

A Selection of Recent Indian Poetry

Monsoon

Furious rain kicks back
from slate rooftiles,
rejoining the grey mist

I'm reminded of India's monsoon
Dark sky opening
in the silk-green Himalayan valley
where my inlaws reside

I can see them
seated on the verandah-veiled in white rain
Their words are washed by water falling

My father inlaw reading;
pages of *The Statesman*
scattered about his lap like children
My mother inlaw sewing
sapphire-gold border of her sari;
cloth spun from the sun's silken eye

Her brown hand moves steadily
from cloth to air,
a distance-threading;
a patient hand
full of seasons

GAIL GHAI

TWO POEMS BY KEKI N. DARUWALLA

Night Fishing

A shorelamp drops
its lighted tackle.
On the hook
no fish-snout spin.
Night fishing
sad as night rain
alone as the mind
before the dreams crowd in.

A Take off on a Passing Remark

Tall buildings impress me
the ones which cut off half the sky.
I like tall stories, even though false;
not the half-truth sleeping with the half lie.
I want things on a large scale:
amplitudes, a sense of space and light,
the great yellow eye of the train
lighting up the distances of the night.
Urchins, furred caterpillars, moles
and fern-beds are all right.
But I want flowering trees, long
streamers of moss, flaming parasites.

But when you ask, still squirrel-young
short as twilight
short as a shadow at noon
why I love you, what can I answer?

Banaras Revisited

To exorcise this hunger
these knots of ugliness along the veins
prepared to pay the asked price
I shopped in Banaras

amidst miles of silk
cool as nirvana-clad yogis
they sold me copper pots of Ganga
at a bargain

phalluses bloomed in banyan profusion
all sorts of stones pieces of rotting wood
suddenly hem me in
with phallic authority

cringing in the no-man's-land
between sinner and saint
I ran along god-infested streets
they mocked my emptiness

pursued by the odour of wet cow dung
the crackle of hell-bent bones
face to face with half-done flesh
I run

in visionary circles
around this square room without a centre
at some moments
when I rub shoulders with death

resuscitation comes
from a few shots of canned Ganga
then I walk
along sun-fretted corridors across
parrot-reflecting lawns

in my own company.

Written at the Taj Mahal

Maria, when we spoke
about the Taj late
one night over vodka
deep in Spain before
we crawled into
your bed that had
a silken canopy,
you told me how
the marble glowed
in moonlight, then
we ourselves seemed
to glow, by candles
bright enough for all
the gossips of
the little town
to find. Now at last
I too find my way,
come unto the Taj,
see green jade,
pink cornelian
embedded in the tomb
to make a bright
carnation the guide
holds his candle to —

it glows, not one instant
older than
that night you saw it
with some other
lover, touched it briefly
with your hand,
caressed it as
you later touched
me too. The Taj
is ageless, at least
until that new refinery
sent its smoke roiling
toward the dome —
it drifts right through
the moonlight —
you and I are far
apart. Would a postcard
reach you? Do you
like Mumtaz lie within
a tomb? I would fear
to see your face now
or cup your breast.
But this white teardrop
of the Taj
has caught our sacred
moment, which I've held
a secret all these years.

And you help me find anew
whatever love turns up,
for my loves
are many now — I have been
a liar to deny
that I love
prodigiously.
When the sun
here brings the river
close to mist
these cripples,
urchins, rickshaws,
then drops behind
the walls, it leaves
us only moonlight
and a grief for love,
all that splendid
women give, in India
or Spain;
and there are loves
that we pursue,
innocent as clowns. I caught
my breath again
as I did that night
I held you. I said
your name, a mantra
that might yet save
us both, help the Taj
survive in moonlight.

DAVID RAY

Kinsmen

Accompanied by my mother and uncles
I went to examine my bride
matched by caste, horoscope
for health, wealth, cooking abilities.
Dowry, prohibited by law,
was to be surmised by the diamonds in her ear,
how many servants waited on the family.

The bride, tightly bound in a titular saree,
sat head bent to the appropriate
angle of ritual modesty:
asked to sing, she sang of a nude saint
that rode on a tiger,
she knew it was not the song
but whether she could sing at all
was the issue to be proved or tested.

Not a word passed between herself & me
while relatives ate
to the tune of her spiritual alacrity,
I kept my mouth shut,
let the time honoured precedent
of elders arbitrating settlements follow
though I gazed at her breasts quite unsettlingly.

We parted among polite queries
on brothers who had settled in the West,
my future if I stayed, in the judiciary.
That evening, the bride's kinsmen
saw me enter the same club
where in the back they drank secretly.

That was some years ago,
married now to a teetotaler
who has developed hepatitis, high blood pressure,
I hear she has taken to writing poetry.

G. S. SHARAT CHANDRA

A Hindoo's Prayer

Not to the Tower of Silence — there to be
by vultures shredded with impunity;
nor, to the soil consigned, to spread
malignant plagues among desipient dead;
nor mummified, embalmed, with cheap perfidious trick,
of sight or smell or touch of death, to cheat the quick.

No — none of these — to me the charnel-house
is sacrosanct; nor Tower nor earth nor cinnamon would rouse
the selfsame ecstasy that searing flame,
precise annihilist, accords to each its suplicants in Brahma's
name.

Enough that they cremate my corpse and cast the bones
in Ganga's depths, to bleach amid its mossy stones
and tranquil tangle-weed, exiled to lie,
iniquitous, until the crack of Doom, in hushed expectancy.

LOUIS JEROME RODRIGUES

Nirvana

By and by
darkness blows out of his eyes,
and misshapen thoughts let go
of a wasting mind.

Then, the recovered vision alights
upon the marble rocks
which ring a ground
polished to such a fine crystalline
it bounces back the blue and empty sky
of no known bound.

No trace of beast or bird,
no sound heard
but the beat of the heart.

Something tells him :
this is it.

Something tells him :
this is all.

Tells it him :
the rest is beyond recall.

KESHAV MALIK

New Delhi, 1974

The city has spread quietly, suddenly. Everywhere
It springs up, this futile architecture, its garish forms

Shuffled and heaped, its grass sprouting sparse
And indifferent, its women brittle with paint,

Its wrists young and hairless, dipped into the pool
Where gold reflections rise, quiver at the rims of eyes.

The old scalps are dry, dead hair has lost its root,
And the mouth that once rehearsed its verses in these streets, now

Is elsewhere. The monuments are black, rainblack
And shoulderless, and the plain that once stretched

Green towards the south is gray with dust and grime.
The old have nowhere to go now, in this new

City they have not built, and the impatient young
Are idle, and do not know where to turn.

VINAY DHARWADKER

The Indigent

Everyday I watch
A grim scene
Outside a milk-booth
In the City Beautiful.

Crates containing empty bottles
Of customer-consumed milk
Allure a crowd of urchins
With their mugs and bowls.

Whosoever is quick to collect
The left-over drops
Calls it a day
And flies away.

Maybe to provide
A succour-diet
To a baby-brother
Or an aged parent.

R. P. CHADDAH