything looks good
tea is brewing
in the neighbourhood
someone sweeps the courtyard
outside her door

again two feet
walk the rough-leather-shoe-walk
someone passes through the gully
goads his oxen
a young man howls without any reason
someone rewraps his shawl
on his shoulder
some woman churns the milk
to make clarified butter
someone milks her buffalo
far away runs a fodder-chopping machine
it cuts silence more than fodder
a buffalo brawls
some one is talking rough to his wife
someone is meditating
someone opens the gate of the temple
someone just balances
the weight of their anxiety
on the scale of the sky

7

This poetry is stranger to the village
It has come from the city
It has brought the city along
this poetry feels bitten
by horsefly
Going piggyback
to village fair with maternal uncle
is no fun for city bred poetry
Perhaps it a bitter truth

that the city is as brittle
as glass for poetry.
The village is sad
but has its poetry intact
For many village people
a brick house is still a dream house
For them the local herbs and pickle
is still the best dish to have
My village doves
feel happy perched
on thatched huts

(From *Dibh De Sittay*)

*

Harminder Dhillon

Under Railway Bridge No: U1637-P

late autumn rain-soaked evening
floating water vapours hanging
melting into wetted night
long as distance to horizon under
iron wheels of freight trains
over the railway bridge
across from corn fields unattended
crumbling decaying behind
mountains of wrecked cars, red blue, white, green
muddied colours of rainbow
smashed crumpled like soda cans in blue bin
rusted iron beams peeling off dripping along
gray concrete pillars graffitied
black, red and yellow, squirted
drizzle of autumn rain run off
(through steel rail gaps)
brown rain water mingled with rust, soil and loco oil
rail box-cars numbered like cows on a butcher farm
ferrying emptiness
nowhere to nowhere
there to there
here to here
squeaking iron brakes
steel rails curving, uncurving
iron-on-iron
thickk-thackk-thickk-thackk
autumn evening hanging in limbo
unsure doubtful of her next step

irresolute at the door-step of night
unawaited, uninvited, unwanted
(away from harvest moon)
under the railway bridge
bathed in purple-brown rain water
sparkling rainbow-coloured oil bubbles
plastic bags fluttering, caked with soil grease
styro-foam littering bobbling in the chilly wind
Bodh Gaya
under Railway Bridge No 1637-P
cross-legged, still, mindful
unruffled
Budha under banyan tree
meditating on the sound of silence between
thick-thack-thick
thack
Budha's belly glistening in loco oil
sparkling purple bubbles
like prayer beads

*

Salman ke liye

Come looking for me

come looking for me, I am that
thread hanging from a shirt,
soaking with tears of my mother;
come looking for me, I am that
quiet pebble covered with dust
on a mid-summer's afternoon;
come looking for me, I am that
leaf sitting still on a window sill;
come looking for me, I am that
branch searching for its roots
on a cold winter night when the
breeze pierces through the clouds;
come looking for me, I am that
little particle of dust that slid
off your foot as you washed away
memories from another life;
come looking for me, but where?
look inside you, look around you -
i am that life that speaks with
every breath you take, reminding
you of a past that could have been,
a present that is therefore not,
and a future, that can never be.

Into the horizon

Tomorrow, as dawn's gentleness takes its first steps through your window onto the surface of your skin, giving it a tender glow, and the promise of the new sun shines through the space between your waist and your arm, flirting with your eyelids, caressing the sweetness of your lips, and your senses awoken to the prospects adorned by the gentle pressure of the morning sun, and slowly you can't help but embrace the precious novelty of yet another inviting day, know that I will have evaporated into the invisible mist that surrounds the cool breeze reminiscent of the night before, erasing all marks of my presence, if there ever were. I will have by then walked into the tiny droplets that hide behind the curtain of sun rays, attempting to recollect the unmarked steps that I had taken with you crushed by the cruel fables written by fate's delicate hands. Tomorrow, when you are ready to meet the many joys dancing at the sound of your feet, I will no longer breathe alongside. I will have been drowned by the noise that celebrates your glorious life.

Men without fathers

Slipping away from myself, one memory at a time. Some I find between the pages of books written by men without fathers, other pieces cling secretly to the shirt that still hangs in the closet waiting to be sentenced, and some more call out from the space inside the checkered patterns of the *saree*, green with wounds left by unmarked strangers. And a few more weep quietly by the bedside of sons yet to be born. Slipping away with men without fathers, in search of wombs of mothers floating in streams stealthily circling the earth.

Mourning

that face -
from now on,
will hang
securely, at
half-mast.

Introspection

Soon the bells will stop ringing,
the audience will have left. All I
will be left is the dust underneath
my feet, the imagined sound of the
tabla, soft, like birds chirping on a
blossoming spring day, the ethereal
sweetness of the *saranggi* echoing
sorrows through the curtain, and the
skin, well, its unrelenting attempt
at separating from the heel, the toes
too, soar, reminding me of the steps,
familiar but still new, they had helped
me take, the body, in motion even now,
and the light from the surrounding
darkness, streaming in like a funnel,
saying that the show has just begun.

Life Sentence

Tonight, basking in the imagined glory of the past
I stand here, mourning the death of future.
Yet, it is there, in the space between the past and future
I attempt life.
I falter
as I am reminded of the scars
left by the rough edges of the sword that created me,
reviving its dance on the receding fractures of my soul,

spilling the black fluid that fills my veins,
violently pushing it through the disfigured passages of my heart.
I hear it. Gushing down the rusted pipes of dreams,
turning them into insipid nightmares
rejoicing in the bloody sensation of its victory,
breathing in the darkness circling my tearless eyes,
showing me, the rightful place for the condemned.

Miniature Dreams

Miniature dreams,
scattered
in the land of giant elbows

Miniature dreams,
led
by the ruptured histories of the heart

Miniature dreams,
gasping
for air through the clogged pores of the chin

Miniature dreams,
dancing
on the rhythm of sinful toes

Miniature dreams,
floating
in the sea of bitter nipples

Miniature dreams, finally
sinking –
in the land of frothy pupils,
bloody heads and,
broken bones.

Searching for moonlight

In searching for stars, I only find dust
soaked, with the blood of ancestors
some sleeping, some still breathing
glistening under the soft spell of the moonlight.
I wonder—
maybe there are no stars,
just the bright red particles of history
masked in the deception of the moonlit night.

Birthday

Disappeared into
a mix of fog and dust
speaking the language
of the wind
whirling around you
like the mouth wide open
behind the glass cage
screaming, yet silenced

still hoping, that
one day you will
be the witness
to my existence.

The Ghazal Effect

As I sit here tonight
impatient for the sun to rise
I remember the days spent
waiting for the restless moon
to shine through the dark blanket
bringing with it notes from the heart
drenched in the mystical beauty
of night's endless desires.
like life itself, those nights too were fleeting.
Today, I know the moon is not restless
and the heart no longer speaks.
But the sky weeps quietly
in solidarity with those whose
cry will never be heard again.

Pieced Together

One plane ticket to Boston.
searching for itself in a pile of papers.

Two lines of an unfinished *ghazal*
written hastily on a piece of soggy napkin
dipped in ancestral miseries,
and another two, struggling to be seen
through the fog in the corridor.
Majnu is oddly relieved at Laila's departure.
Orange, maroon, green on the silky *dupatta*
reach out to each other in a frenzy,
while the scarf still talks of the Wall in Beijing.
At a distance, waits Henry watching the Queen
slowly fade into the blinding light of the Rising Sun.
And, then Route 1?¹ It has no choice
but to surrender to the onslaught of tires
pounding on its chest.
The blue stripes on the white sleeve finally
washed of the sins from the night before.
Sitting still is Faiz, yearning to fall asleep
in night's tight embrace.
And of course, the watch—
it sits dead on the dresser holding onto time.
One plane ticket to Boston
searching for itself in a pile of papers.

*

¹ A major highway connecting New Jersey and Pennsylvania

Translated by Swaran J. Owcarw

A Small Fact

An old pale leaf
quivers like boat
allows inside
pale sunlight
just now it rained
a sea above my roof
allows sunset

A Celebration

Oh what it rings like a bell
nothing in my house
is like a shrine or a cathedral

No chance of rain even
But it may
if reflections from mirror be the indication
Like a hope which shatters
Yet preserves its image in the mirror
It's time to take delight in loneliness
and to appreciate matchlessness of the whole lot
amazed, i stay inside
and mud outside makes murmur
of me wetting

I See

On the corner of the table before me
there lies a broken piece of glass
a chair tied to the table
and a new year calendar

The dates habitually searching holiday within my eyes
There is a picture of butterfly in the calendar
and on which day it's going to fly
dates show never

and there is paperweight
worthless in the absence of air
or without any paper underneath

I observe some shrubbery inside the paperweight
And there seems a sea inside it
enclosing many green coral reefs within
why do i watch all this
Perhaps to escape
The frenzied chain of thoughts inside
And their endless binding analysis

I watch and flee from risk
of me becoming my own pet

A Hope

Generally I'm of habit
To peel off and look for petite hopes

As from an apple
So exactly I do
That no extra hope should go along with peel
and may it dribble some sap

But not sure of knife
Sometimes so quick it does
And slashes more apple than the peel
And a luscious hope
Is thrown in the dustbin

An Expression

Kept sitting a long time
near the un-carved stone
a part broken mirror
and a tree bark filled with chirping sound of birds

Kept listening to –
The truth of your failed arrival
Kept seeing –
The death music of falling of a leaf in the air
from the top
Kept puffing the empty bottle
– unnecessarily
after an age, i think

what is left within me
for an expression...

Pale Leaves

Lying noiselessly
on the grass

lazily after they fall from their twig
without any fear of annihilation
yet they could make the sunlight poignant in its paleness
and could reflect the pending squall

Some of them
keep sitting around the letter box
and one even sitting close to the opening
may get posted with a little puff of air
I hope –
I would receive it till next rains
would find it
shining below the lamp post of my house

*

Papiya Lahiri

From where I see

From where I see
It is embossed in the transparent
Skin of a candy floss and embedded in the curves of
the terracotta sculpture
The hollow of a cheek sings the mournful ditty of a lost world—
the ancient logistics hanging loose within the cracks and crevices
In historical buildings—staring at the face
Of modern man—within the spectacular wide empty
Spaces full of mocking echoes— of an illusory vision,
Casting its dull yellow glow over the dusty pages of boisterous youth
The visions lie tied—overlapped—caught between
The annals of history, passing silently from one page to another of a
fat history book
Changing times—dropping fast and steady
Like sand from a tight fist of a powerful man

Hoodwinked

I
Hang on to the peg of hope
With the piercing knowledge of the peg
coming off and falling deep,
taking an unwilling heart along the drain of lost memories
all options lost and not in sight
Is the road to retribution like a guarantee card expiring before the
expiry date.

II

Against a strong gust of wind an unprepared ant, sitting tight—
Lo, till the moon shifts its place to the ninth sphere of luck and
wisdom!

Was not the moon's place the same when you chose the left alley
Leaving the broad highway behind —a short cut
Bearing the unbearable stench of the dark place,
your quick steps skipping the dirty poly-bag on the left close to the
rotting peel of a banana and the big carton of rusting iron on the
right while adroitly avoiding the long trail of urine in the middle.

Reaching the opening half-relieved,
Only to come face to face with an acquaintance—

The last person you wanted to meet at that time, in that spot.

Ageless Symptom

Didn't I try looking at the unfathomable dark hole?
It kept sucking the nectar of bitter sweet memories from my mind
I didn't shake my eyelids
That would mean losing sight, an irrevocable, irremediable loss
Getting myself immersed in a sea of guilt and letting the overpowering
multitude of regrets and mistakes devour me at one go
The pressure held under the tension of reawakening the crotchety side
of my being
I looked straight—not a brow flinched, not a line formed on the road
to salvation
The bubbles lying all quiet inside like the unnoticeable fizz contained in
a bottle—only making a frisky burst when the cover is removed
For the world to consume from
Unknowingly, resembling the ripples forming and disappearing like a
quick entry and exit from a shop of very expensive items

*

*Translated by Seth Michelson***Mother used to save**

At any moment,
under any conditions, the storehouse
of mother was never empty,
she saved oils, grains, pickles, beans,
salt in clay pots, glass jars of jaggery,
all of it living for centuries
in her magic storeroom, and available
in an instant
without a single “Open, Sesame!”

Mother saved flesh, too:
on her waist and hips, for her
seven hungry children, born
one after another,
and for the next generation:
to love grandma's soft, sweet feel.

And she saved stories, myths,
unknown rhythms, steps
for the grandchildren's dreams,
a way of keeping her with them
after she's long gone.

In her final moments, her last
breaths left her daughters a home,
through which she keeps dissolving
like a sugar packet into water.

Before leaving

close all the doors, one
by one,

hear them shut with a click,
pat each knob farewell,

and try never to promise to return,
not even by mistake,

don't fret over who next
might pass through; each door
itself decides this

before leaving wipe away
each footprint
and fingerprint, no longer
needed by anyone,

before leaving, pack your things,
bundle every rusted story

and decorate the table with memories of laughter

before leaving, check every book,
throwing out the pressed flowers
dried in their pages

before leaving erase every line, break
open all the knots

and smile with strength
until life comes to sit
in the corners of your mouth

before leaving, close the final door,
and the rest will close themselves

Dreaming in Another Land

He wanted her to smile
the dream of living in another land.

He wanted her to dance
like a melody on a violin's strings.

He wanted to see in her lap
the milk-stained mouth of a sleeping child.

He looked after her
like day-old bread to be relished.

He was trying to save her
from the barbed wire
around Albania or Siberia
that bloomed like flowers from stone.

He loved her more than his country
but lost her far away like his dream,

the same as a young man
of his enemy country.

Nichola's mother

Her world is only as large as her bread,
her sky
the blackbird
flying across the window,
all juices for her
start and end with grapes.

She stands on her toes
and starts to twirl.

Borders draw and redraw themselves
across her chest, languages
peeping and pecking grains
from the palm of her hand.

She's been so many countries
without ever moving
from her axis as Nichola's mother.

**Nichola is a Macedonian poet and his mother's home has been ruled by three
different countries in her lifetime*

Amjad Ali's sarod

Amjad Ali lifts the sarod to his lap
like a jumpy rabbit and slowly begins to stroke it.
With a hiccup, strings clear their throats

then a gamaka bites, sharp as a knife.
Amjad Ali closes his eyes in the glow of raga
while Night Queen wakes from the magic box, peeking out
at the jhinjhoti strutting its nine-beat swagger.

In that instant, I see a cry, my chin
cupped in my palms as I watch the sounds
of music dancing, my eyes numb, the rhythms captured
in the clap of the tabla as it weaves its silk.

I watch the cry flutter with each note,
and I lose track of time,
can't tell if anyone else here
sees through blind eyes.

I'm carried away by Amjad Ali's rendition
of "Let Us Walk Alone," and I forget the cry,
which falls asleep like a small child sucking her thumb.

And though I'm freed now to enjoy Amjad Ali,
the sound of the cry resurges,
suffusing the jhinjhoti and "Let Us Walk Alone."

Cries call me now to the town square, where
they become flags draped on bushes like dusty rugs. I want
to reconnect the broken strings of the great teachers,
drowsied, half-strangled by the coiling serpent

of rhythmic waves of music
that make us deaf to youthful cries.
Amjad Ali's sarod doesn't know the language of the deaf,
and I'm almost deaf with the non-cries of this crying.

Roots

An itch in the sole of my foot
reminds me of my roots

and while searching for them
I wander aimlessly

though they're not very far:
only five feet and a few inches down

not very deep,
but they shift in the evening
so by the time I draw near,
my soles are disappearing
into their own shadow.

Migraine

A woodpecker hooks
its claws into my temple
and pecks into my brain,
his beak snatching up
the tiny worms
of my thoughts and attachments.

There is no fixed date for the arrival
of this woodpecker,
who instead of fruit prefers the dry wood of brains,

devouring my every thought.
I close my eyes to his tuk-tuk
pulsing in my veins
and disappear into the bird.

Stray dreams

Each morning
my dreams begin
to wander around

They know where not to go
Destinations
are never marked in their plans

They don't go to Fairyland
The beauty of the stars
doesn't attract them either

Among those living on Earth
they love only black ants
which are not less than elephants

Trees and birds don't
attract them

Their most interesting practice
is to trail running cars

Abandoning cities and villages
they reach
those satellites
where live those
we in our languages call the dead

The story of dead people is different too
They don't recognize the new ways of life
and go gossiping to the dreams

By night the dreams return
home

and place their bundle on the stump
in the middle of my mind
where they themselves sleep

the bundle opening me awake
in my nights with its gifts

Time near me

Today I woke late
and ignored my cup of tea
reading an unknown
poet from Lithuania.
His poems were open like a glass jar
and my words began
to fill the gaps between them.

Today I ignored the dirty dishes
in the sink, didn't bother
to fold the washed clothes.
I turned on the TV, flipped
channels, and let my room
fill with many voices.

When words took flight from my fingertips
on the keyboard, birthing
a poem by computer,
that moment
"time" wandered around me
like my tame dog.
The Wings of an Ant

They say an ant has no wings
and that even if she did, she couldn't fly.

And if unable to fly, why suffer the pain of wings?

The ant's death rides on her wings,
but death itself is flight.

The ant started to fly
by pale blue light, bending
her wings to the south,
an illusion of silence amidst noise.

Towards the yellow light, she flew
against her life,
carrying flight in her every cell.

She saw the seeds of flight
for the next generation.

Manmohan

When he plays the drum,

the sea steams
and his beloved's brow
beads with sweat,

when he beats the drum,
huge stars implode
and the curtain
flickers in his beloved's window.

Sweat-soaked pain sprays out
from his beating drum,
the Earth losing its way,

a small bird
landing on his beloved's roof,
her hair
showering down,
the trees bathed in its sweet perfume.

*

Tenacity

A small thin hilly trail
looks back
turning.

Walking up from valley to the hilltop
the frail trail looks tenacious
like a hill woman
carrying loads of logs.

Calm, motionless cedars and pines
watch dispassionately.
pretending innocence.

I am perturbed.
I don't know
how the trail is walking steep
like a hill woman.

Vision

Just closing your eyes
you can't acquire
the vision of a blind person
who reads with fingertips
sees more by touch

than a man with eyes does.
He doesn't carry the illusion
of vision.

His black days are white nights
sun, moon arise with ease
He finds directions
smelling time and feeling the way.
He knows no respite from error.

Only by closing eyes
you can't achieve the dexterity of a blind person.

The blind one doesn't sulk
in the effulgence of light.
He only loves his black moon, stars, dark Sun.

A blind one walking down the pavement—
to me is a great love of life.
He is able to read what
I can't know even by looking.

Door

Is anyone safe indoors or outdoors?
Nobody knows.
There is fear
inside and out.

Between two fears is the dead city
where man and the door
drift.

Doors are the ruins of dead seasons.
Only trees remain alive.

In dreams
the door opens in our breast
and bolts from inside.

The door burgles sleep,
spread like a forest
in the mind.

Sleeping man mutters.
Doors smile, sheepishly.
Bolts and lock tease.

Sleeping door gets up
in the midnight
with the howl of jackals
in the forest.

Man sleeps carefree inside the house.
The door stands, attentive, outside.

An associate of fear, the door
while shut, is ajar
in the mind.

Desire

How close the moon descended
to us last night.
So many tales it narrated
in the frozen moonlight.
It took us on a long ride
on the silver chariot.

We went far
and returned very late.
Moon's hospitality was marvelous.

After you had left,
even now
days, the Moon comes swiftly down
to me
looks at me, tries hesitantly to ask something.

I guess his inquisitiveness.

This time you do one thing.
Come to me just for a while.
Take the Moon with you, escort it.

Untill the next full moon
in the frozen moonlight
I will eagerly expect you
with melted sight.

State

Asleep
I hear the clamor of the sea
And dreams with the rhythm of
rising, falling waves.
Just awake from sleep I become an isle
far from the mainland.

The sad, broken anchored ship
keeps touching the drowsy sand of the beaches.

A far-off glimmering lamp-post
and the sound of the violin
call me to them all night.

After I return
I see the same old hollow body
And a carcass of dreams floating far away
on the receding waters.

*

1

Logged out of the wild word web
closing my eyes listen to breath

Breathing or being breathed into
Sinking below the waves of thought
Into the still waters of heart
Silent as always have been

There is a space of no sound
Where all prayers are answered already
Everything that needs to be done is accomplished totally
the wishes fulfilled effortlessly
dreaming or realizing, irrelevant!

Is it the entire length of time
or a collapsed function of a wave
I may never understand
the enigma of an inner smile

Is this perfect as it could be
or just that the critic is gone
Always being always becoming
Walking with one foot on ground
and the other on stars ??

Putting words to silence is efforting
not the moon, just a finger pointing ??

2

I love to sit back and relax
watch the sun casting shadows
watch the trees expressing
their creativity endlessly
with every different leaf
yet the same pattern
and not bothering about patenting the design
Birds chirping, singing in joy
not needing any audience

This moment offers more gifts than we can gather
Pause...Breathe... Life is talking to us already
We are already receiving all that we need
like the trees are receiving all air they need
effortlessly, seamlessly and endlessly
We are already giving all that we need to give
the circle is complete in this very moment
thriving, shining and radiating the ISness
Universe is complete and perfect
in this moment, and this one and this one
For that is the only time there is
.... this moment.... are you listening

3

There is nothing personal about it
Choose it if it gives you happiness
or if you wish to feel otherwise
Not that I don't care....

But I can only choose for me
You share your song with me
and fear judgement
I bare my soul and forget

While you still collect pieces
Of what I choose to see
I move on to the next adventure
Jumping off the cliff
in the holy Ganges

You see twin flames
Weaved eternally, in sorrow and joy
I know only wild fire everywhere,
And burn burn burn...
Like Roman yellow candles,
scattered as zillion diamonds in the sky

You seek to dwell in me
Here lives the spirit of a gypsy
who rests in no abode
Beware of being madly in love
It will rob you off yourself

You cherish memories of rescue
or as you like to imagine it
seek to compete and win
while I am celebrating oneness

Mastering relationships is not my cup of tea
I abandoned me long time back
I don't belong to me either

4

I can never give up on you
Because I have seen the light in me
And I know it's the same as light within you
To see you in pain hurts a part of me as well
And I know pain is pleasure's soul-mate
Their dance enchants

Like the flow of a dream you wake up from,
and still want to go back....
Like the restlessness of an unfinished story

I am the story
you breathe life into
Considering it yours.
And I am the story-teller
who knows the exact twist
to keep you imprisoned
in the story, you call yours

I can wait for you
wait for you to choose you
and meet me there,
beyond pain and pleasure
Beyond fear and desire
Beyond me and you
In the eternal celebration
Of all that Is!!

5

I have been hiding behind
the pillars of fear
thinking they would keep me safe
in this thick dark forest full of haze

tired of clinging to the rock
I let me fall into my own block
the abyss is deeper than it seems
kissing goodbye to all my dreams

not knowing what is at the end there
reluctant to go back to the fear
I turn my head around and dare

There still seems no light at the end
Spreading my arms, I bend
I welcome my own death
suddenly feel supported every breath
never knew I had wings
flapping them softly, the air clings
lifting me up with joy and sings
as if it was waiting for me since ever
to spread my arms and surrender.

6

I belong here
in this skin
this body is my home
and Gaya my ride

into the celestial space
In this moment
I fold back into myself
In this moment
I expand beyond the cosmos

If this is what you call a day
I'm up for a million lifetimes
If the dream of magic
is the spell of night
I can play on forever

I ride the dragon
in the dark of night
I'm weaving the stars
to adorn my smile
I am the dragon
and the beloved of divine!

*

Jaspreet Singh

My 1984

Every summer during school holidays my mother would take us from Indian-administered Kashmir to Ludhiana in Punjab to visit our grandparents. The address still resides within me: '30 Civil Street. Near Ghumar Mandi.' Summers are extremely hot there, especially the kiln-fire month of June, but we managed with ceiling fans and a "desert cooler." Each one of the rooms in that partially plastered, red-brick house was unique, as if it belonged to a slightly different imponderable epoch. My grandfather didn't have enough money to build the house all at once, so he kept adding a room every five years or so.

I would insist on sleeping in his room. Most cousins didn't want to sleep there. Grandfather slept with the lights on, and he woke up very early in the morning. He suffered from chronic bronchitis (after a longago trip to a hill-station) and occasionally lapsed into yoga-inspired breathing exercises. Plus the room carried the mild odour of a chemical laboratory. In the corner cupboard there were four or five darkbrown bottles of chemicals, a Bunsen burner, and an optical microscope.

My scientific grandfather would wake up at 4:30 sharp, recite the *Japuji*, and soon afterwards hold dialogues between God and Darwin. Halfway into the dialogues he would slip into a Sufi-style swoon.

Nanak nadari nadar nibal. Nanak nadari nadar nibal.

God would win the argument in the end, but the next day Darwin would challenge God once again.

We called him Bhapaji, and so did everyone else. Even our grandmother called him Bhapaji. After reciting bani for two or three hours, Bhapaji would step out, do a *neem datun* by the guava tree in the courtyard. More breathing exercises would follow, and he would hurriedly scan through the *Tribune*. At times he would ask me to read the

paper out loud. For a few minutes I would gladly become his highly underqualified reader — often stumbling over strange sesquipedalian words. Bhapaji would correct me gently, my mispronounced '*Pandemonium* in the Parliament'. He would explain 'Emergency' and 'Riparian' to me in a language I was able to comprehend.

After news, he would eat a light breakfast of milk with honey, toast, and fruit, and feeling more relaxed he would tell us about Partition. (These tellings are the 'enchanted' fairy tales of my childhood, and to this day, some thirty years later, some 7000 miles away, on an entirely different continent, possess power to cause real and unreal disturbances in my daily routines and equilibriums.)

Bhapaji was a partition survivor. Both his parents died in the year 1947. Like millions of others, the division left him shocked, bewildered and transformed into a refugee in his own land. Several years had passed by. He had retired now as the headmaster of a high school in Ludhiana, the so-called Manchester of Punjab. Those days I neither possessed the knowledge nor the psychic apparatus to comprehend his loss. I don't think I will ever grasp it fully.

Evenings I would walk with him, and it was during those long walks I found out that before Partition he taught the sciences on the wrong side of the border. The story that moved me the most was how chemistry had in fact saved his life during mass violence. One of his student's war-hero brother had rescued him from a wretched camp in 1947. Teaching the Periodic Table, and how to charge an Electroscope had positive consequences at least for this family.

Grandfather would always take along a walking stick or a black umbrella. His beard was grey, and eyes kind and intelligent. Dignified. Starched turban. Black shoes. Whenever the story was narrated, while walking, one particular detail would stand out. During that moment of crisis, when people around him had given up hope, Bhapaji, unable to think about India or Pakistan, had only thought about the Golden Temple. At that moment all vectors, tracks, roads, and great circles pointed towards the shimmering waters of Amritsar.

*

I have little recall now where and when and on which wall of my childhood I saw my first Golden Temple photograph. What was my first real long-exposure visit like? Was it my maternal grandfather who first encouraged me to take those tiny exploratory steps into the waters of amrit sarovar? Who told me that the ‘temple’ (Harmandar Sahib) was not ‘golden’ until the 1830’s? Growing up I would hear discontinuous ‘sakhis’ about its foundation stone and the chief-architect. Guru Arjan, the fifth Sikh Guru, it is said, designed the original building towards the end of the sixteenth century. Guru Arjan also oversaw the construction of the city of Amritsar, and compiled the Sikh scripture.

However, this creative moment (in Punjab’s history) of book-making and spiritual-center making was marred by a huge tragedy. Guru Arjan was arrested and tortured (Circa 1606) by officials on orders of the Emperor. Visual representations of the stoic Guru’s last few days are perhaps some of the most heartbreaking, and in those pre-internet days (in post-partition, post-colonial India) the paintings would appear regularly in Sikh calendars. Because of those *Punjab & Sind Bank* calendars hung over the walls of my childhood, I discovered the Punjabi word ‘taseeha’ before the English word ‘torture’.

*

Now that I think about it, Harmandar Sahib (or the Golden Temple) was much more than a site of pilgrimage for my family members. This ‘constructed and socially produced’ place contributed to the psychic healing of millions of dismembered people. As there were no Partition memorials, the Darbar Sahib complex served (among other things) as an unofficial memorial to the dead and the displaced. I imagine my maternal grandparents walking bare feet along the parikarma, I see them circumambulating the shimmering waters working through their grief and loss.

Each spot in the complex is a storied spot, a link to ancestors, and a link to remembered glories, sacrifices, traumas and disasters. There are memories and mythologies around big and small holocausts

there –the *Ghalugharas*. But, especially for Partition survivors, there were recent wounds and memories more intimate and fresh: this is where a father or mother or an uncle were reunited, this is where one searched forever for a brother or an aunt, who never arrived. In the Golden Temple complex in that serene and beautiful space, surrounded by the hum of near infinite music it is hard for the living not to mingle with the dead.

The Golden Temple (both in its ‘material’ and ‘psychic’ forms) absorbed a lot of felt-and-unfelt thought (also a lot of felt unthought) and in its own way provided my grandparents with hope to continue on. Beyond breaking point.

By the sarovar waters there is a tree of healing: a *Zizyphus jujube*. Over 400-years old now the *Dukh Bhanjani Beri* is visibly fragile, and wrinkled and vulnerable to insects, but its leaves are mostly green and branches flare out in all directions.

For Sikh people all over the world (no matter how tenuous their relationship) did the entire complex become an unofficial memorial to loss?

Also a monument to survival against all odds.

Vamik Volkan, whose work focuses on large group trauma, suggests: “Sometimes a monument as a linking object absorbs unfinished elements of incomplete mourning and helps the group to adjust to its current situation without re-experiencing the impact of the past trauma and its disturbing emotions.”

*

The room where he slept and stored his little laboratory was the first room my grandfather built in new India after losing an entire house to Partition. Before moving to Ludhiana, some 84 miles from Amritsar, and before building that perennially ‘unfinished house’, the family wandered from city to city in divided Punjab... Many years later my mother told me a bit about growing up by the railway fields and about her father’s traumatic condition after Partition. *Bhapaji’s brother would ask*

him to apply for a job. Bhapaji would join a school. Only to quit a few days later. It doesn't surprise me, but ends up stirring a strange numbing response. My grandfather felt paralyzed and was unable to teach for an entire year after the cataclysmic event.

To this day I know more about the chemical odors in his room and the deep purple rhombic crystals in a petri-dish; I know more about the way he would tie his starched mint-colored turbans, the glow of his safety pins, and the way he would apply Simco and fix his beard; I know more about the tapping sounds made by his walking stick, his black BATA 'gurgabi' shoes, and the crackling of his short wave transistor radio than I know about his inner life.

"Do you know the name of these crystals?" he asked in Punjabi and English.

Crystals, he said in English.

Before me, in a petri-dish, there is a little pile of dark purple crystals.

Then in an Erlenmeyer flask, half-filled with water, he dropped a few crystals, and I saw a confluence of science and magic.

Soon that clear, transparent water in the flask started becoming a garden of pink and randomly purple trees.

"Potassium permanganate."

In my mind, Potassium permanganate is not just a fond crystal of a memory connected to my grandfather, Potassium is also indelibly linked to the martyrdom day of the chief architect of Golden Temple. On that 'oscillating' day, every year, my grandfather would open his cabinet and make large volumes of KMnO_4 solution.

I say 'oscillating' because of the lunisolar calendar. Guru Arjan's martyrdom day (or shahidi gurburab) arrived guided by the moon. My grandfather, like several others, relied on an almanac (Jantri) to determine the corresponding date on the solar Gregorian calendar.

Like others he would 'remember' and 'celebrate' the day of mourning by distributing a special drink to the passers by. 'Kachi lassi' or 'unfinished lassi'. The main ingredients of the concoction (which brims with Proustian possibilities for me in faraway Canada) are water,

milk, sugar, chunks of ice, and rose extract (ruh-af-za).

Kachi lassi: Not to be confused with yoghurt based lassi.

Also, KMnO_4 crystals are not an ingredient; potassium permanganate is not a part of the drink. It is only used to disinfect the glasses. Two or three buckets full of KMnO_4 solution to begin with... Family members and friends from within the neighborhood would volunteer and take turns to wash used glasses.

My grandparents have set up a stall — a *Chhabeel* — under the shade of the guava tree outside the house... Bhapaji is serving lassi to thirsty passersby. Free. All welcome... He serves every year. My memory of kachi lassi and KMnO_4 is really a convergence of memories of several years. Scorching temperatures + superheated winds are built into these happy memories. I feel embraced by my grandparents.

In 1984 we are based in Delhi. However, as usual, we visit Ludhiana during the summer holidays.

Guru Arjan's gurburab is fast approaching according to my grandfather's Jantri. But something has gone terribly wrong.

The whole of Punjab is under Curfew.

Power blackouts. Phone disruption.

No newspapers. Censorship.

Permanently tuned to BBC world service, my grandfather's short wave radio lay supine on a jute cot. Now and then it heaves and crackles.

Indira. Army. Militants. Amritsar. Golden Temple. (We don't know what is going on.)

Pilgrims?

DEAD (We don't know yet.)

*

June, 1984.

Operation Blue Star — even the most decorated generals and military historians acknowledge — was a disaster. The raid on the Golden Temple complex was less a 'flushing out' operation, more a massacre of innocent civilians.

Thirty years later there are more questions than answers. Why was Guru Arjan's martyrdom day chosen as the day of attack? Why were thousands of pilgrims allowed into the Golden Temple complex just before the shock-and-awe operation? It resulted in a huge loss of life, and caused acute individual and collective trauma, which has found no closure. Seven battle tanks had rolled in... A hugely important heritage building was reduced to rubble... Firing squads executed captive men after tying their hands with turbans. Rare manuscripts and historical artifacts were seized, and the reference library was set on fire. The dying were even deprived of water by the army, and the dead were disposed off savagely with the speed of light. Thousands in Punjab were tortured, humiliated, thousands disappeared. To this day Blue Star is an open wound for millions. The full truth may never come out? But the narrative provided by the Indian authorities does get disturbed now and then. Recently it was disturbed (and convulsively so) by a declassified archive in the UK.

Operation Blue Star was not the 'only option'. It was not the 'last resort'. Recent articles in the media suggest that the standard narrative around this disaster has finally started to break even within the dominant discourse. Calls have been made in India to investigate Indira Gandhi's criminal culpability. Blue Star had catastrophic consequences, and its aftermath is filled with events that caused unspeakable suffering for years on end.

Ironically, this dark chapter in Indian and Punjab history is also the least documented. The universities have done little research. In the libraries, there is a serious dearth of witness memoirs. Not enough literature grew out of this rubble. No significant biographies.

Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, a seminary preacher (initially propped up by the Congress Party) had fortified the complex and terrorized both the minority and majority communities in Punjab. He did not have a mass following as it is made to appear (by disparate groups). His brand of power and extremism co-existed with Indira Gandhi's. A narcissistic leader and dynast, she had previously suspended the country's Constitution and terrorized the entire country by assuming dictatorial control.

Over the years I have heard so many people discuss the army action. Regardless of differences most of them find the timing and the method of attack unacceptable.

Operation Blue Star left a traumatic imprint on the memory of the collective.

*

"Trauma: an overwhelming experience of a sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of intrusive phenomena." - Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*.

*

Several times I have gone back to that moment when our lives were about to change forever. But all we knew then was the curfew, the power blackouts, phone disruptions, and BBC world service.

It was lunchtime. We were gathered at the table. My grandmother had cooked 'lobia', but the grown ups seemed to have lost appetite. Only the children ate. I see myself eating and looking and looking at my parents and grandparents. The rest is absence of memory. That moment in time never really got integrated into normal memory.

A few days later we left Ludhiana and I recall to this day the near empty highway, the Grand Trunk Road. Check-posts everywhere. Punjab under heavy army occupation. Our first stop, a roadside dhaba, near empty. We sat on jute cots in the shade of unknown trees. Not far from the dhaba, near the green fields, an ancient well was visible, a Persian wheel in motion. The mechanical sounds of the wheel entered our ears intermittently. Fragile sounds made by falling water. Fatigued sounds made by two circling bulls.

Back in Delhi all through summer I felt more thirsty than ever. One day after school I bought water from a roadside vendor. No one knew the source of his water; he didn't wash the glasses properly.

He had no buckets filled with potassium permanganate solution. But I was very young and thirsty and took the risk. A few days later I fainted and was diagnosed with jaundice (*Hepatitis A*). The whole world transformed into yellow. Bed-ridden at home for three months; my parents worried and sleepless. A very slow recovery. But like all things it came to an end, and in early October I returned to school. No debilitating fatigue now, no nausea and it was possible to walk slowly. The doctor advised me to walk all the way to school instead of taking the bus. This way you will regain strength quickly, he said.

On the 31st of October I walked faster than usual to my school. Around mid-day we were in the biology lab, dissecting. A strong odor of chloroform filled the laboratory. I still recall the red-brick St. Thomas church visible from the window, and the massive Catholic Cross. That is when our biology teacher made an announcement: Classes have been cancelled (Indira Gandhi in hospital. Shot by her bodyguards). Right afterwards she walked to my bench and put an arm round my shoulder. She knew about the doctor's advice. She knew my destination was only two kilometers away. You walk carefully all the way back home, she said.

*

“Seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at the moment of danger.” - Walter Benjamin.

*

November, 1984.

We lived in a yellow-painted apartment block. A mob passed by our block, attacking the Sikh citizens they saw on the streets. We took refuge in our neighbor's house, but even there we could hear the acoustics of the mob, the barbaric slogans. “Khooon ka badla khooon say (Blood for blood).”

We were the lucky ones. We were spared. Around 20 minutes

later, the mob passed our apartment block. I recall hearing a couple of gunshots fired in the air, followed by a dead silence, and the loud racist and bloodthirsty slogans receding, as if a demonstration of the Doppler effect.

The few hours we were in the neighbor's house fill an enormous space in my mind. I have not been able to articulate those few hours, the burned remains of books and buildings I saw later and the tiny particles of ash floating in air.

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“Those who survived are not true witnesses.” Primo Levi, the Italian chemist's insight into genocidal violence in Europe is also valid for Delhi and other cities across India.

Only the dead are true witnesses. But the living have come to know a lot. That November India's ruling Congress Party used state-controlled radio, television and the dreaded police force to conduct a major genocidal pogrom in Delhi. Nothing was spontaneous. Cabinet Ministers and Members of Parliament hired and directed mobs to burn to death as many Sikhs as possible. Public buses were used to transport the mobs. Voters' lists were used to mark houses and businesses overnight. High officials distributed kerosene oil and white phosphorous. Witness testimonials talk about the innovative use of rubber tyres to simultaneously trap the target, create thick clouds of toxins and facilitate combustion.

Women were brutally gang-raped. They, too, are the 'living-dead' true witnesses.

The mass murder and genocidal rape was not confined to Delhi. Untold numbers were set on fire in more than forty cities throughout India. Books were burned; copies of Guru Granth Sahib were reduced to ashes in large numbers. This kind of coordination of the state apparatus to kill its own citizens in such large numbers was unsurpassed in post-partition Indian history.

The aching spectacle and the acoustics created by hired mobs

are too horrific to describe in detail. Many victims had been earlier displaced by the Partition of India in 1947 and later by Indira Gandhi's dreadful emergency in 1975. Most led impoverished existence in resettlement colonies on the fringes of Delhi weaving jute cots or working as carpenters or ironsmiths.

A few days later the head of the government, Rajiv Gandhi, justified the pogroms. *When a big tree falls, the Earth shakes a little*, he said, and almost instantaneously rewarded the guilty by making them ministers in his cabinet. He also announced medals for the police officers, who had facilitated the atrocity.

Instead of being tried by the International Criminal Court for facilitating a genocide and for shielding the perpetrators, Mr. Gandhi led his party to a landslide victory in the Parliamentary elections. He also received the highest civilian honor, the *Bharat Ratna* or the Jewel of India. Most Western governments developed a cozy relationship with him.

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Afterwardness. Almost three decades and numerous compromised judicial commissions later, not a single prominent politician, cabinet minister, bureaucrat, judge, or a high-ranking police officer has been brought to justice. (No full and independent inquiry was ever conducted).

No memorials exist to the dead, and the Congress is even opposed to remembrance of lives and communities destroyed in November of that year. When busloads of foreign tourists visit Indira and Rajiv Gandhi 'memorials' (or forgetorials) they have little idea that when one walks in the Indian capital one actually walks on the ashes of Sikh citizens who perished some thirty years ago.

What lies beyond comprehension is that the Indian political class enjoys near infinite immunity after committing mass murder (and 'memorycide' — the last stage of genocidal violence). In vain one looks for hope within the civil society, but it seems the depths of horror and suffering do not disturb the inner life of the nation. A huge crime

against humanity has been reduced to a "Sikh issue".

In a recently televised interview the scion of Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, Rahul Gandhi, tried to defend the indefensible, and circulated new lies in order to hide the criminal culpability of his father.

As he spoke (with a dimpled smile) a shudder went through the exterminated resettlement colonies in Delhi ¾ Trilokpuri, Kalyanpuri, Sultanpuri and Tilak Vihar's Widow Colony — and awakened the dead.

For several years now it was unclear whether the international community was aware of the enormity of November 1984. But the 2011 Wikileaks reveal a slice of what the US government has known for a while: "...Congress Party leaders competed with one another to see which wards would shed more Sikh blood."

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A Pogrom is a wound on the psyche of the collective and without justice and reconciliation it leads to recurrences, which are similarly ignored.

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Silence is not helpful. Memory, W.G. Sebald wrote, even if you repress it, will come back at you and it will shape your life. Not so long ago, before my mother passed away, I asked my own family members about their memories of November 1984. My sister told me how she has sought to erase the memories of her school, which was looted, partially destroyed, and set on fire by a mob. During those couple of hours in the neighbour's house, I still recall, she kept saying, "Let's go home. I have to finish my homework." She was 12.

My father recalled his journey home from work on the evening of October 31. He was the commanding officer of a Signal Regiment (E-Block) near the Parliament. When the officers' van passed by the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in central Delhi, he saw some signs of violence through the van window. As the violence intensified on

November 1, 1984, Father received several desperate calls from his Sikh staff members: junior officers, signalmen, radio and cipher operators. He dispatched a Hindu driver to rescue them.

My mother said she had nothing to say. When I insisted, she told me about the regiment driver. Ishwar, the driver, called very late on the night of November 1. She had answered the phone. Ishwar was crying. “He told your father the details of the day, almost like an entry in a log book,” she said. Then he broke down. Ishwar had driven for nine hours through Delhi, through fire and smoke, bodies and ash. He had rescued dozens of Sikh men and brought their families to the safety of a barbed-wire camp in Khanpur area in south Delhi. Many more needed help. Ishwar had not slept or eaten for the last sixteen hours. He could no longer stare in the eye of the horror.

“Your father tried to persuade Ishwar to make one more trip,” mother recalled. “But Ishwar broke down.” My mother was silent for a while. She spoke about Ishwar’s sobbing, crackling voice, and the complete collapse of language. “To this day I hear Ishwar’s voice and his scream,” mother said, her eyes filled with moisture. When she spoke several hours later, she asked me a question about the book I was working on. I could see that she felt like saying something to me, but she was unable to do so. And all I could think of for days on end was a chilling line by the German Romantic poet Heinrich Heine: *Those who begin by burning books will end by burning people.* In Delhi in 1984 this one line was completely inverted. Books were burned after burning people.

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‘I am Charlie’ is not about Charlie

‘I am Charlie’ is not about Charlie. It’s about me, you, and the values we hold dear.

The value, for example, that no one must be killed for expressing their views, that no one must be made to live in fear for their views. For us all to be free to express ourselves. For all of us to have the right to Freedom of Expression.

It may be of interest to me to research and to figure out if Charlie Hebdo is racist, Islamophobic, an instrument of White Colonialists and/or an outright right wing fascist publication but the results of this fact-finding mission will have no bearing on my ‘I’m Charlie’ decision. Rather they’ll help me hone and strengthen my ongoing struggle against racism, islamophobia, colonialism and fascism. In other words, it doesn’t matter who or what Charlie Hebdo was or is, what matters is who I am, who you are, and how we choose to defend ourselves.

Being selective in our support for basic human rights because of who the victims were or how the incidents are playing out in their larger contexts or if we favor the power-holders who benefit from such incidents or if it was a staged drama, is actually a callous position to take. We are asking humans to be more human than some others to enjoy our support for the protection of their lives. Here is an example where support is selectively offered, so we can see where this thinking leads us. ‘Pakistan’s Blasphemy Laws, Shariat Courts, Jirga, Madrassa institutions only support humans that are Muslim.’ Right? Wrong! These institutions mostly support humans who are prosperous, Sunni, Adult, Male Muslims of perhaps Punjabi variety.

Some ifs and buts. If I am against US Drone strikes in Pakistan, and so are the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, should I withdraw my oppo-

sition for fear of being found on the same side as my enemies? Don't think so, though I may add a footnote stating that my opposition to US Drone strikes does not constitute support for the zealots. If the main beneficiaries of the massacre of journalists in Paris appear to be the conservatives and European governments who are now tightening their racist/islamophobic laws against migrants and Muslims, should I leave the 'I'm Charlie' enclosure? No, but I will give active support to the local/global movements protesting against this usage, like I do against the usage of Malala Yousafzai by these same people. And if the bloodshed in Paris earlier this month was a staged drama, we know for sure it wasn't staged by any of the 12 people who got shot and killed by Al-Qaeda Goons.

In all of this, and away from the enemy camp where the leaders of the free world and the religious fundamentalists both reside perpetuating violence and weaponry, I find myself making my way between Freedom-of-Expression Criers who do not see how their unqualified mantra facilitates racist/war agendas, and Islamophobia Wailers who are unable to acknowledge the necessity to confront/criticize Islam, while both use their dearly held positions as extreme accusations against each other. And then confronting the limp argument of the protectors of the 'religious sentiment' who ask us to follow the thinking of extreme fundamentalist by 'not offending' in the first place those religious people who will then be moved to 'rightfully' kill the offenders further inciting backlash against Muslims in the West. A clever ploy that places all responsibility of all violence on the victim/s of violence.

As a non-religious Muslim Canadian woman, my position to defend Freedom of Expression includes my right to reject victim-bashing in both my worlds, and to criticize Islam, and to resist all oppressive constructs of my 'free world' such as class, race, gender, religion, ethnicity, age, sexuality, corporate profitism, and more. That's how I continue to be Charlie.

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Literature and the Sacred

In the beginning was the Word. The Word was with God, the Word was God. Said the Biblical prophet.... In our own tradition we know that *Wakh*, or Word belongs to God. Goethe's *Faust* isn't convinced. So in the opening lines of his play, the hero wrote that in the beginning was the Deed rather than the Word. Here are the relevant lines: "The Word I cannot set supremely high/ A new translation I will try.../ I read, if by the spirit I am taught,/ This sense 'In the beginning was the thought', Yet while the pen is urged with willing fingers/ A sense of doubt and hesitancy lingers./ The spirit comes to guide me in my need,/ I write, 'In the beginning was the Deed'.

The two declarations have become the antagonistic parties in the battle for literature. Those who regard the sacred Word as beyond question consider the writer as an extraordinary genius (a typical romantic gesture) and attribute to the writer the status of legislator of mankind. Such a conception of literature looks upon a work as a radiator of a particular kind of effulgence not obtained elsewhere. W.H. Abrams's notion of the mirror and the lamp just about encapsulates this belief. As the Word or the Wakh belong to God, literature by association acquires a sacred aura. This is the closest we can come to talk of literature and the sacred. The Word or language in less exalted signification becomes a revelation. Or even a radiation. It is *sui generis*; it carries its own justification. Through it we enter the boundless sphere of God's presence. And face its transformative power. The Word becomes the World as it enters human consciousness without human mediation. Language becomes a paradise, a utopian presence while we are exposed to its divine ministrations. As Milton says in Book XII, lines 585-87 of *Paradise Lost*: "Then wilt thou not be loath/ to leave this paradise, but shalt possess/ a paradise within thee, happier far." Or as

Theodore Roethke says, “The body, delighting in threshold,/ rocks in and out of itself.” In this way poetry becomes an utterance rather than a statement, an epiphany rather than an observation. When we are face to face with scripture, we experience this epiphany within ourselves since we confer on the literary or poetic utterance a divinity which underwrites our being and which gives it value. When James Joyce spoke of the epiphany in *Stephen’s Hero*, he spoke of it as an emanation of the Word in the world, of the divine in the mundane. The revelatory character of the Word has been accepted by a non-visionary philosopher like Aristotle who called revelation recognition and discovery. Such ideas often lead to a direct deification of the word which in turn becomes a mystic essence. And the writer a magus as in Plato. Such magical or semi-magical interpretation of the art of creation is still prevalent in certain literary quarters. The Russian poet Gumilev has expressed these thoughts in poetic form. As he says, “In days of yore when over a world still new/ God leaned his head, it was a word/ which made the sun stop in his course/ and towns were ruined by a word. /But we forgot the word alone is blessed/ Mid terrors that are sent us for a rod,/ and to the gospel that was writ by John/ ’tis said the word is—God.”

Although we have invested the scripture with a revelatory character, we also recognise the fact that we cannot confine the word to the heights of the divine or the transcendental. Literature is also an event, an unfolding within the quotidian world of time and space. Literature is as much grounded in human experience in time as it is in the timeless sphere of the sacred. It is as much a matter of what Goethe’s *Faust* called the deed as it is that of the Word. And let me add here that whenever we speak of literature, we speak of it as a this-worldly enterprise concerned with what Keats and later on E.M. Forster termed the holiness of heartys affections. What Eric Heller says about poetry is true of all literature. In his essay “The Hazard of Modern Poetry” he suggests that “poetry is concerned with the true stature of things; also that it is the vindication of a valuable and a meaningful world”. The

idea of literature as Deed involves a sense of the writer or artist as one who acts in this world to make sense of it. Here one must hasten to add that the worldly space the artist occupies is not always a sacred space; indeed it is tainted with the deprivations and deficits that we inherit in the course of our history as both individual human beings and as members of a society, a community. When Conrad’s hero Lord Jim is asked by Stein to immerse in the destructive element, he means what I mean by confronting the terrors of history by immersing into rather than escaping from the world. In the sacred time of the gods, nature and man are one, in the worldly time—or what Hegel was to call dialectical time—human development is a teleological movement and not a sudden transformation or revelation. As the great writer Borges put it in the parable ‘Borges and I’: “It is a tiger which destroys me, but I am the tiger; it is the fire that consumes me, but I am the fire. The world, unfortunately is real, I unfortunately am Borges’. In other words, literature cannot sustain itself by simply being revelatory; it has to have its grounding in the human person as well as the human condition. As Herbert Read, quoting Hegel, says, the function of sculpture (as of other arts) is to present “the divine in its infinite repose” and he contrasts it with the disruption into contingent existence, a world that is broken into complex forms and movements.

The sense of the sacred, then, traverses the whole gamut of divine revelation and the challenges of the destructive element in both nature and society. Since the originary Word is embedded in the words of the writer or the images the artist deals in, we cannot escape the worldliness of the literary/artistic enterprise because literature is created out of language and language is a product of the development of human consciousness as it experiences the world. One need not go all the way with Wittgenstein to say that language is the limit of human consciousness, but one can, nevertheless, not escape the shaping influence of language on the human consciousness. It is not for nothing, then, that George Steiner lamented the corruption of the German language in the whole of Nazi domination of Europe and the fact that

post-war German poets chose to write an austere poetry to remove the taint of complicity from contemporary German.

Scholars of religion have drawn a comparison between the sacred and the profane. Building on Rudolph Otto's seminal treatise *The Sacred* (1917), Eliade in his lectures titled *The Sacred and the Profane* makes the distinctions clear. The sacred and the profane are two modes of being in this world, two existential situations assumed by man in the course of his history. These modes of being in the world are not of concern only to the history of religions or to sociology; in the last analysis, the sacred and the profane modes of being depend upon the different positions that man has conquered in the cosmos; hence they are of concern both to the philosopher..." Eliade might have added—to the artist, the writer and the musician as much as to the rest of them. Eliade also talks of a sacred space which gives to every religion a fixed point of reference. In epic works such as *Iliad* and *Mahabharat*, the sacred pervades the profane, the worldly in the constant interaction between the gods and the humans, but this can also create friction between the two and break the unity that the religious sense of the sacred assumes. The violence we see in *Iliad* and which Simone Weil sees at the heart of Homer's text reveals the fragility of the sacred compact. Similarly, the horror of the war between the Kaurvas and Pandavas in the Indian epic belies the designs of a God-ordained cosmos. As Rene Girard says in his classic book *Violence and the Sacred*, the sacred and the monstrous coexist everywhere. In Greek Drama violence is the staple on which the plots revolve. The violence of possessive nature in *Medea* which results in the murder of Jason's children, the violence of the house of Atreus, the violence of Euripides's mad protagonists as in *Heraclides* and other plays, follows the intervention of gods in human affairs. Hegel has already noted the fact that the dark powers attack from ambush, from the unknown. The overriding and exemplary paradox of the sacred and the sacrilegious co-existing in literary creations such as the Greek tragic drama reinforces the doubleness of our existence in the world. It is this doubleness that makes

Greek tragedy in particular and tragedy in general so powerful in the pre-scientific age. We are told by Aristotle that tragedy offers a catharsis, but Nietzsche is right in asking in the *Birth of Tragedy* as to what kind of society could give rise to such a genre, one that celebrates such deep and desolating terrors. Tragedy offers a challenge to the sacred when it presents the impossibility of the Word becoming incarnate. Shakespeare's *Timon* says, "Let the language end". And it did in Euripides' *Bacchae* in which human beings are transformed into speechless beasts. The paradox of tragedy, then, is also a paradox of *logos*, language, as we notice in the postmodern undermining of the creative power of language.

But we are not concerned simply with religious connotations of the sacred. We are not concerned with the quest for a religious life as presented in Dante's and Milton's epics as well as in the poems of Richard Crashaw in English or in Sufi poets in other poetic traditions. We are concerned with the ways the sense of the sacred permeates our worldliness, our here and now. One is to trace it in what Eliot calls the still-point, the centre (Eliade calls it the central axis for all future orientation). Eliot himself sought this through a religious quest, as in the later *Quartets*. D.H. Lawrence regarded sexual love as the culminating centre of an epiphany which is both erotic and sacred, or in Lawrence's terms, sacred because erotic. This can be illustrated by closely attending to the language of his novel *The Rainbow*. In this novel three generations of the Brangwens seek an ecstasy which for us, the readers, becomes both a profane sexual climax and a revelation of the sacred. This twin effect is achieved by his truly original art of narrative iteration approximating to a chant. If we analyze the rendering of sexual scenes in this novel we shall notice a repetition of similar experiences (Lawrence called them allotropic states) by the Tom-Lydia couple and the Anna-Will couple, a repetition of movements of the physical bodies climaxing both in sexual release and a state of what the author calls mingling. That the third generation, of Ursula Brangwen and Anton Skrebensky, fails to achieve this type of consummation is because by the time this generation grows up, the rapport between the human and

the natural has broken down. The sacred has been completely taken over by the profane. The Country and the City (in Raymond Williams's classification) have drifted apart. I am not sure if Georg Lukas had read Lawrence's novel, but on the basis of his comparison of the epic being and the novelistic being in the early *Theory of the Novel*, Lawrence's book, though grounded in the transition between the Victorian and the modern age, has the texture of an epic tale. Joyce's *Ulysses* too is an epic, but one of wandering, drift and rootlessness, though home is beckoning Stephen Dedalus throughout the course of the novel and remains an ironic point of light. Lawrence's novel also acquires a quasi-mythic structure in that it re-enacts the primal gesture of love through different generation of Brangwens, fulfilling Mircea Eliade's prophecy of the myth of eternal return.

The impulse towards the sacred has another dimension in literature, the Bardic ambitions of writers to become the conscience of their nations. In contemporary thinking these ambitions are expressed in the concern to save civilization from barbarians. In modern poetry Yeats, Eliot and Auden have, in their own ways, sought to redeem mankind through an attempt to save their respective communities. Communities, nations—not mankind in general because, though ambitious in their salvatory mission, they could not rise above the social, economic and political pressures of their times that made the accomplishment of their mission difficult. Yeats created a utopia of his native Irish peasant culture, Eliot and Auden sought to restore what they thought to be the dissociation of sensibility by harking back to the 17th century. Yeats had hoped to create “a type of man whose most moving religious experience would bring with it imagery to connect it with an Irish multitude now and in the past time” (*Explorations*). His past time shares with William Morris a certain kind of medievalism that he brings forth in his poetry. Eliot's community as he postulates it in *Idea of a Christian Society* is equally non-abstract. “I am not here attempting to convert,” he says, and suggests a pattern, an organization of values for a futuristic society. He seeks to effect social and economic changes only through

spiritual change by confronting what he calls liberalism that destroyed traditional social habits of the people. He foresees a community of Christians, a small and mostly self-contained group attached to the soil. Like Eliot and Yeats, Auden also visualized a small group of individuals, of citizens creating what he called a civitas of sound. In his *New Year Letter* he puts it this way: “A cottage in Long Island Shone/ Where Buxtehude as we played/ One of his passacaglias made/ Our minds a civitas of sound/ Whwhere nothing but assent was found.” Such certitude seems a little shaky when we realize that in the same poem he had grasped the predatory character of capitalism and the Economic Man: “Of Luther's faith and Montaigne's doubt.../ emerged a new anthropos,/ an empiric Economic Man,/ the urban, prudent, and uninventive/ profit his rational motive.” In other words, they had already sensed the trend in which poetry would be of no use. The Word that emanated from God had already lost its power. Rilke too had sensed the snapping of the bond between creation and its creator and expressed his fear in the first of the Duino Elegies: “...Alas, who is there/ we can make use of? Not angels, not men;/ and already the knowing brutes are aware/ that we don't feel securely at home/ within our interpreted world...” The following lines of T.S. Eliot from *Four Quartets* are not only true of the failure of language, but of the failure of communication as a whole: “Words strain, /crack and sometimes break under the burden,/ Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,/ Decay with imprecision...so each venture / is now a beginning, a raid on the inarticulate/ with shabby equipment always deteriorating...” And Auden was lamenting that “all I have is a voice”. In his plays *The Dog Beneath the Skin* and *Ascent of F6*, he had denounced the ‘orator’, the persuaders who project grandiose plans to save mankind. As the Abbot says in the latter, “You wish to conquer the Demon and then to save Mankind”? But by the time he came to write *September 1, 1939* and *Spain*, his ardour for the big causes had died down and he recognized, as Yeats had in *Countess Cathleen*, that his art didn't matter. Refusing to claim moral or personal authority, and refusing to encourage the public to admire him as somehow heroic (unlike Yeats or Hemingway for that

matter); Auden preferred to present himself as less than he was. An Arcadian who wanted to live without harming anyone else and not as a stern-minded utopian who fantasizes an ideal future and destroys everything in its realization. As he says in his prose poem *Vespers*: “I am an Arcadian, he is a Utopian/ He notes with contempt my Aquarian belly: I/ note with alarm his Scorpion’s mouth/ He would like to see me cleaning latrines: I would/ like to see him removed to some other planet.” And in *Cave of Making* composed in peaceful Austria, he noted “More than ever/ life-out-there-is goodly miraculous loveable/ but we shan’t, not since Stalin and Hitler/ trust ourselves ever again: we know that, / subjectively,/ all is possible”. A similar sentiment is expressed by Yeats when he says: “We must descend where all ladders start/ in the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart”.

Today, the bardic voice has been lost in the labyrinths of mere textuality. The culture of post-modernism has reduced everything to discourse. To quote George Steiner in *Real Presences*: “It is against this encompassing background of the crisis of the word, of the abrogation of meaning, that we can...grasp the negative impulses towards deconstruction” (115). “[T]he deconstructive saturnalia, the carnival of dislocations, the masques of non-meaning” have made the voice of art meaningless. Postmodernism’s devaluation of logocentrism is in itself carried out in logocentric terms, deconstruction’s militant drive towards textuality and the dance of significations goes back to Shakespeare’s Bottom in *Mid-Summer Night’s Dream* (III, 1, 26-44). The move to self-reflexivity, to self-parody and the consequent dismantling of grounded meanings and reflections deriving from Bottom have in postmodernist thought reached their apogee in the annihilation of value formerly ascribed to literary texts (what Walter Benjamin called their aura). This has resulted in the devaluation of the Word into mere language and to the claim of Jacques Lacan that “the world of language...creates the world of things”. This statement denies the world of sense its autonomy of being and privileges language and the writerly text above what comes out of the word. So that Paul de Man can claim that the literary text represents not its imaginative power and outreach,

but its self-blindness and anti-humanist bafflement at the ruses of figurative language with no ground of meaning and symbolism and communication. And, as a consequence of this denial of materiality to a literary work, Stanley Fish sums up this suspicion of the materiality of a literary text by asking the question: Is there is text in the class room at all? By finding its justification in Heideggerian and Nietzschean antifoundationalism, deconstructive practice can tell us nothing meaningful about the classics of literature except to insist that texts are always already inherently contradictory. As Terry Eagleton elaborates in *The Event of Literature* (2013): “Deconstruction marks the point at which the decline of the humanist heritage modulates into militant anti-humanism” (104). No wonder that tragedy, a literary form that exalts the heroism of human suffering, is not a major form of literary expression. No contemporary work of literature has the sublimity of Goethe whose Faust is received with joy after his soul is taken away, or the stoic nobility of Yeats’s poem *Lapis Lazuli* in which Hamlet and Lear Are ‘gay’, “gaiety transfiguring their dread”.

Does all that I have suggested so far denote that in our present age, racked by crisis, violence and injustice, no lasting writing is possible? Is Adorno’s statement true that after Auschwitz no writing is possible? Have we reached a point at which as the hero of Eric Maria Remarque’s novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* says “horror is that there is no horror”? Bertolt Brecht asked the same question: “In the dark times, will there be singing?” And himself answered, “Yes, there will be singing/ about the dark times”. Believing himself to be belonging to a lost generation (“we know we are only temporary and after us will follow/ nothing worth talking about”), he found salvation in communism but died as a disillusioned man but not before warning that “the guileless word is folly. A smooth forehead/ suggests insensitivity” to those born later. Looking at Carolyn Forché’s anthology *Against Forgetting*, we note how contemporary poets are re-discovering the power of language to reveal, to ignite and to experiment in new ways. They stand, in the words of the great Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, “as witness to the common lot/ survivor of that time that place”.

But I would like to draw attention to three novels, two in German and one in Hebrew in which the authors, Hermann Broch, Thomas Mann and Y.S. Agnon grappled with the demons of dark times looming over the vocation of an artist. I choose these writers because they seem to me to capture in their distinctive ways the very same existential dilemmas that the canonical writers capture, now despised by the postmodernist reader and the academy alike. Hermann Broch's novel *Death of Virgil*, like Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* and Y.S. Agnon's *Shira*, is concerned with the position of the artist in the world and history. He asks whether a writer is after all God and whether he can refurbish language to enable it to escape the debasement of the terrible times. Its chief protagonist, the poet Virgil is teetering between life and death and wishing to burn his great poem *Aeneid* asks whether the poet's pursuit of beauty and aesthetic purity can prevent "laughter that destroys reality". This novel, like everything Kafka wrote, renounces entertainment and, like Kafka again, his hero (in this case the poet Virgil) is everyman who serves as Broch's vehicle for his philosophical speculations on life, death, language and creativity. With such a preoccupation the novel becomes a parable for the fate of art in our dark times, a parable which is presented as a form of a dream whose infinite ambivalences in relation to the real Virgil is intensified by Broch's lyrical prose sustained over 500 pages of close print. This in itself is a feat of artistry comparable to the subtle modulations of tone and pitch in Proust's great novel and spans the gap between Proust's rich and abundant life and Kafka's empty presences. Virgil philosophizes about the fate of the poet. "Love's power of remembrance", Virgil muses, "had forced Orpheus to enter the depth of Hades.... He was prematurely impelled to return... unable to send forth the loving recollection and guided by no memory..." (157). With this insight into the crisis of our times, Virgil despairs of poetry and decides to burn his poem. In the hour of his death, he recognizes "art's ...despairing attempt to build up the imperishable from things that perish". This deep pessimism is in line with the general tendency to denigrate art or the word, which postmodernism sedulously fosters. Paradoxically, Broch, though despairing of art, abandons himself to the lyricism and music of words to

redeem the ugliness and squalor of our world. This is evident in the descriptions of landscape, the sea that brings home Virgil's ship and the melancholy tone of his ruminations on life, death and time. The novel's lyrical brooding lifts it to a plane where its innate gloom is irradiated by something approximating hope, something Nietzsche achieved in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and Rilke in *Duino Elegies*.

Thomas Mann's novel *Doctor Faustus* differs from both Marlowe's and Goethe's plays. Whereas in Marlowe Faust's damnation was complete and whereas Goethe's play looks optimistically at the coming of new scientific knowledge ("It is possible...fast in my mind plan upon plan unfolds" (lines 10218-10222), in Thomas Mann Faust encounters the spectre of Nazism that drives him mad. Adrian Leverkühn says in the novel, "What human beings have fought for and stormed citadels, what the exultantly announced, I will take it back". As we know, Leverkühn is a musician who strives to keep his art alive under the Nazi threat and ends up in insanity, but not before composing his last testament *The Lamentation of Dr. Faustus*. Mann approaches the threat of fascism as a cultural movement. His hero Leverkühn, a musician struggling to keep his music alive, is the epitome of the artist in an age when the Word has lost its resonance and jackboots on the march erase every semblance of artistic presence. In this atmosphere Mann's lingering attachment to the bourgeois world is completely broken, as is to be seen not only in his own exile to California but also in Leverkühn's alienation from his world. Earlier in *Magic Mountain* he had foreseen bourgeois culture as a disease as symbolized in the Swiss sanatorium where Hans Castrop is admitted, but in *Mario the Magician* and *Doctor Faustus* he expresses his fear that, to quote from Leverkühn's reflections, "art is stuck and grown too heavy and scorneth itself...man playeth the truant and breaketh out in hellish drunkenness, so giveth he his soul thereto and cometh among the carrion". Leverkühn's personal tragedy becomes the tragedy of art under fascism. As Georg Lukacs writing about Mann says, "It becomes simultaneously the tragedy of Germany, indeed the whole of bourgeois humanity today". Housebound after his paralytic stroke, Leverkühn finally dies when Germany is at the height of her dissolute triumphs. Through his death we are made to realize

without overtly getting into the politics of the artist's situation the death of art itself, of the primal word or the musical note through which art had enriched society.

In Y.S. Agnon's *Shira* the crisis of literature (the title in Hebrew means both *poetry* and *milk* as also *the name of his mistress*, both nourishing the artist's soul) is highlighted not only in his frequent references to writers as different as Goethe, Nietzsche, Balzac and Stefan George, but also in the protagonist Manfred Herbst's clumsy attempts to write a play on the model of Greek tragedy. Is it because of the impossibility of tragedy after the advent of Hitler? Or is it due to Herbst's Socratic nature derived from his German academic upbringing which frowns upon the tragic as irrational, though Herbst manages to see a copy of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* in an antiquarian shop in Jerusalem. That tragedy endows suffering with meaning escapes him altogether. Death and renunciation are other motifs intimately linked with the theme of poetry and nourishing. The leper and the Byzantine medievalism to which Herbst is drawn may serve as emblems of Herbst's final retreat into the leper hospital and an intimation of death as in Herbst's recollection of the dead soldier in the First World War. All mock his sterile scholarship. His descent into and surrender to Eros and art amidst the political turmoil in Jerusalem and the approaching holocaust make his academic pursuits futile.

All these speculations seem to lead to a sobering and chastening thought, best expressed in my favourite poet W.H. Auden's poem *Death's Echo*:

The desires of the heart are as crooked as corkscrews
Not to be born is the best for man
the second-best is a formal order,
the dance's pattern; dance while you can.

*

These observations were given as plenary presentation on the seminar on Lit. and the Sacred held at Kashmir University in March 2014.

...And This Palpitation of Existence

In honor of Professor Harjeet Singh Gill on his 80th birthday

Today, January 13, 2015, when we have gathered here to celebrate the 80th birthday of our beloved teacher, the beloved colleague of some us here, and the thinker whose thinking has nourished us over decades long by now and has not ceased nourishing us over all these decades too short and too long, too long being too short. I wonder: what does it mean to celebrate the birthday of someone, someone whom we admire – here someone a thinker bearing a proper name – adoring the singularity of a thought, adoring the thought of a singularity, singularity that nourishes and opens us, unceasingly, to the infinitude of a thinking? I have always thought Professor Gill as a thinker, for encountering him gives us the gift of thought, the gift of opening to the infinitude of thinking, infinitude that while departing from finitude does not leave finitude behind as left-over, infinitude enigmatic – this infinitude of thinking – that trembles, palpitates, glistens and gleams, throbs our heart in admiration. I wonder, once again, and never ceased wondering for decades long: what does it mean to think? What is this strange experience that we have learnt to call “thinking”, learning without knowing or knowing without learning “anything”, thinking that opens us to infinitude while never leaving finitude as mere left-over, infinitude palpitating in the heart of finitude and is nourished on it? How to think, while thinking all along, the infinitude with finitude, the event of eternity erupting in the very midst of life while touching, at the same time, the threshold of death, touching while withdrawing, crossing over beyond while the beyond is still the not yet, the not yet reached and not yet attained? How to think leaving this world while remaining in it, like a pilgrim of eternity in the desert of the world, wandering without inhab-

iting wherein the birth simultaneously touches the threshold of death, wherein all welcoming welcomes what we have not learnt, what we have not known, what we have failed to know while welcoming all along, all the while, always and ever before, immemorially? Could it be that thinking not be learnt, for it has to do with the immemorial and infinitude of an exposure to the unknown, to the unknowable that would not have to pass over into the known, which would not have to be a mere attenuated variation of the visible, which would not have to be privation of memory and of knowledge, that which is before the memorial and visible, not in the manner of the logical “before”, but in the manner in which love precedes good and evil? How is it that – so I wonder today, just like a child, just like my child – how is it that each time we welcome what is to arrive we must take leave at the same time, as though the celebration of natality, of the day that recurs every year in the calendar, is born out of mortality, out of a fragility of our existence that we know not how to name, how to know, how to remember, but may nevertheless think as something like a gift coming to us from somewhere else, from some other place, from other destination? Is thinking otherwise than this – of the gift from a destination that opens up infinitude with the palpitation of the heart, with the trembling of finitude, with the being-open of the visible? Is thinking other than always being “existential” – this being the favourite word from Professor Gill – in which we attempt to think the trembling of being, this event called “being” at all, being that can always happen otherwise than a *stasis*, otherwise than a condition presently given or an essence, otherwise than that which has come to rest in the immobility of the gaze that fixes it and knows it thus as that which is, finally, knowable, as that which is memorisable and visible in the light of the Day? Could we, then, be able to say of the *phenomenality* of phenomenon – of this palpitation of existence – that it so *sutures* itself, exhausts itself, gives itself so completely to presence that nothing of remnant would remain, that nothing of the invisible would be able to maintain itself, that nothing which is not signification – the humming of the sea, the rustling of

leaves, the murmur of the most rudimentary and elementary awakening to consciousness from the depth of slumber – would remain that is untouched by the light of the Day? Should we say of this language that is *not yet* language, of the *potentia* of language that would not come to pass over into the immobility of a gaze, that it can be none but signification?

Re-reading some of Professor Gill’s works, I am astonished by that which he wants us to hear, or rather to listen in this word, in this term or in this name, over-used by him, that is, “signification”. “Structures of signification”: how innumerable times will he repeat it, as though we have not yet listened to that which resonates in this word, the infinitude of verblativity which overflows, exceeds, outpours the given, immobile, petrified structures of language, as though there can ever be achieved such luminosity without simultaneous darkening of the invisible, such blazing brilliance without simultaneous desertion of sense, such work of the Day without being fatigued and workless? But such failure, failure to achieve the absolute luminosity of signification, is a good thing. We learn to listen to the verblativity of the infinitude that resonates in language, born out of our mortality and nourished on the fragility of existence, by having failed to achieve the immobility of the gaze that seizes, grasps, appropriates that which has *always already* dephenomenalized itself. All those who have listened to Professor Gill – and we all know that he never says anything new but forever repeats himself – all those listeners, students, friends will remember how he evokes the distinction that Maurice Merleau-Ponty makes, that of the distinction between “thinking thought” and “thought thought”. He then goes on to multiply examples: Michel Foucault’s archaeological idea of enunciation, Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogical idea of heteroglossia, and 12th century thinker Peter Abelard’s dialectical understanding of the triune Gods of Christianity. And we remember, in admiration, of his corrective of the translation of the title of Jean-Paul Sartre’s famous book *Being and Nothingness*. He wants us to listen what Sartre listens: *to be*, that is, being in the infinitude of the verbal, and *to negate*, for the French

word *néant*, in distinction from the word *rien*, implies the active verbliness over the nominative. Hence we read, so Professor Gill reminds us, the title of Jean Paul Sartre's book *L'être and le Néant*, "to be and to negate". I would like to supplement Professor Gill here. In his famous letter on humanism, wherein Martin Heidegger criticizes Sartre's existentialism, Heidegger listens to Sartre's insistence on the verbliness of the infinitude of this *néant* in a manner that many of the professed Sartre's disciples do not listen to, for this term or the word *néant* has a conceptual history that Sartre himself traces back to what Hegel means by the word *Negation* in all its *inquietitude*, in all the restless energy with which the concept unleashes the movement of history. It is another matter that it is the same Hegel in the same book called *Phenomenology of Spirit* summons up the "patience of the spirit" that abides, makes itself an abode, by letting what comes to pass. Could it that the inquietitude of existence, so tied up with the impatience of language, this palpitation of being be heard or listened to in the dialectical movement without being absorbed into the totality which this movement constantly pre-supposes? I remember in a certain text that reads Jean-Paul Sartre, Professor Gill is attentive – which shows what a great scholar we have amongst us – to the notion of totality implied therein, an attention that brings a tension in Professor Gill's own works, an unbearable tension between the notions of totality and the structure of signification which we can arrive at showing conceptual pairs of oppositions and, on the other hand, the event of being that would not rest exhausted in any given totality, an event which Professor Gill himself names – and what a beautiful name it is! – as "existential", this incessant palpitation of being, this trembling not yet at rest and is still trembling, trembling without reaching stillness, without reaching the patience of the concept.

Existence: outside, ex- of insistence and persistence, without respite! Some of the medieval apocalyptic writers, especially Joachim of Fiore from 12th century, ask us to listen to this verbliness in the word they use: *transire*. Thus when Martin Heidegger uses the word *transcendenz* in his *Sein und Zeit*, we must listen to the resonance of the infinitude of

the verbal: it is the essence of *Existenz* that the there, Da- of *Da-sein* always *transcends*, in such a way that we must understand the title *Sein und Zeit* as "to be and to time", for it is not time that interests Heidegger but *to time*, in the way that it is not being that interests Heidegger but always *to be*, that is, its eruption from the *Abgrund*, from-without-ground, of mortality *towards* it goes ahead, this "towards" implying the innermost transcendence of existence. Heidegger's existential analytic of *Dasein* listens to the verbal resonance of being-*there* in its "to" and "towardness", going ahead *towards* that which *arrives* from the futurity, as though from the extremity of time.

During all these years since I met Professor Gill for the first time – I still remember that day – it is his speaking of the word *existential* that has always fascinated me more than those other words which are generally associated with him, those now well-known words that we have learnt to speak with him and from him to speak that which comes to us as an event of thought, to speak of "structure", of "signification", of "semiotics" etc. And as I write the word *existential*, I can now almost hear the breath that emanates from his voice and listen to the singular intensity that his voice lends to the word as he utters it: *existential*. For long have I associated the name, the proper name Harjeet Singh Gill with this breath, this breath almost imperceptible, passing through this indiscernible passage between the concept and phenomenon, passing without being *passé* and thus is always arriving as the event which, for me, is not yet signification, which *spaces* a space *still available* and *times* a time *still remaining*: so I utter, with him, from him – "existence", the-there of the outside that happens, arrives, comes and that is always new for me, while uttering the same word with him, always the same word. And we know Professor Gill utters only a few words, the same words for all these decades, always the same words, words that are yet always new, renewed in contemplation: "structure", "semiotics", "signification", "existence", "table", "chair", "father", "son", "nominalism", "realism". If you search, you may perhaps find one or two more words, but nothing more.

Where, then – so we wonder – is this event of language to be heard? Professor Gill, who is trained in linguistics and semiotics in his youth, answers: it is neither in the predicative structure of logical proposition nor in the syntactic-morpho-phonological structures of supposedly universal language. Where, then, is this event of language to be heard? He comes to answer, more decisively in these last few years of his life: it is in the language of poetry and in the language of art, and even in the language of translation, is there to be heard the resonance of the verbal infinitude of language, of language in its palpitation and trembling, of language in its and as its *existential*, of linguistic trembling of existence, or even better, of the *existential* palpitation of language. In poetic language and in language of art, opens up there the Open where language happens, arrives, comes. In poetry and in art, language *as such* trembles. I said “as such”. This is not a phrase that he ever uses, but it is all there. One has to read him in spirit and not just in its letter. Here is an instance of this trembling, of this palpitation, of the beating of the heart, of life persisting and still persisting while it is in suspension, of existence suspending in tumultuous voluptuousness.

Professor Gill is reading here Gustav Flaubert. He is reading Flaubert’s incomparable *Saint Julien*. He criticises the great translator Robert Baldick of Oxford University for not listening to this palpitation of existence, this beating of the heart, this heart of language that beats and is still beating in savage and tumultuous voluptuousness. How can a translator not listen to the heart of language? Is it not the task of the translator to listen to the heart of language, to welcome the arrival of language, to welcome so that language may come to itself in the Open of existence? Here is the French paragraph:

Le pigeon, les ailes cassés , palpait, suspendu dans les branches d’un troène. La persistence de sa vie irrita l’enfant. Il se mit à l’étrangler; et les convulsions de l’oiseau faisaient battre son coeur, l’emplissaient d’une volupté sauvage et tumultueuse. Au dernier raidissement , il se sentit défaillir...

Here is the translation by Robert Baldick :

The pigeon, its wings broken and its body quivering, was caught in the branches of a privet. Its stubborn refusal to die infuriated the child. He set about wringing its neck, and its convulsions made his heart beat wildly, filling him with a savage, passionate delight. When it finally went still in his hands he felt he was going to faint...

Professor Gill now comments. Let us now listen to him listening, let us listen with him listening – to this palpitation of existence, to this throbbing of the heart and to the savage and tumultuous voluptuousness:

This passage shows most clearly what indeed has gone wrong in this rendering. A highly internalised existential situation has been transformed into an extrovert state, inflicting a major psychic deviation on the kernel theme of this discourse of St. Julien. The “palpitating” (heart) is rendered as “quivering body”, and “suspension” is taken as “caught”. It is interesting to note that throughout the English translation, the “movement” is rendered as a static state. “The persistence of its life” is somehow understood as “its stubborn refusal to die” and “irrita l’enfant” becomes “infuriated the child”. The persistence of life is an internal affair, a state of hyper-tension from within as is the notion of “irritation”. Both of these concepts are interrelated and lead to a unified psychic interpolation. On the other hand, the stubborn refusal to die and the infuriated state point to a conscious act, an external behaviour, almost an outburst, a state of mind most unfamiliar to Julien. This English rendering demonstrates a complete misunderstanding of the discourse of St. Julien. “The convulsions of the bird made his heart beat” has become “its convulsions made his heart beat wildly”. Why this addition of “wildly”? And, the translation goes on with “filling him with a savage, passionate delight” where the French version refers to a “volupté sauvage et tumultueuse”. How on earth can one equate “savage and tumultuous voluptuousness” with “savage and passionate de-

light”? Passionate delight and tumultuous voluptuousness refer to two very different psychic centres of external and internal mental states. There is no question of a passionate delight, there is within the innermost layers of Julien’s mind, a state of tumultuous upheaval which makes him feel “défaillir”, disintegrate, decompose, faint. It is only from a storm within that one disintegrates, and not from a state of passionate delight.

This passage all throughout is italicized. I don’t know a better way to celebrate the 80th birthday of my beloved teacher than to listen to him once more and always once more – to this palpitation of existence! Felicitation, Professor Gill !!!

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Harjeet Singh Gill, “Semiotic Analysis of a Literary Text: La Légende de Saint Julien L’ Hospitalier of Gustav Flaubert: Method and Praxis” in *Journal of the School of Languages*, Vol. III (“Structures of Signification”), (New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1991), 640.

John Siddique’s *Sobni Mahiwal*

A Post-nostalgic Diasporic Artifact

John Siddique has many homes. Among languages, English. In poetry, Latin American and Irish. His affections nest in Punjab—on the Indian side of the border with Pakistan.

His grandfather lived in Jalandhar. The partition in 1947 turned him out of home. He was forced to seek his fortune in Pakistan. One of his sons, Siddique’s father, would later leave Pakistan to make England his home.

Siddique was born in England in 1964. He lives in Yorkshire.

In recent years, he has often journeyed to India, to Punjab, to Jalandhar. On 11 June 2012, he came to Patiala. We snacked in a restaurant and talked.

I have never seen so much intensity and serenity sitting together in one face. His conversation was clear and deep.

As someone who was not born on the Indian subcontinent nor has lived on it, Siddique’s memory of the ancestral homeland is an acquired memory. When I read his relatively long poem *Sobni Mahiwal**, later published in *South Asian Ensemble* in 2013, I was struck by his unusual way of relating to the folk legend.

The legend of Sohni and Mahiwal lives on as one of the founding legends of Punjabi culture on both sides of the border. It is a tale of love, deception and death, all turning on the lovers’ alienation in the world. Siddique’s re-telling makes it a paradigm of the peculiar relationship of the diaspora, particularly of the second and later generations, with the culture of their ancestral homeland.

His *Sobni Mahiwal* is a post-nostalgic work. The poet builds a home of austere affects, with an architect’s sensitivity to spaces and a sculptor’s defining tenderness. There is no sentimental clamminess. The

aesthetics achieve an almost geometric discipline—such is the detachment with which the poet attaches himself to his art home. The result is a structural paradox, an embodiment of passion in a form so pure it has the hard translucence of a crystal palace. A pure house for the lover's being as a diasporic subject.

In *The Place Within* Vassanji speaks of two roads available to the seeker of the self—the mystical and the historico-cultural. He chooses to follow the latter. Siddique too hits that road in *Sohni Mahiwal* but only to inhabit it as a space in which his art would seek its form but would be irreducible to it. The result is a delocalized, emancipated artifact, evacuated even of the originary geography of the legend of Sohni and Mahiwal.

The poem has two sections, each section has ten parts. In each section, the parts begin with one line. The second part has two lines, the third three, and so on and on until the tenth part has ten lines.

Each section is a dramatic monologue in which the speaker's subjectivity opens up to make room for the lover's, indicated by a shift between *I* and *we*. The looming presence of a hostile world is invoked by *them* and *they*. The first section is *Izzat Baig (Mahiwal)*; the second is *Sohni*. The two sections are like two inverted pyramids. They carry and reflect each other. Each is a theatre of private consciousness in which archetypes have swallowed the legend's historico-geographic traces.

The philosophical framework is put in place with the very first line of the poem: 'Each moment is the first moment'. The words will recur. Recalling the Buddhist doctrine of momentariness (*ksanikavada*), they effect a radical displacement of identity on the axis of time, refusing nostalgia, reconstituting memory, challenging tradition, and rejecting the notion of history that feeds on a romance of imagined timeless essences. Memory is not dumped ('I have seen this day many times before'), but it is not closed either. It is open: it can bear insemination by the new.

So time, not God, is the potter. *I* is the pot ('I am made smooth by the hand of day'). Time insists on being all there is, on being the very

meaning of life ('I thought that the passage of time/ was what life was about'). And time gives meaning to life, through love and art, through love as art and art as love. It confers immortality. Clay being the ground of being, fire is the giver of birth: 'We are born in fire'. The Promethean myth gets kneaded into the legend's clay.

And then: 'We are the hand/ and we are the turning of the wheel'. We are time's hand. We are also time. After the clay has been fired, 'the river of the heart' knows no law other than that of fire. Mortality becomes love's canvas ('Coiled rope, clay heart/ painted with the only colours we have').

As the first section of the poem plunges into its last part (tenth), the alien world rises up to strike with a vengeance: 'The world hates lovers. It fears beauty'. But the alienation will produce the fusion of love and art. Against the world's will 'to unname, to unmake us' (we of the fired clay), love becomes art on the canvas of mortality: 'We have painted our love brushstroke/ by brushstroke on the clay of our flesh'. A strange immortality is crafted between clay and time. Out of—no, very much in—mortality.

Reflected in Sohni's consciousness, 'we' passes into and becomes time: 'Moments painted brushstroke by brushstroke/ with the only colours we have to hand.' We, who are time, are also the material of art.

It is given to Sohni to articulate the event that is at once acceptance and sacrifice and action, so that the moment cannot be distinguished from the movement. The moment the die is cast, to risk a change of metaphor, will define the artist's being. Quietly, the lover has metamorphosed into the artist: 'the whole of/ the artist's being defined by a single action'. Yet the artist has not ceased being a lover: 'Painting our love brushstroke by/ brushstroke onto the clay of our flesh'.

Where is love housed? It fills the 'inner space' which, then, 'allows the body to exist'. The vase with its inner space, unlike the unfired pitcher in the legend, will not sink, and Sohni will not drown to her death. Love shall keep the vessel 'buoyant'. A thing of clay, but

fired and filled with love, it will house for all time the lovers' story: a thing of fiction, of art, of truth lived—"Painting our story onto this vase,/ its being, its beauty, its form – our flesh'.

The lovers' alienation from the world has mellowed by the time the poem reaches the last part. A sublime disdain has replaced the earlier fury.

*Others make bread, build houses, hammer in nails,
fix car engines, write poetry , hold babies.*

*Some lie with their words. Some lie with their faces,
their hands always give them away. Love and poetry
course through our fingers to make shapes of our clay.*

Love and art have fused to create a shaping divinity out of mortality.

And the secret of the fusion is given away with a child's magnanimity: "The clay turning on the wheel, placed/ in fire and in time".

*Siddique, John. *Sobni Mahival*. Published in *South Asian Ensemble*. Vol. 5 No.1-2. Winter and Spring 2013. 13-32.

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Anoop K Babra

A Parallel Journey...

"Beautiful British Columbia" as they call it for all the beautiful reasons. Sure enough nature resides there in full bloom throughout twelve months of the year...each day of the year, every year! If there is any wisdom running through my veins today, any seasoned poise and calm in my walking on this earth today, a major chunk of credit goes to my experiences of listening and confiding in the great silence of the Rockies, the peaceful rustle of magnificent trees, endless space, the carefree wild life that shows up all of a sudden in random front yards, the selfless flow of Fraser River...the pulse of my life owes a lot to Beautiful British Columbia!

The wilderness in nature is similar to the wilderness in life pertaining to the structural wear and tear, the negotiations and outcomes of steep slopes regardless of dampness and mist, human life runs parallel to nature. The strenuous journey on tumultuous paths of isolated griefs, challenges and fears make life tough but just one look at the openness of the Pacific Ocean under the vast skies would reassure me and soothe my bruised human ego. Both the Pacific Ocean and endless blue skies do not leave or abandon each other even for a fraction of a second. They watch over each other lovingly...just like my few lucky stars watch over me no matter how self-centered and preoccupied I can get unconsciously. I inter-breathed with these forests many a time as I walked through trails leading me to the granite cliffs of Big Chief Mountain (Squamish, BC)... they responded to my inner upheavals... and my deepest roots are safe across all the shorelines of beaches on Sea To Sky Highway and of course throughout Beautiful British Columbia!

The fully automated sky-train running on grade-separated tracks on elevated guide ways overviews not only the fast paced scenes of the

metropolitan Vancouver (and Greater Vancouver) but also major parts of natural beauty that BC is blessed with more than any other part of the vast lands of Canada. As far as BC is concerned it is Mother Nature's most spoiled child for she has bestowed upon BC an incomparable amount of charismatic scenic beauty. My numerous commutes in The Expo Line, The Millennium Line and The Canada Line witnessed how majestically tiny little tug boats carried the weight of straight rows of logs of lumber in Fraser River, how colourful sailboats tried to stay afloat on playfully raised tides of omnibus and omnipotent Pacific Ocean on bright sunny mornings and how proudly cruise ships carried cheerful travelers to the breath taking beautiful holiday destinations of their dreams...as I would sit with down cast eyes in my next to window seat in sky-train on the world's longest cable supported (transit-only) bridge, The Skybridge to cross the Fraser River. The dynamic and interwoven rims of the Pacific and the four chambers of my heart have many similarities... We are both following undetermined directions, carrying out duties, keeping secrets in our depths and bearing weight: both the Pacific and I are *en route* new discoveries. The ocean and the tides of my mind are parallel...with the difference that Pacific is awesome and boundless whereas I am awestruck and thankful yet tired sometimes of dead ends or my encounters with split ends of long roads... my journey goes on... Resilience keeps me company!

Often I went to different beaches in Vancouver. I loved sandy beaches the most because they helped me see better at the distant mountains. I would sit still on a smooth log of my choice and admire the great mountains, and the mighty ocean... They challenged my complacent conviction, These still, beautiful gigantic rocks, mostly covered with Alpine Fir, Juniper, Western Larch, Spruce and an endless variety of Maple often draped in snow have their own rhythm and order of existence. I am always in awe of them. They have the power to make me feel small and intimidated... I am almost nonexistent in my own eyes in front of them. I would wonder why both abundance and lack exist simultaneously in one's life as hard-core parallel realities. It is al-

ways one's conscious choice however which secret path one tends... puts up with a stench of a rotten wedlock within the so called comfort of a four walled house as a co-owner or walks out quietly with dignity, clutching tight one's only child's hand on a cold January morning without ever looking back. When one chooses not to focus on what is missing from one's life but is grateful for the abundance that's present in love, health, family, friends, work, room for spirituality, the joys of nature, when one's personal pursuits become paramount and all important (up and above the financial fear factors) in order to bring peace, more than anything else...then illusions of façade and false promises frizzle away, unfulfilled desires get tamed and learn to rest in peace and the shattered heart learns to heal itself...The emotional void starts to fill just like baron trees start to blossom after winter.

Life is just as complicated or as simple as one makes it. Often Jasmine Mehar comes home from school with all kinds of freshly gained knowledge of stars, constellations, planets, plants, animals and people, field trips, and so forth. She discloses all her chapters of the day to me usually on the kitchen table right away as I fix her an after-school snack. "Oh mama, I love stars, some of them are very close to me," she says sometimes at bedtime, "and the moon can hide behind my thumb you know." She spills her secret with such ease and falls asleep. She makes me wonder whether one may understand the deep labyrinths of the cosmos but not the shallows of human ego, why this "self" is far beyond reach and hard to fathom but the stars are within reach of Mehar's chubby little fist. The passion and enthusiasm we show in a relationship or our first ever love, a piece of art, a book, and any experience for that matter fly off before we realize. We tend to forget *we have forgotten*. One may successfully block out important episodes and believe that nothing is permanent in order to move on smoothly through life, yet the ongoing clashes between creation and reflection are inevitable. Time and space are daunting things; some moments pass unobserved, others remain with us frozen for a lifetime. The universe is too complicated for my limited sensibility but the more

one understands the universe and nature, especially sub-atomic physics and metaphysics that attempt to encompass nature and human as one... the more amazing one finds it all. Even the mental push and pull is amazing at times. With these grains of thought and many more I close my eyes and start to whisper my Hare Krishna Jaap, a continuous mantra, to calm my overworked emotions down while the British Columbian evergreens rustle with all their might parallel to me to wave off the dark clouds...

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Artist Jarnail Singh

The Painter of a Vanishing World

Interviewed by Ajmer Rode

Artist, illustrator, designer, photographer and art journalist Jarnail Singh was born in Punjab, India. Mentored by his father Kirpal Singh, a celebrated artist, he inherited not only a talent for painting but also an appreciation of historical icons and their role in the history of Sikhism. After immigrating to Canada in 2000 he has been living in Surrey, British Columbia, and has become the most sought after artist of Punjabi origin in Canada. He continues the fine tradition of portraying Sikh icons, especially the Gurus, and historical events, and has done much to capture the images of Punjabi folklore which is disappearing fast. Recently he finished painting a series on women of Punjab and has begun a series on British Columbia landscapes. Jarnail Singh has exhibited his art at many national and international venues; his works are included in the exhibits at the Central Sikh Museum in the Golden Temple at Amritsar.

The City of Surrey honored him with its prestigious First Civic Treasures Award; he is among the twelve persons from art, literature and culture honored for their lifetime contributions to the city's art scene. The Vancouver Sun included him in its list of 100 prominent South Asians who have made significant contributions to life in British Columbia.

What does art mean to you?

For me art is a way of life, the very essence of my existence, as essential as breathing. For me it is about sharing with the world what I feel is worth sharing, about telling the stories I feel are worth telling, about sharing the ideas and experiences that give me happiness, and about evoking, hopefully, the same emotions in others. More specifically, art for me is a medium to communicate with the people around, with my neighborhood and with society in general. Also it is a means for finding my personal inner voice and its expression.

Do you remember the first time you held a brush in your hand? Did someone light up the path for you?

I am not quite sure when I first picked up the brush. Art was all around me as I grew up. My father, S. Kirpal Singh, was also a pioneer artist, who painted the history of the Sikh faith; he was the founder artist of the Central Sikh Museum, the first ever Sikh Museum in the World, at the Golden Temple in Amritsar. I sure learned the basics of painting from him, and that too in the old guru shishya tradition of apprenticeship that was still prevalent in those days. So my first influence was my father. As a child I used to watch him paint. Although a child is probably not aware of these things, yet I think that at the back of my mind I always wanted to be an artist, a painter. Whenever people came to our house, Father would ask me to show my drawings to them and they would generously praise the awkward doodles of a child. I remember the famous artist Sobha Singh once visiting our house in Delhi. After looking at my drawings he rewarded me with a 50-paisa coin and blessed me. I have kept it as a prized possession.

How did the journey take off after childhood?

It was quite fast. After doing my high school I began assisting Father and then gradually found my own sphere of work. I started participating in Punjab Lalit Kala Academy exhibitions, won awards and had exhibitions in Bombay, Calcutta, and New Delhi, and then also in Punjabi University, Punjab Agricultural University and Guru Nanak Dev University.

What fascinated you first, line or color?

Hard to say. I was not aware of this in the beginning. But now, reflecting retrospectively, I think it was color that attracted me first. You can see the love of color in my early work. I loved painting the reds and other vibrant colors in the clothes of Punjabi women. I remember when I was exhibiting at Punjabi University, Patiala, Lali Baba of the famous Bhootwara commented: *Aje tan kalakar rangan nal kbed riba e* (The artist is just playing with colors yet.)

As you mentioned, your father was a prominent Sikh painter. Tell us more about how he influenced your work. Did you feel comfortable in his presence?

I think he is the greatest painter of Sikh history and his work has not been evaluated properly. In his day the mainstream art in India was predominantly influenced by Abstract art movement, popular in the west. Everybody was into nonrepresentational abstract style of painting but here was an artist retelling the history of his community and people in a realistic style, a style easily understood by the common man for whom it was painted. This was brazenly dismissed as religious art. But a close study of my father's work will reveal to you the classical elements of fine art: composition, color harmony, balance. His work, out of all the artists' I love, has been my major inspiration. He would always stress the study of relevant historical incidents, period details, costumes and weaponry etc. because future generations would base their perception of the past times on the details that we paint today in the scene. Very few artists have been able to recreate and paint the turbulent times of Sikh people's history like him. In 1956 he was employed as an artist by Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), the statutory body that manages historical Sikh Shrines. The Central Sikh Museum was opened in 1958 with the paintings he made... My early schooling happened in Amritsar and Delhi; in 1965, Father moved to Chandigarh, where I stayed until 2000, the year I moved to Canada.

I saw your recent publication Punjab Paintings. Looks gorgeous. Can you tell us more about it?

Punjab Paintings features my selected work from the past 35 years. Most of the paintings depict Punjabi life, customs and traditions, especially the rural Punjabi. These things are now vanishing fast. Much, I would say, has already gone, and many old ways and customs are now a thing of the past. I think the significance of this book lies in that our next generations will be able to see the art work like this and learn about their past—how life used to be in rural Punjab in the era gone by. Nowadays nobody listens to grandpa stories at night, people don't go to

weddings on camels and horses and the bride does not arrive in a palanquin or bullock-pulled rath, women don't grind corn on hand mills, farmers don't do manual winnowing, and stuff like that. But all that is part of these paintings and is captured vividly in paint and color. I feel good when I hear friends remark: "This is a very beautiful publication, the first coffee table book of its kind telling the story of Punjab in paintings, a book everyone should love to own and cherish...." It was published by Punjab Arts Council.

A Journey with the Endless Eye is another recent publication—with your paintings and my stories—on the Komagata Maru incident.

This book was my—and I believe yours too—dream project and a labor of love. I worked on it off and on for more than seven years. At last it is published now and I am personally really happy, proud, that we have done it. Finally it has seen the light of the day. Credit goes to Richard Olafson of Ekstasis Editions of Victoria who decided to take up this publication. What I really feel is that these paintings give a humane touch to the whole story. Everybody knows from history books and photographic records what happened to the Komagata Maru ship and its passengers. What is different about the narratives and paintings in this book is that the book tries to recreate the emotional side of the story: suffering of the passengers, their hope and anger, the agony of the mother whose child is dying from thirst and hunger, the treatment meted out to soldiers who had made sacrifices for the British Empire... You don't find these emotional depictions in the archival records and photos. I think therein lies the significance of *A Journey with the Endless Eye*. Also the treatment I have given to the art work is somewhat different from my usual, richly detailed and colorful style. Here the colors are more subtle and muted and somber to reflect the overall mood of the story and the tragic finale of the incident. In some paintings the colorscape is almost monochromatic, mostly browns with some underpainting showing: the image of the Sikh soldier at war with a hazy head of death looming over him in the dark turbulent sky, or the pas-

sengers attacking the police boat Sea Lion, or the tragic shooting incident when the ship reached Budge Budge Ghat, resulting in the death of some 20 passengers.

Most of your work portrays history and culture of Punjab. Is there a central theme?

I love painting the history and culture of Punjab, I really do. When I began painting these cultural images some of my friends would make fun of me, saying—*what is this, a painting? A woman grinding corn or doing embroidery or daily household chores; you call it art?* But I did have in my mind a central theme: the household life of rural Punjab. So I systematically started painting a series around this theme showing people doing ordinary work, their customs and traditions, their farming activity; and a series showing costumes and jewelry and beauty of Punjabi women. These paintings became hugely popular. In my humble view no other artist before this created such a large body of work Punjabi people could relate to, communicate with or empathize with. And I think the cultural relevance of the paintings was the main reason for their wholehearted acceptance and celebration by Punjabis. Of course, I make no claim that these are the best paintings; all I say is that I painted them with deep commitment, faith and love, and to the best of my ability to capture the essence of Punjabi culture. Also one of my cherished aims was to paint subjects no artist had attempted so far, like, the martyrdom of Banda Singh Bahadur, and Maharaja Ranjit Singh storming the Lahore fort at the age of 19. Another aim was to paint stories and events that portray the message of service, brotherhood and oneness of mankind spread by the Sikh Gurus. Painting for me is essentially a medium for telling the stories of my land, my people, my history and my culture.

How has Sikhism influenced your work?

It has influenced the subject matter of my work.

Beautiful women seem to dominate your portrait work. If you want to illustrate Punjabi phulkari, why has the woman wearing it to be so beautiful?

Well, on a lighter note, nobody would like to own a painting of an ugly woman. But seriously, I love painting the beauty of life, love painting beautiful women. My friends would often tease calling me a painter of *Sobhian Tiwian*, beautiful women. Sometimes people ask me: do such beautiful women really exist? My answer is, they do. While working with models, not professional but the girls and women who willingly posed for me just out of respect for my art, I met some of the most beautiful women in my life. When I was painting rural scenes people often asked me: there is so much dirt and ugliness in villages, why don't you paint that? My answer to them would be: I want to paint beauty of life, not its ugly side. That is how I am. Yes, I wanted to create a series showing the grandeur and beauty of our phulkari art. Why not wrap the phulkari around an equally beautiful woman? Yes, I wanted to create an idealized image of Punjabi beauty expressed in our folklore: fair complexion, beautiful big eyes, sharp nose, wide forehead, sharp chin, soft thin lips. I have incorporated all these features in a single ideal face, and do people love it? Absolutely! They love it. These portraits have become hugely popular on calendars, greeting cards, posters... you name it. They say imitation is the best form of flattery; these are probably the most imitated paintings in Punjabi world.

Would you describe the genre of your work as realism?

Yes, you can describe it as realism with a touch of idealism.

You have been writing on famous painters of the world and undoubtedly are familiar with modern and postmodern movements in painting. Yet you decided to stick to a traditional form, I mean realism. Any reason?

I simply love this style and form. And as I said earlier, my subject matter and themes find best expression in this style.

Some art critics would describe your work as enhanced photography. Your answer to that?

Only those with preset and preconceived ideas about creativity think that way. In this age of free expression the very idea that one genre is

artistically superior to another sounds so banal. Do you think the painting showing Komagata Maru passengers fighting the Sea Lion, or the one showing the start of the Komagata Maru voyage with Gurdit Singh talking to passengers, or another one depicting a Sikh soldier fighting in the battlefield, or the police firing on passengers at Budge Budge Ghat India, would be termed as enhanced photography? In this age when hyper realism paintings are a new highly regarded genre, is the term enhanced photography for my work justified? In any case I am not worried about these comments. I paint what I like, and how I like it. I love painting the way I do. But if at some stage I feel it is not suitable for what I want to express and communicate, I may do it differently.

When did you move to Canada? Is this your first move outside Punjab?

I moved to Canada permanently in 2000. Before that I had come here as a visitor in 1995. Earlier I had been to UK and the US. I have had exhibitions outside Punjab in Bombay, Calcutta and New Delhi, and outside India in Thailand, England and USA.

Why do you think so many Punjabi painters have moved out of Punjab, especially to the West?

I think every creative person wants to reach a bigger audience and explore new avenues for his or her creative expression, and that is the reason so many Punjabi painters have moved outside Punjab. Art and commerce have an intrinsic connection: the bigger the city the bigger the scope for an artist and his art to grow and develop professionally. An artist living in a small town in Punjab has lesser opportunities to grow compared to the one living in a bigger city. For instance, an artist living in Chandigarh has better chances and opportunities than the one living in, say Moga or Zira. Similarly someone in Bombay has more chances for growth than someone in Chandigarh.

Has your move to Canada infused you with new inspirations?

Yes it has. Has been very inspiring, indeed. Especially the beautiful raw

virgin natural landscape of Beautiful British Colombia has filled me with new inspirations. I have always wanted to paint nature, and after coming here I was really touched by the abundance of natural beauty. I have painted some nature and am really happy with the results and love it. It has added a new dimension to my creative expression.

You have been very successful after moving to the City of Surrey: new paintings, murals, exhibitions, lots of contract work... What's the secret?

I love doing what I do. I have never painted anything I did not feel inspired to paint. I feel those who come across me reciprocate my passion and commitment and sincerity toward art. My father used to say: *there are no short cuts in art*. I have never looked for short cuts. My diligence and my faith and commitment to excel and work to the best of my ability and capacity are what people seem to appreciate when they meet me. I have always listened to my heart and as the saying goes, whatever comes out of your heart touches the heart of people around you. I have been very lucky that people love me and my work. Somebody up there loves me!

Do you feel you've been duly recognized by the City of Surrey?

Yes. Of course, I was really surprised when I got a call from the city hall; I thought someone was pulling my leg. I said, "Come on, don't pull my leg." And the woman on the other end said, "No Jarnail, I seriously mean it. You have been selected as one of the Surrey Civic Treasures." In 2008, the city of Surrey won the Cultural Capital of Canada grant honor, and as one of the legacy building activities under this project they had this Civic Treasures Recognition program. So I was one of the first 12 persons recognized as Surrey Civic Treasures from different fields of art, music, literature, theatre. It was indeed an honor for me to be selected personally and at the community level also because I was the only Canadian of Indian origin selected for this honor.

Your partner, Baljit, is an accomplished artist and art teacher; your children are

also following their artistic aspirations. Does this create harmony or tension in the family? How does this affect your work?

I often say jokingly that Baljit has really studied art but I am an illiterate in the field. She has a Bachelor of Arts degree with Fine Arts from Government College for Women, Chandigarh. And she is always the first to see and critique my paintings. She makes suggestions and often points out that I don't work hard enough, as diligently as I am capable of. She is a very good artist in her own right and has done some very beautiful paintings depicting Indian and Punjabi women in different moods. Some of her paintings are included in the recently published *Punjab Paintings*. My daughter Neeti Singh is very talented, but the way Baljit reminds me that I don't work hard, I tell Neeti: *work hard, otherwise you'll waste your talent!* My son Zobar has a very good eye, is a very talented photographer. His works were featured in the exhibition *From the Land of Five Rivers* at Surrey Art Gallery and in a solo show at Newton Cultural Centre also in Surrey.

How do you look at the time ahead?

Very good and positive. I see myself exploring new avenues and audiences. And new subject matter and themes. I feel there is a whole new exciting future out there waiting...

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Zubair Ahmed

Dead Man's Float

Translated by Anne Murphy, with Zubair Ahmed

And so it happened that the house remained within his consciousness, haunting his dreams.

If he dreamt of the dead then there they were, in that house; if he dreamt of the living, they were in the same house again. It all happened in front of that house, in the streets of the neighborhood or nearby. He had moved from here to there, lived in various places, and had even gone abroad—but even there he dreamt of that same house and those very streets. 21 years in it had devoured all the years of his life since. And that was the real tragedy that haunted him: it was not his own house and so he was forced to leave it.

He didn't return for many years after he left. The new tenants continued to call him to visit, until they themselves didn't live there anymore. Even the newcomers who followed them also left. Then one more tenant came and he too didn't stay. Finally someone bought the old house, demolished it, and built it anew. The new owner made a grand new design, a new house that was more than three times as large as the old one, with multiple stories and a towering gate in front. When he saw the new house, the pain that was ever slumbering in his deepest unconscious was awakened. He let out a long cold sigh.

The first house was utterly different. It had three rooms on the ground floor, with a kitchen on the side, and a tiny courtyard. Underneath the stairs going to the second floor, there was a room for bathing. The toilet was at the top of house (as it was done in the 1960s, when it was built). There was a big room on right side at the 2nd story and on left a kitchen and a small room.

He stood looking at the new house. He had the old one in his heart: he was watching the new one through the old one. When he

could only see the old one and not the new, he became even more dejected. Living in the city so many years, he had finally come to revisit his old house in the old neighborhood.

It is our tragedy that we are not allowed to live in the places where we are born and become ourselves, the dreams of which remain alive within us. The beginning of our sojourn on this earth is like a blue sky. Time turns it grey. But remembrance turns that ash color into a deep smoky blue. This is the place between dreams and reality, where we keep living and dying.

Just a little time has passed and the rain has stopped. But still there is still a touch of water in the hard, piercing air that thrashes his face, making it cold and wet. The wind continues to blow.

All the world has changed and keeps on changing. The wide streets have become narrow and the narrow ones extremely thin: all the old houses are being demolished and new ones are being built. The streets have been raised higher and the older houses have become new and the new ones even newer: modest houses have just disappeared. The houses we could go to and from without any hesitation, now they seem so strange, so distant, so far out of reach. The soggy air blows fast in the silent street, making an eerie noise. Then a bike or car manages to wade through, splashing water, or it turns back: where have all the old vendors of the *moballah* [neighborhood] gone now?

At the first turn of the lane, a slightly larger road beyond is transforming into a major *bazaar* now. First came the Burger kiosk, then a small motorcycle mechanic shop, and then the car repair garage. Next came the grocery store and then a stationery shop full of notebooks and pencils. After the kiosk for *paan* [chewing tobacco] and cigarettes was opened, you would always see the boys standing there, outside. That all happened many years after we were forced to leave. For so many years even after we left, there was just a shop or two nearby. From there one could get anything, from a small needle to cigarettes.

A very old car, the cheapest one could imagine, wanders haltingly, as if it is about to stop. But then it comes very slowly, passing near

him. A young man and his wife sit in the front seat: in the back, two children and a woman. She catches his eye somehow. He looks closely at her: she is elderly, or no, perhaps middle aged. Their eyes meet for a moment. At first both are surprised, then upset. Then both heave a deep sigh in which there is a kind of a moan. Finally they pretend not to have seen what they have seen. And perhaps they didn't.

If she could stop for a while and could have an exchange of greetings, would somebody shoot her? She may still think herself too good for that, but even I have a better car than her now. In the old days she held her nose up high.* She's gotten old over the last few years, keeping an eye on her adolescent daughters. But now they too have gotten old, all without getting married. We were nothing in those days; leaving one or two families aside, all the boys were underprivileged. He had internalized and lived her face so many nights and days, cherished dreams of each and every curve of her body. But she never once spoke with him.

Mornings became evenings in front of her home. How proud she was of her beauty and status; how rich she appeared at that time. After all her father was a minor servant in some government department and they did have a motorcycle; in the whole *mohallah* they had the only one. They were more prosperous than others, but what are they now? He has more than them but he knows that no matter how prosperous he might become, he would never have her. Before, he couldn't have her because he was lower. Now, what was it? The gap of time! Time is like that game-playing pigeon who once flew away and would never come back to sit at your roof.

What we did get by thinking about "lower" and "higher"? Separation and loneliness, nothing more.

The evening has descended, and for a long time he is just wandering in his old *mohallah*. He doesn't come across a single person from his old days. The rain has worn off the old fading whitewash from the walls, and the ancient dirt-colored bricks are emerging from underneath, as if time itself has unearthed them.

A little movement appears in the silent streets: suddenly it speeds up but then it slows down again. It is as if the rain has slowed everyone down, empty and helpless: the sharp wind has driven everyone from the streets. The blanket of darkness secretly tries to take everything close to him, and a dim light leaks out from doors and windows of the nearby houses. Two young men are walking along briskly, talking in loud boisterous voices. They slow down for a moment, seeing him, but when they don't recognize him they move on, absorbed in their fun. Who knows how long he has been wandering there; now the darkness has fully descended, enveloping the world. 'Go home now,' something within him says. 'Home.' He looks at the old house, where now a new one is standing. 'Nobody recognizes you. Look. It is late. If someone stopped and spoke with you, then maybe you would wake out of your reverie.'

The night has settled in, through the streets, and the wind of fear passes through his heart. He is soaking wet. What if somebody were to ask where he is going, which house he is looking for, whom he intends to see? Cold, wet fear sends waves through his inner core. He trembles. Fear, fear—that fear of being unrecognized in the night, in the cold, wet wind. It brings to mind that night he passed sleeping in a park while he was abroad, on his own. That night, the whole of it stands before him with the same old shadows of fear.

That night of 29 years before, when after fleeing from the hunger of his home with some friends, lost in the greed of earning in Europe, he went to Rome and got stuck. After months of sleeping in the streets and the underground metro stations, he was supposed to sleep that night in a real bed. Masood had given him the key. Masood too was from Lahore and like him was from Krishan Nagar. He had been living in Rome for many years and had become like a local. But whenever Masood got drunk he used to repeat two things again and again. First: 'I didn't mean to live in Rome, I always thought I would go to England or America. I am just stuck in Rome for nothing.' But for many years he was living there. It was said that his aunt lived in England

but who knows why she did not bring him there. Second, he used to recall his mother. She was probably living alone in Lahore in some rented room in a corner of Krishan Nagar and he sent her some US dollars every year or so. I never asked about his father and he never spoke of him. He might have done so, but after drinking he would only speak of his mother: 'My mother must be alone, all alone. She wanted me to get married. She must be waiting for me.' Masood was around 33 or 35 years old then, and I had not yet reached 20.

Masood met me at Piazza Navona. We had arrived in Rome in summer, but now the cold was piercing. We were three friends without any plans or a clue, like fools, with just a few dollars in our pockets. We made our way on the road from Afghanistan to Iran, then to Turkey; then from Istanbul we took the Oriental Express through Yugoslavia and arrived in Rome on a 5-day visa. Shooky went to work on a ship but I was refused because of my eyeglasses. Manzali got a job in another city and was thrilled because a Philippine was working there with him.

Piazza Navona is a famous tourist place in Rome. It has a large open area with beautiful statues in a circle; beautiful old buildings surround them. There is a wide courtyard of old grey brick, and grey pigeons are always flying there, picking their food from floor. All around there are cafés, restaurants and bars, where tourists sit all day long soaking in the sun. I came upon the place by chance, wandering all day in the city, and then started coming every day.

The hippie movement was at its peak, and it was here that I bumped into Jhangi from Karachi. He opened a kiosk there every evening. But the kiosk was illegal and sometimes when it was raided by the authorities, I would recall the raids of the Lahore Municipal Corporation back home. Jhangi had been living in Rome with his family for many years. His wife would make handmade toys all day and he used to sell them at Piazza Navona in his kiosk.

The toys were made of colorful pieces of cloth and were very attractive. There was a sign written on a hard sheet lying nearby them: "Hand Made."

When he would set up his kiosk, I would stand near him, with nothing to do. I wandered all day alone, without any place to sleep or any livelihood. Free food we had from church, and we could sleep in the empty, broken houses of the hippies. Most of the hippies used to live in condemned buildings. They would break into abandoned houses, seize them and squat there.

Seeing me jobless, Jhangi suggested that I work with him. I accepted at once. He gave his own kiosk to me and started to set up another one. But I still couldn't find any place to live. To live anywhere you needed a passport or some other document that the police called "documentee." My passport was already with the police and they were keeping an eye on me until the day they could find money on me for an air ticket so they could deport me. At that point, I did have some money because of the work, but there was still no place to live. Jhangi would say to me every day, "I would take you home but my wife wouldn't like it."

Then one day Jhangi introduced me to Masood, as he was also from Lahore. Then we discovered that we were from the same *mohalla* (neighborhood), Krishan Nagar. Masood lived at a very cheap place but he still was not able to afford it. So now he was hopeful that we could share the rent. Next day we met in the sunshine and he showed me the place. It was something like an old store and all over the plaster and whitewash were disintegrating. There was an old bed on one side and on the other an iron bed without any bed sheet. That was supposed to be my bed: he laid down some worn out foam on it, spread out some kind of old sheet, and then gave me an old blanket. You could call it my first home abroad. I lived there many months but I lost my way getting there on the first night.

Counting out the money with Jhangi at Piazza Navona, it was normal to stay until midnight or beyond. I had to return the kiosk to him. It was made of steel and had to be separated, each and every part, so that it was easy to put in the trunk of his car. After counting out the money and finishing the work, and having one or two shots of whiskey

from the bar near the station—which remained open all night—it didn't occur to me one bit that I was going to forget the way to the place where I was supposed to sleep. I went to the place I thought I was going, but I couldn't find the place that Masood had shown me in the morning. There was supposed to be a big, open gate-like door somewhere, and then after passing through it a tiny, narrow verandah. Turning left and walking down some stairs, there was supposed to be the store-like room. If I could just find that door-like gate, I could find my way.

My breath caught in my throat. It was the middle of the night. Police cars passed by me slowly. After wandering and wandering I reached a place where I was sure that I would find Masood: a corner on the main road that would lead to the street with the big gate. He would pass by, late, and we'd walk together to the house. I tucked into a shadow.

But time passed and Masood didn't appear, and I realized I had not only lost the street but the whole way. Cars stopped making their usual noises and drunken couples came out, standing together, hugging and kissing each other. I was becoming more and more afraid. What if one of them phoned the police to say that an Asian man was standing in the street at midnight, appearing suspicious...? So I kept walking on in silence. It was only through walking and walking that I could save myself from the police.

Walking like that, on and on, I don't know where I finally reached. At last I came to a big road, where there was some traffic in both directions. There was light all around—or perhaps night was just coming to an end—and there appeared to be a park in the distance. It was a time in Europe, or at least in Rome, when you could spend a night in a park and police wouldn't bother you. Though I was dead tired because of walking so long, the hope of a park sharpened the pace of feet. But it was not a park: it was just an empty space, a kind of square. But at that point I couldn't even stand anymore, so I sat down there on the grass: when a man is hungry there is even pleasure in drinking water. At last I leaned against a lamp and slept right there. That was, in truth, my first home abroad.

Walking in the old *moballa*, it is as if he is standing in front of her house. At that time it appeared to be such a big house. But it was just a small house on a tiny lot. It was old, from the time before partition, and no one had spent anything on it for many years. Mud oozed from the fissures in the walls.

The dark night has thickened.

The wet air has created an unseen, untouched wire in the extreme darkness of the night. The blue flame of remembrance has scorched everything inside. In old times, when out late, he would stop beneath her window and his friends would go on ahead; it seemed to him that someone was awakening behind the window.

The beginning is like a blue sky; time makes it dull and grey. Remembrance turns it into a deep blue evening, before it becomes a thick night.

There is some other place between dream and reality where we live and die.

It appears that her window has opened for the first and last time. A long straight line of light stretches down the road, making the drenched road shine like glass. From behind the window where the light leaks out, a voice seems to emerge.

“Bairy!** Go home and sleep.”

*

* *Literally, wouldn't allow a fly to sit at her nose.*

** *The author's nickname as a child.*

Angelee Deodhar

Coriander

Each day those huge laughing eyes grip my imagination. Each day I hope to hear a voice teasingly ask if I need some errand done, some flowers or fruit plucked, the garden cleaned, the dog walked and each day I am disappointed for she is long gone. Dhania is not there to do any of these things. Who was she? Where did she come from? Why did our lives intertwine as they did, when they did, who knows, but if there are angels on earth then surely she was one and I was lucky to have known her.

My friend Alka and I are teachers and we have taught at the local convent school for the last two decades. We come from very different backgrounds yet we have been like sisters and she belongs to an affluent Maharashtrian family and I to a middle class Punjabi one, yet we never let our different backgrounds come between us. The common thread which binds us is our love for teaching. We walk to the bus stop from where the bus picks us up to take us to the school. Although Alka drives she prefers to take the school bus as she feels that traffic and the parking is a problem in the mornings.

One day when we were returning from school we found our street had been dug up and the whole surface was to be re-tarred after underground cables and pipes had been laid. We could see a huge truck bring laborers and drop them off and collect them twice a day.

We would find the laborers come with large empty Pepsi or Coke bottles to fill with water and use it for their meals. We had allowed them to fill their bottles once a day from the garden tap. Since I had two dogs I told them not to enter the gate in case one of the dogs was loose and attacked them, but they went to Alka's home instead. Amongst all the children who were with the women there was one teenager – a bright eyed, cheery girl called Dhania and she was usually left behind to

take care of the toddlers, cook and clean the utensils and only occasionally carry a few items of clothing as she had one very thin leg ending in a shriveled foot which she dragged when she walked. It seemed she had had polio as a child.

Each time we passed her, she would smile or wave and we would smile and wave back. She never asked for anything but my heart went out to her. She was the same age as the children I taught – around thirteen and although she was in tatters she was smiling or singing as she worked, a perfect little mother to the infants and toddlers who sat amongst the rubble as their parents worked from dawn till noon and then also in the evening to get things finished before the rains set in. The littlest ones would be gently laid in a piece of cloth one meter square, and this would be slung on a flat branch of a tree within easy reach of Dhania or the mother. Sometimes she would be minding three or four children while she worked at the makeshift chulha to cook rice and lentils in aluminum pots. There were few vessels and when the food was cooked the meal, such as it was, was served in a large flat oval plate with upturned edges and her family would all eat from the communal thali. Dhania never ate with the others but waited till they were done and then took her share in a small tin plate to eat by herself. I wondered at this and once asked why – she told me that was because she was accursed and been punished because of her bad foot and so that she didn't affect anybody else she should stay away when they ate. To me it made no sense that a child should be thus punished when the food cooked and chores done by her were accepted but not her deformity.

A road gang has no personality, it has no stability. One day they are there with picks and shovels with women and children and the next they have moved on. It may be in a week or two weeks at the most but they are nomads and, they move on sometimes in the same city, sometimes farther away... their house is under the stars and sun.

I asked Dhania if she knew what her name meant and she laughed and said it meant wealthy, dhan walli, to which I laughed and

said it also means coriander, the fresh green leaves you add to food to make it tasty. I asked which of the women was her mother and she said she didn't have one but many as all the women loved and looked after her when her own mother had died when she was born and the children? Well they were her siblings, her brothers and sisters. And she loved to look after them. Had she ever been to school? She had not because they never stayed long enough anywhere. When I brought her a book Dhaniam was delighted but she would not keep it, only looked at it when I held it out for her, told her what the words meant and how the pictures looked and what the words said. Dhaniam would get my clothes from the dhobi or run a few errands for me but would not accept any payment, saying I will take it all together when the time comes, you write it down, OK?

On the last day I saw Dhaniam, she told me they would be moving to a new site in the city and then she would miss me. She was tearful but when I offered her the money I owed her for the odd jobs she declined and, said I'll take it tomorrow and went on with what she was doing. Early the next day, I heard the trucks come and when I went out, the temporary camp site had been moved things loaded and was underway. I asked the foreman if he had seen Dhaniam. He looked at me strangely and asked how I knew about Dhaniam. I told him about the teenage girl who used to take care of the little children and who washed the utensils, whose deformed foot prevented her from running along quickly.

The foreman assured me there was no one of that description in either of the trucks. He had had this team for almost four months. He asked in his own dialect if there was such a girl known to anyone. All but an old crone shook their heads and then she started sobbing and said, she was my grand daughter but she died one year ago. I did not have money to cremate her she was with child when she died a child mother, and she was thrown into a ditch and left to her fate. We did not have money to cremate her but buried her there.

The tin box of money I had kept for Dhaniam shook in my

hands as I took in what I was being told to me and then I understood what I was supposed to do. I went to the dargah and offered jasmine and roses at the shrine and sweets on behalf of Dhaniam. I understood why she had wanted to be paid the next day. And now whenever I cook, I think of how dhaniam, the humble coriander, cilantro adds a special flavor to the food.

*

Subhash Chandra

Naga Baba

There was a frantic commotion in the Bara Bazaar. The shopkeepers had come out of their shops and stood in groups on the road. Women, haggling with vegetable vendors, ran into their houses.

“*Chhota* Seth?” shouted a shopkeeper, as the fully naked man came near. “What has happened to him?”

He was Harish, the son of Nalpat Seth, one of the richest men in Meerut, who owned two sugar mills and a textile factory in Modinagar and a tyre manufacturing unit in Partapur. He lived in a sprawling bungalow on the Mall Road, an area where mostly the top brass of the army had their big government bungalows. The few Brits, who were fond of Indian spices and swarthy voluptuous maids, also continued to live on the Mall Road.

Nalpat Seth’s second wife, Kamala Devi was much younger than him – younger even than his son – and was exceedingly beautiful, because of which he was highly suspicious of young people and employed only middle-aged or old servants at home. He did not trust even the young and bubbly cardiologist who visited him for monthly check-ups and joked loudly. Nalpat Seth thought his jokes were meant for Kamala in the other room. The Seth never took her out to any function or festival, not even to the Bhainsali Grounds for the annual Dussehra festival, where he was generally the Chief Guest. Still, he felt a nagging discomfort that kept him constantly uneasy.

Harish, an only son of the Seth, was a shy young man, with fine manners and mild disposition. He was in his late twenties and had been largely tutored at home. Nalpat Seth believed he had built his business empire precisely because he was not much educated. According to him, the highly educated lost the practical wisdom needed for success in trade and industry.

One day when Nalpat Seth was explaining business intricacies to his son, he suddenly said, “Harish, have you noticed something about your mother?”

“What?”

“Most of the time she looks sad and lost. Doesn’t talk much, nor does she play with the dogs, as she used to.”

Harish waited for him to go on, and he did.

“Be nice to your mother,” he said morosely. “She feels so lonely. Spend time with her.”

Harish had inherited his father’s shrewd intelligence. He wanted to tell his father that the cause of her sadness was her imprisonment, the countless restrictions under which she had to live. But he merely said: “Yes, *Pitaji*, I will.”

He decided to fulfill his father’s command, but he wondered what all he could talk about with this young, illiterate woman. He could not discuss business with her, nor could he talk about politics of which she knew nothing. Still, in the evenings, he started going to her room dutifully. In the beginning he talked about the servants, the dogs, and the orchard in the house, but soon he would be ill at ease and leave. However, he noticed his visits cheered her up and during the time he was with her, she was in good spirits. He then began to read the newspaper to her – mostly the stories about crimes, accidents and natural calamities.

“Do you like listening to the newspaper stories?”

“Do come every evening.” She looked at him with eager eyes.

Harish felt happy he could make a difference to her dull life. Then an idea struck him. “Shall I tell you the story of the film I saw recently?” he asked one day. Her face lit up and there was a sparkle in her eyes, “Yes. Please do. Which film did you see?”

Nagin.

Kamala Devi had dreamed about films as a child, but never got to see one as they had been too poor. Harish narrated the story in great details as he wanted to bring the film alive to her. She was fasci-

nated that a snake could turn into a woman. Over the next few days, she made him repeat the story several times, and each time she listened with rapt attention. Next, he narrated the story of *Sharada*, a Raj Kapoor and Meena Kumari starrer in which the beloved of the son becomes the second wife of the man. Kamala Devi became reflective and plied Harish with questions.

“Did the father come to know Sharada had been his son’s beloved? Did the former lover address her as mother? How did they manage to live under one roof as strangers?”

Soon, without his knowing, the subject of their conversation was no longer films and yet he was spending hours with her in her room, talking, laughing, and savouring the delicacies she made for him, especially. The withering bud bloomed into a radiant flower. The small beads of sweat which sometimes appeared on her upper lip looked like the morning dew on flower petals.

He would now often lose count of time and the two remained together late into the night. Once when he was walking out of her room at 1 a.m., he ran into his father who was not getting sleep and was walking about. They looked at each other, but went to their respective rooms without a word. The next day, Nalpat Seth suffered a massive heart attack and died.

“He has gone mad. Can’t you see?”

“I mean what could have sent him mad?”

“*Hey Bhagwan!* Why he of all people? Such a gentle soul!”

“I think the death of his father has unhinged him.”

“But that happened six months ago.”

“At times, the suppressed grief bursts into a malady after some time.”

This was an area where the Bania community was dominant, a people known for their business acumen, but also for their extreme conservatism. Their womenfolk stirred out of the house only for procuring the daily needs, and that too, with veils drawn. When someone knocked on a door, the woman would direct the visitor, from behind

the shut doors, to the shop and talk to her husband, or son. No male sweeper was allowed inside the house. The semi-dark houses, devoid of adequate sun, gave the women a pale complexion and made them look emaciated.

The shopkeepers had all the sympathy for the young man. But at the same time they were worried.

“He is mad. He can appear in the bazaar like this any time. What will happen to our womenfolk? How are they going to come out of the house for necessary errands?”

Another said, “Think of the business, Lala. He may get wild and attack anyone of us or destroy our stocks in shops.”

When it came to choosing between business and anything else, the former took precedence.

All nodded in agreement.

“He is totally unrecognizable. He looks like a vagabond with his straggly beard, the mass of tangled hair and unwashed body, with blotches of dirt all over,” said yet another man.

A young fellow commented on the size of his member, with a knowing smile. “I have not seen one of such a length. God help his woman!”

“Utterly shameless!” an old man chided him. “You can’t think of anything else?”

“Insensitive, too.”

Actually the young man’s comment, though facetious, had its roots in his personal situation. He had been married for seven years, but his wife had not conceived.

He had often taunted her. “My bad luck. I brought home an empty vassal.”

His mother also constantly nagged her and hurled barbs at her. “You have come as a curse on our family. I have only one son. You are hell bent on stopping our family line. Nobody will remember Madan’s father.”

Even though Madan had blamed his wife, he sometimes had

misgivings about the small size of his organ. He worried that perhaps he himself was the cause of their being childless. He was extremely nervous on his wedding night, and his performance had been a disaster. Though he was reasonably healthy and in occasional fights had licked his peers, he had earned the mocking nickname of *Moongfali* (peanut) among them because of the size of his tool. So, he thought wistfully, “If only I could exchange this thing with you, fellow! You have no use for it anyway.”

Little did he know what fate awaited the object of his envy or its owner?

The madman just walked past people obliviously. Once in a while he stopped in the middle of the road, raised his eyes and hands towards the sky and uttered gibberish: *Zindagi kameeni aadami, rang bahut kameene, Ma, Ma, maro, maro us ko. Paapi, Paapi, Zinda hai, kyon kyon Ma, Ma Maro usko*” and then he clenched his fist and pounded his chest deliriously. People watched him in total silence, scared and yet fascinated.

For a fortnight life in Bara Bazaar remained disturbed and then it began to limp back to normal. People were getting used to his nakedness. For the women also the problem was solved. They kept indoors till he had passed the bazaar which was always at a fixed time and only once a day.

“He is as harmless as he was when he was sane,” said Sattu, the oldest shopkeeper, who ran a sweets shop.

“You are right *Chacha*. I don’t think he would do any harm to anyone. Even though he is mad, his *samskaras* are governing him,” added Haria.

“If only we could help him, somehow,” said Ganesh.

“How can we?” asked Madan, the youngest of the lot.

“Just be nice to him. He is the same Chhota Seth even though he is not himself,” advised Sattu.

All agreed.

And then one day the neighbours heard pained screams from inside Madan’s house.

“You shameless *raamd*, why did you have to go out when he was passing by?” It was Madan shouting, the young man who had talked about the size of madman’s member.

“I didn’t know he was there. Besides, I was in a hurry.”

“And what happened to your veil?”

“I told you I was in a hurry. I forgot about it.”

“You are a liar. And you are talking back. Insolent woman! I’ll break all your bones. What was the mighty hurry for you to go out running?”

“Amma had high fever.”

The fellow had to keep quiet. But he remained unhappy that such a thing had happened. What will people say? They will mock him and his family. But more than the others, he himself felt stressed that she had seen a fully naked man. As he had expected, the incident was the talk of Bara and Chhota Bazaars.

And then something happened that became the talk of the whole city. Soon after the incident, Madan’s wife conceived and in time delivered a healthy, chubby baby boy.

Bara Bazaar became a holy place, where childless couples started coming from far and wide. They waited for hours on end for the Naga Baba, as he had now come to be called, to walk through the bazaar. Women sat with their veils drawn. But when the Naga Baba passed by, they unveiled their faces, looked at him, and folded their hands. They did it under the express instructions of their husbands. As for the madman, they didn’t exist, as it were. Over time, the crowd kept swelling and became unmanageable. The local temple committee decided to take matters in hand, because at times there was chaos, when the madman appeared. They put up ropes along both the sides of the bazaar. Their volunteers fanned out managing the jostling supplicants. They arranged for water in the hot summer season. They spread rose petals on the road and played *bhajans* on the loudspeaker.

“Ever since Chhota Seth has started walking the bazaar, our business has increased manifold,” said Haria.

“Ask the ice cream and *kulche-chole* vendors. They are doing brisk business. So are those selling balloons and toys for children,” Ganesh added.

“Yes, my own sales have tripled. Sometimes people start appearing before the daybreak and they have their breakfast at my shop. He is a Godsend for us,” said Sattu.

“He has brought joy to so many unhappy families. God bless him!” This was Haria again.

Madan who was now an important member of every group discussion interjected, “Imagine, all of us were scared on account of our women and our business. God will forgive us for our sins.”

Sattu looked at him indulgently. “How is the Munna doing?”

“Very well, you should see the way he looks into my eyes and smiles, cycles, and kicks my chin. We are a blessed family.”

So long as people had kept behind the ropes, and nobody addressed the madman or came close to him, everything was all right. He would continue with his routine walk, repeating every now then the usual incoherent words and gestures. But the women who had been blessed with babies wanted to touch the Baba’s feet, and would be eager to get his blessings for their newborns. The temple volunteers did their best to stop them from going near to the Baba. But they were not entirely successful. Then the committee met and deliberated. Loudspeakers were installed at various points. Warnings blared out, impressing upon people to observe order, pay their obeisance to the Naga Baba from a distance and maintain peace. People were told, “The Naga Baba might get upset. It would be in nobody’s interest.”

But all this was of no avail. Once, a woman placed the bundle containing her newborn on the road despite the January chill and waited to touch Naga Baba’s feet. She was in no hurry to move away. All appeals by the volunteers fell on deaf ears. How can you reason with a grateful mother who believes that but for the Naga Baba, she would

have remained childless?

The madman was shaken out of the hallucinatory world which he inhabited and which isolated him from the material surroundings. His way barred, he looked at the child and the mother uncomprehendingly, and then a sad and troubled look clouded his eyes. He skirted the woman and the child and walked on.

But one day something unusual happened. A mother touched his feet, and then extending the baby to him pleaded, “Baba, please bless the child for a long life. My three infants have died! By your *kerpa* I have got him.”

The madman was bewildered, looked at the baby a long time and then at the mother. There was a frantic look in his eyes and a frown on his face, as if he were trying to recall something.

“Baba, please, please let this child live. I will serve you all my life. Listen to the entreaties of a helpless mother!

After a long, silent pause, he broke into a sweat, started trembling and screamed wildly, *Zindagi kameeni aadami, paapi, paapi, rang babut kameene paapi, paapi, Ma, Ma, maro mujhe, maro mujhe, Zinda hai, kyon kyon, jeena mushkil, Ma, Ma maro mujhe, maro mujhe*. The sentence contained changed pronouns and a couple of additional words. Then he agitatedly turned and ran back home. He was not seen for a few days. People were worried but none had the courage to go to the bungalow and find out.

After a week of the incident, the sun rose to reveal a grisly sight. Chhota Seth, a.k.a. Naga Baba, a.k.a. madman, was sprawled prostrate on the road, blood streaming out from under his body. A lump of flesh – his shrunk penis turning blue – was lying nearby.

Three days after his death, Kamla Devi hanged herself!

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Book Review

Coolie Woman: Odyssey of Indenture

By Gaiutra Bahadur

University of Chicago Press, 2014

Pages 274

Cyril Dabydeen

In a riposte to an academic's critique on the quality of scholarship in her book, *Coolie Woman*, author Gaiutra Bahadur—a Guyanese-born US-based journalist-writer—stated that it is “very much a subaltern history, a history from below that strives to recover the voices of people who didn't have the power to write themselves into history”; and, she emphasized: “I analyzed the reports on 77 indenture voyages from Calcutta to the Caribbean, mining them for the stories of the indentured but also grounding this qualitative data in quantitative analysis, generating statistics on the percentage of pregnant women, married couples and returnees aboard ship.”

Let me say, immediately, that I admire Bahadur's work; it is a book that reflects her prodigious research skills and energy to recreate and reconstruct the past, narratively, and indeed, with intellectual acumen. At best, *Coolie Woman* straddles memoir in the literary non-fiction genre exploring the origin and legacy of the life of her great grandmother, Sujaria, a “coolie” woman, who was brought to British Guiana around 1903 in almost mysterious circumstances to work in the sugar plantation; she was subsequently moved to the Rose Hall sugar plantation (Canje district) where I was born and lived up to my early manhood; and therein lies the immediacy for this reader because it's also where I taught school for almost a decade, at Rose Hall, the behemoth sugar cane factory located obliquely across the school; I also interacted

with sugar plantation workers on a daily basis; and, my own writing draws from this heritage. Ms Bahadur grew up in the Cumberland village, in Canje, but emigrated as a young girl with her family to New York. I'd met Ms Bahadur in Trinidad at the Bocas Literary Festival, where she introduced herself to me.

Her search for ancestral links drives much of what we read in this retrospective volume; and *Coolie Woman* has garnered much praise (it was short-listed for key literary awards). But *odyssey*: going back into one's beginnings, or provenance, is not entirely new. US-based Denise Grollmus's personal journey of Jewish discovery in Poland where three million Jews were murdered by the Nazis and discovering that her grandmother—a Jew—a fact kept hidden for almost 70 years, also came to mind. But perhaps the coolie indentured system is more compelling, for one like myself, a capitalist-cum-colonial nexus, as it was, that brought to the Caribbean three million African slaves and one million Indians as indentured servants—most of the latter to Guyana and Trinidad. Over the years I have interacted with key scholars who have written insightfully on this subject: like Professors Brinsley Samaroo, Clem Seecharran, Frank Birbalsingh, and briefly, with the late UK scholar Hugh Tinker (in 1988 at a York University Conference on indentureship), who famously labelled the coolie indenture system as “another form of slavery.” My own imaginative work focusses on this nefarious system, as has David Dabydeen's (poems, stories, and novels, essays): about the tribulation our forbears experienced after coming through the dreadful *kala pani* (“dark water”) of the Indian Ocean, and enduring sugar plantation travail.

Bahadur's book takes a special place due to her subaltern woman's point of view; as she relates: “I relied on official archives but also sought to fill in the many gaps and silences in the archives—they can lead us to the texture of indentured women's lives, but not to the texture of their thoughts—with alternative and personal sources....rather than from the perspectives of British colonial officials” (Letter, *Stabroek News*). Indeed, she journeyed back to the Caribbean, India, the UK

and elsewhere more than to vicariously relive her great grandmother's journey, and through painstaking research and serious reflection resulted her achievement in *Coolie Woman*. Yet, I bore in mind Sigmund Freud's caveat about the biographer's art's "false colouring" —and of an author perhaps reading too much into events, like the Ramayana (Ram and Sita) trope and allegory and seeing the British plantocracy as Ravan. But this is a minor carp—for beyond anything else this book is soul-searching: about a great grandmother's ordeal (Sujaria was four months pregnant on the ship when she crossed the *kala pani*), a woman with "eyes like cat's eyes...and skin white like white people," perhaps pointing to her Brahminic caste, added to her coming from the Indian state of Bihar before reaching Calcutta to begin her horrific near four-month sea journey on *The Clyde*.

Women chosen for indenture might have derived from a "complex mix of victimization and Vaishnavite devotion" (31), Bahadur tells us, and that those like Sujaria were initially ostracized; the recruiters often went to holy sites and found such women, as "family members took widows to pilgrimage sites and abandoned them there. At other times, widows found their own way there, as they fled mistreatment and sexual advances in their in-laws' homes," writes Bahadur (31).

Sujaria's sugar plantation experiences encapsulate the indentured people's struggles (particularly women's) as angst that the author internalizes, calling it her "transformative journey" and her "narrative history" characterizing the egregious labour experience when "one shilling was the value of a human life," as well as the psychic and social trauma that ensued in the British Guiana sugar plantations where there were 64 women to 100 men (the figure varied over the indenture period). The gender imbalance was fraught with sexual exploitation and oppression which Bahadur describes in poignant detail. This is no Rushdiean "imaginary homeland" retelling as Bahadur interweaves Vedas mythology juxtaposed with stereotypes that underpin the relations between Guyanese of African and Indian backgrounds during a large part of the Gladstone-coolie indenture (lasting from 1838 to 1917);

slaver Sir John Gladstone was the father of British prime minister Sir William Gladstone.

Compelling situations associated with time and place are unearthed and reflected throughout this book, including angularities tied to rivalries and jealousies between former African slaves and Indian coolies: the dynamics are often worked out in the prevailing gender relationships and the sexual shenanigans and animosities—Bahadur argues—which are tied to violence between men and women (seen, for instance, in the evocative chapter, "Beautiful Woman without a Nose"); and, not surprisingly, sexual goings-on and power relationships between coolie women and white planters and their overseers in the context of the European stereotype of Indians' "possessiveness and promiscuity" juxtaposed with the notion of the "chastity of Indian women"—demonstrate that women were kept in more than a symbolic bondage. In this context Bahadur narratively triangulates Sujaria's story of survival: testament to an extraordinary spirit and will to live, as well as the great-grandmother's practical intelligence and faith (largely Hinduism). The author herself is a devotee of Saraswati (deity of "knowledge and purity"), seen in her feminist drive.

Overall, Bahadur writes insightfully about the legacy of violence and murders that occurred—still a haunting legacy—in her analysis of the indenture system; as she states: "More murders occurred in Guyana than elsewhere, but Trinidad's statistics were only slightly less grim" (109); and "Indenture threw men into the arms of their gods. They were displaced, and Hinduism rooted them...Indenture drove some to religion and others to madness"(125).

Other chapters such as "Gone but not Forgotten," "The Dream of Return," and "Every Ancestor" make for compelling reading; and, for me, what especially resonates in the book are references to Inverness and the Scottish Highlands in the chapter "Surviving History," which combines the anecdotal mixed with fact-based revelations about the linkage between Guyana's Rose Hall sugar plantation and the Highlands' Rose Hall (in Scotland I myself once visited). Not surprisingly, in

the end Bahadur went back to the district in Bihar to meet up with her forebears: relations of her indentured great grandmother, who is still remembered, which I find touching (I have read of other “return” narrations); I had also travelled to India, but not as a “returnee”. Importantly, *Coolie Woman* is very much about the colonized and colonizer and the “dark dramas” that ensued; it is neither a polemical work, nor necessarily a shift from Eurocentric to Indo-centric scholarship, but is work “plumbing the depths of origins” (Wilson Harris). It also builds upon precursor texts such as Verene Shepherd’s *Maharani’s Misery: Narratives of a Passage from India to the Caribbean*, which Gaiutra Bahadur acknowledges. In context, I was intrigued by scholar Lisa Outar’s emphasis on Bahadur’s take: that “Coolie women weren’t exactly like Jane Austen heroines, practising love as a form of social mobility, but they seem to have used their scarcity to survive...in an exploitative environment” (Review, *Stabroek News*) in forming sexual and familial partnerships.

This book’s style eschews jargon and pretentiousness seen in much academic discourse, but has a natural rhythm in sentence structure and the cadence of colloquial speech mixed in with the formal and measured; it also has near exquisite descriptions of imagined experiences: all in view of the criss-crossing of genres, from literary non-fiction to scholarship. The black-and-white photographs are also evocative. Significantly, *Coolie Woman* strives to recover the voices of people who didn’t have the power to write themselves into history, as has been said; and, to invoke V.S. Naipaul: “as a people you have to know the past.” I believe this book should be read by all in the Caribbean—and elsewhere—and be a central text in post-colonial studies aimed at fostering awareness of Indian women’s historical struggles in Guyana, Trinidad, and the rest of the Caribbean, as well as in places like Fiji—here the invidious indentureship system still has echoic repercussions on people’s lives.

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Love in a Time of Technology

Poems by Sasenarine Persaud

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Gurdev Chauhan

Quite known in South Asian literary circles for floating the literary term Yogic realism, a mix of Yogic consciousness and everyday reality, Sasenarine Persaud, Guyana born and Tempa (USA) settled poet, essayist and short story writer, has published several books of poetry, essays and short fiction. Before making, Tempa, Florida, USA his new home, he had many years of teaching combined with creative writing in and around Toronto besides his stint on the juries for the Ontario Arts Council.

Love in a Time of Technology is his recent book of poems. The name of the book reminds me of Marquez’s novel *Love in the Time of Cholera*, which I read way back in the early nineties. Here, in Persaud’s book, the word *technology* replaces the word *cholera*. The dis-ease for a spooky kind of ease. The poems, here, “probe, and question concepts and beliefs, poke fun at age, companions taken for granted, and the realization that like a mannequin in a Manhattan store-front, love is faceless and raceless.” Love on the cyberspace leaves the world of flesh and blood for the barren land of technology, especially that connected with the Internet. The Internet has overtaken the concrete by the image in the media portals, an alternative mode of reality called the virtual reality, the reality of fragile porcelain values.

As a reading of poems of the volume would reveal, love does not hold for us what it used to in the Pre-Internet age. Its very definition has changed. From the physical, it seems to have moved to the virtual, from the body and the mind to the image, from the territory to the map.

Poems in the different sections, namely *Love in the time of technology*, *Elswhere*, *Storm* and *Returning to a far country*, seem to walk through the different love territories of mood, territory and time.

The very first poem lands us in the strange delusory world of the portal, a divorce from the world outside the room widow and the widow of the memory such as of the foxes yelping at night in the fields, the mongrels roaming in the dark. Love confines itself only like the images of faces and gestures popping up on the computer or phone screen.

You are immersed in the Internet
You have forgotten
How to speak, to say, "I am sorry."
And you will part as you have met
Through the portals of the Internet

In another poem, *In Storage*, the poet seems to be gloating in the smug contentment of the hyper-reality of the Internet that his memory produces for him.

In the digital world, we can almost
smell mangoes in the Bourda Market
or hear parrots chattering
on the southern tip of peninsula
but how does your hand
these days
shape a word or phrase
or embellish the flourish of a heart
at letter's end or an afterthought: PS

The poem, *Love within Love: Brookline Booksmith* reeks of a different vintage. Here the girl and the boy although visiting the bookstore seek out the reality outside the books and the bookstore. They *brush their coats still damp from the flurries outside* and are hungry for each other, the books retreating to the background.

Home is another poem depicting man's eternal search for his real home. The search for it ends in just losing it. The poem's last line so aptly brings the truth home:

Home is everywhere and nowhere.

Perhaps we can say the same thing about love, as one poem of this book says:

We all fled, prowling the streets
Of Manhattan under ginkoes
And Japanese cherries blooming
After the long chill marvelling
At mannequins - as you have, too -
Frozen in storefront windows
Faceless and, almost raceless

Sasenarine Persaud has a deep sense of Indian variety of spiritualism, especially the philosophy of non-dualism stressing the oneness of the universe. A small poem, *One*, deserves quoting for its terseness:

One says one
Is the fluttering of stars
At night in a dissolution
At mornings; a wick turned down until lit by dusk. One says
One is the yoking of lingam
And yoni - Shiva's flaming
In a fireside; but One says one
Is not the same as one.

In the poem *Tulips*, the poet relives and travels back in time to his ancestral India, the only country he could call really his own for its spiritual dawn of the Bhagvad Gita as also for its marigolds, mangoes and turmeric.

Yet other poems in the section, *Love afterwards*, *Hickson Park: Tampa on the River*, *Take Back*, *The Tenth Love*, *Lighting the Dawn* are beautiful in their own characteristic way in capturing the elusive everywhere nature of love, of love's tenacity to hold good for all ages and places. Space and time are just anathema to it.

Whereas *Elswhere* and *From Mouth to Ear* are poems extolling music, silence, sound and language as nourishing and holding the world eternally together, *Fireflies Caught in Molasses* is a poem with overtones of the poet's ancestral identity clashing with that of the countries of his adoption and sustenance from time to time.

Poems of the last section, *Returning to a Far Country* bear

Sasenarine Persued's homegrown sense of Hindu mythology and lore, a natural upshot of his ancestral linkage with India, but nowhere this penchant of his for the oriental spoils the offbeat character of his poetry. It rather lends it another signifying dimension.

Sasenarine Persaud's ease in sculpting fresh images of nature from the ordinary is a remarkable feature of his poetry. It is its new high.

Through floor-to-ceiling glass
swaying oaks and nodding
elms give the lie to wall (*The Tenth Love*)

Snow dusting pavement
in a feather touch
at the intersection,
you pause, eyes skyward. (*Near Bloor & Yonge*)

Wilting in the Florida sun
while wildflowers were shapes
we'd never - starbursts
in the spring grass waving.

goodbye hello no ants on shirt
no snake in the pond no turtle
surfacing for air no woodpecker
tap-dancing on a bark musicing our ears (*Wildflowers*)

His poems, *Toronto, Georgetown, New York, Florida and Dennis Street* are strongly marked with imagery taken from his Indian roots, the folklore and mythology laced with the Caribbean consciousness and dimension. Indian words like neem, Maya, Mamoo, Om, Dasrath, Mathura, Diwali, Rama Gita, Rajput, sarod, Bansari, Lata, Mukesh, Ramcharitmanas, Ramayana, Shivlinga, Gul-Gula, and Kohinoor lend regional flavour and a new poetic landscape. The book vigorously underpins Sasenarine Persaud's distinctive brand of poetry.

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Contributors

Ajmer Rode has written and directed over ten plays. He has published poetry and translation in Punjabi and English. His book *Leela*, co-authored with Navtej Bharati, is regarded as an important milestone in Punjabi poetry. He resides in BC Canada.

Angelee Deodhar has published six books of haiku in Hindi and English and has translated into Hindi *Masaoka Shiki's Life and Haiku* from English.

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Bhupinder Preet has published five books of poetry in Punjabi, including *Harphan Jihe Patte, Ret da Khuda, Tupka Tupka* and *Goonj*.

Cyril Dabydeen edited *Beyond Sangre Grande: Caribbean Writing Today* (TSAR, Toronto). *God's Spider/poetry* (Peepal Tree Press, UK) is his newest book. He resides in Ottawa, Canada.

Deepti Zutshi is based in Toronto and is preparing for Post Doctoral Research on performance studies.

Diditi Mitra earned her doctoral degree in Sociology from Temple University. Her work is in the areas of race and immigration. She has published two books, *Immigrant Punjabi Mobility in the United States: Adaptation through race and class* and *Race and the Life Course: Readings from the intersection of race, ethnicity and age*. Diditi is also trained in the north Indian classical dance form of Kathak and has performed in various venues in the United States.

Fauzia Rafiq has published two novels *Sakeena* (in both Punjabi and English) and *The Adventures of Sabeena: Biography of a Relentless Warrior*. She runs *Uddari* blog. She lives in Vancouver.

Gurdev Chauhan has published five books of poetry in Punjabi and one book of poetry in English. He has translated widely from Punjabi and Hindi into English and vice versa. He edits South Asian Ensemble with Prof. Rajesh Sharma. He was awarded two-year Junior fellowship for creative writing in the years 1990-1991 by Govt. of India, Department of Culture. He translated Amrita Pritam's *Ek Thi Sara* into English. He resides in Trenton, ON, Canada.

Gurupdesh Singh taught English at Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar. His academic interests are applied linguistics, critical theory and comparative literature. In his spare time, he dabbles with Urdu poetry and translation work.

Harminder Dhillon was trained to be an engineer, dabbled in journalism and publishing, and then studied law. He lives in Mississauga and practices law. His writing interests include essays, prose-poems and verse in English and Punjabi. He is working on a book of poems in Punjabi, *Chab Wela*, and is also penning an essay on the only dog he has ever kept. He resides in Mississauga, Canada.

Jarnail Singh has free-lanced in painting, illustration, design, photography, and art journalism. His work is exhibited in Art Council, Surrey; Sikh Heritage Museum, Abbotsford; Komagatamaru Memorial Museum, Punjab War Museum, Indian Embassy, Washington; GND University, and Panjab University. His exhibitions include Vibrant Vitas, Delta, 2014, Arts Choice, Firehall Center for Arts Delta, Punjab Heritage, Arts 2000 and 2005, Phulkari Exhibition, Jahagir art Gallery etc. Punjab Arts Council, Chandigarh has published his *Punjab Paintings by Punjab Painters*. His awards include Surrey Civic Treasure Award, Mehfil Magazine Excellence in Arts Award 2010, and Vancouver Sun's list of 100 South Asians. He resides in Surrey, BC, Canada.

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John Brandi is a poet and painter. Haiku writing is his great passion. He has been in the forefront of the struggle for land rights and civil liberties for the Andean farmers, a protestor against the American war in Vietnam and the founder of Tooth of Time Books which published the maiden books of aspiring poets. He is a recipient of National Endowment for the Arts Poetry Fellowship and other awards. Currently he teaches creative writing in New Mexico(USA) .

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Manmohan has published nine books of poetry and seven books of critical prose in Punjabi. He has translated four books from English and Hindi into Punjabi. His novel *Nirvan* won him the Bhartiya Sahitya Akademi Award.

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Rati Saxena is a poet, translator, and editor of *kritya*. She has published 11 collections of poetry in Hindi and English and one each in Malayalam (translated), Irish and Italian. She has also written a travelogue, *Cheenti Ke Par* (Hindi); and a memoir, *Every Thing is Past Tense*. Her research on the Atharvaveda has been published as *The Seeds of the Mind* under the fellowship of the Indira Gandhi National Center for Arts. She is a Kendriya Sahitya Akademi awardee for translation for 2000.

Ruth Vanita taught at Delhi University for twenty years. She now teaches at the University of Montana, and divides her time between Missoula and Gurgaon. She was the founding co-editor of *Manushi*, India’s first feminist magazine, and is a well-known translator and literary historian. She is the author of several books, including the pioneering *Same-Sex Love in India* (with Saleem Kidwai); a collection of poems, *A Play of Light*, and most recently *Gender, Sex and the City: Urdu Rekhti Poetry 1780-1870*. Her poetry has appeared in many anthologies and journals. She is now preparing her second collection of poems.

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Sasenarine Persaud is the author of ten books of fiction and poetry. *Love in The Time of Technology* is his latest book of poetry. His awards include The KM Hunter Foundation Award (Toronto), the Arthur Schomburg Award (New York), Canada Council Poetry Award, a fiction award from the Ontario Arts Council and Fellowships from the University of Miami and Boston University. His work has been published in 8 countries including Canada, England, the Caribbean, India and the USA. He lives in Tampa, Florida.

Subhash Chandra taught in the Department of English, University of Delhi. He is the author of *The Fiction of J.D. Salinger* and editor of *Thomas Hardy: A Collection of Critical Essays*, of *Mohan Rakesh’s Halfway House: Critical Perspectives* and *Lesbian Voices: Canada and the World*. As a recipient of a Shastri Indo-Canadian Fellowship, he worked on a post-doctoral project on Multiculturalism and the Print Media in Canada at the University of Toronto, Canada.

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