

A second Book of Verse
Vivisections
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A Writers Workshop Redbird Book



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AUBADE

The twarbed dawn-sun leans
Culled sands and lawns and knolls
Leaden over moon's nibbled lobes
Nylon stars fading in the blue
Zibbed in the smull-dazzle called
Birds nidifying in the dekel
Straw and fluff bills filled
The twarbed dawn-sun laughed.

A spillway of gold in the leaves
Bright nuggets gleamed on the walls
Bees buzzed on the baize of the lawns
And stormed on mapped sand-knolls
Sun-stunned the dulled cud raised
Calf's head from the cow's udders
A man sat haunched in the field
-The twarbed dawn-sun laughed.

Surprised by stencilled rays
Dawn' adon crepuscular tsar
Coddled and cradled in sleep
Yelled hoarse with pouting lips.
Stray puppies playful as otters
Barked at cattle in the street
Lemon camels trudged sleep-filled
-The twarbed dawn-sun laughed.

Fishes beamed on the ripples
Of sand in the dawn-wind purls
Of day -- the little child prammed
Wrinkling gold rivers romped
Palmed lids and sepaned lashes
Opened like million sea-shells
As shimmering, dazzled delight-filled
The twarbed dawn-sun laughed.

MEM SAHIB

1

Owens enough toiletry to start
A cosmetic store, Eyes
Bedizened with matte shadow
And mascara, she reeks
Of deodorant and perfume. Aphids of vanity

Blight the rose of her aspect.

Six kinds of cream strive
To make her skin soft, rare brands
Of soap her complexion fair. Lotions
Darken, tonics thicken, shampoos
Lengthen her impoverished hair. Sprays
Hold them in place.

The duchesse displays more- astringents
Moisturisers, ointments, rows
Of lipstick; enamel for cuticles
Grown long as a caracal's;
Eyeliners, pencils for shading brows:
And a lacad runner with vials
Of civet, musk and cologne.
Her wardrobe, a boutique
In miniature, is draped with cholis,
Jeans, jacquard ponchos
Caftans in dobby, and
Jumpsuits with kimono sleeves.
The cheval glass in her boudoir frames
Several images of her conceit.
She performs
Her balneary ritual once a week.

2
Tides of fat distend
Shores of her belly, as she
Settles down in her car to drive
To the club. There she browses through
Fashion weeklies, film magazines. Talks
Of tatting and crochet to her friends.
Discusses recipes
From Chinese and French cuisines, whispers
Loudly the latest sex
Scandals in her locality, about
Tribady or infidelity.

A lady demonstrates ikebana.

They play
Mahjong and canasta for hours. flx
A jam session at her house. She counts
Herself among the élite -this coarse
Hybrid of two cultures
Boll-weevil upon her spouse.

Perhaps the next week's
Flower arrangement would be
A rafflesia on a javanese tree.

WIND AND TREE

A Sonnet

Green gorgons of darkness rooted in the earth
Your hundred hearts are bursting as they clap
Their jade hands all tangled in a trap
Of green snakes and gold ganglions of their birth.
Time's white ants have made a hollow in the girth
Of your dented trunks, all dead through gangrened sap
A hundred hearts are pitched into the lap
Of gaping dark like ashes flung in a hearth.

Now over your myriad hoods a harpy hangs
Whose waiting talons wouldn't their target miss
She springs upon them now her spongy tangs
And sucks green hemlock from your tongue's forked kiss
Till all the sting is stolen from your fangs
And all the poison blown in her stealthy hiss.

PURANI GALI

A cloaca flowing from Burra Bazaar
Spills its cobbles with faeces and lant.

Purani Gali has
An unbroken chain of garbage hills
Humped like stricken dromedaries
And just one rusty, age-eroded drum
Perpetually choked with trash.

Now at its rim, a crow perches
Rectrices raised, culmen dipping.
Then emerges with a dead
Tailless lizard in its carbon bill.

And, as it takes to flight
Its wings almost graze
Hiroo's bald head - old beggar
Who with his bent stave
Stirs each stack of stench
Turn by turn; ferrets

Pieces of 'basi roti
Fungus-coated bread
And rotten fruit.

Close by, a sow and her farrow
Nose the upturned dumps for swill.
A black dog trots away with a bone.

Garbage sustains
Bird, beast, man.

BEE TO A FLOWER (To Min)

As you lay shut my bud
Bough to bough, leaf to leaf I sprung
Climbed the stem that held you
Through the sepals beheld you
Then closer to your calyx I clung.

No fritillary or sly argos
Could match my amatory talk
As settling down fully
With wings, corbicula
I almost fracted your stalk.

You, petiole-scandent, spurned
Every act of my gentle chivvying
I won't be refractory
In my quest for nectary
"Love". I said, "is all grief and giving".

And I knew that the tears of my pain
Could drench you like the rain and the dew
So I wooed and wooed
Till finally you cooed
The petals of my corolla are open to you.

Flower you are mine now. I shall search
Every cranny of your being through and through
In your stamen I'll creep
Your pollen drink deep
Then lie dead. There's nothing more to do.

PRAYER

in the hypocrisy of smiles

lies the truth of tears,
in hope
the truth of despair.
in prayer
the truth of sin.
in contentment
the truth of desire,
in speech
the truth of guilt.
in faith
the truth of betrayal.
in resurrection
the truth of fear,
in thoughts
my own destruction,

in the hypocrisy of smiles
lies the truth of tears,

CULTURE

Bred among odours of ordure
I missed the chance to nose
A pure
Damask rose.
Now fully grown I realise
We were only taught to use
Green fields as lavatories
And therefore, I have come to associate
All kinds of hues
Merely with animal or human waste.

A tinge of minivet-scarlet
Is no reminiscence of that bird
But of betel-spittle stains
Left by movie fans
On walls
Of cinema halls
And by pimps and harlots
In red-light lanes.

Siris leaves possess
An autumn flavesence
immeasurably less
Than expectorations
Of asthmatic old men
Coughing doubled-up on loose

Squeaky string cots
Whose
Rans of twine
Are broken as their thoughts.

A takin-gold evokes
Nor In the least
Memories of dawn or some rare beast

But turds of stray dogs
Like pagoda heaps
Among scattered slippers
Of scores of worshippers
At a Vashnoi temple-feast.

Tourists note
Fresco-amber
In Ajanta art
I know this pigment from
Pools of bovine piss
At any vegetable mart.

Yet
Devil take me if
I sound like a hammer set
To break an anvil, a wave
Trying to topple the cliff.

SONG OF THE RAINMAKERS

Calm down O breath of the twins
The horse of Santiago is running
Call down the fire from Heaven
Quartz crystals be showered on the women
The 'Tilo' be stunning, be stunning.

I will sit in the rain and say
Water is the Sakvari song
Parjanya is pleased today
The Great One is making a noise.

I will sit in the rain and say
Men of the totem gather
Come, march into camp and play
In bunches of eagle-hawk feather
In ochre, red, pipeclay.

Fold your arms and then disperse
Eating the game you hunt
Glued by human blood
Broad bands of white bird's down
And all this while, not a drop
Not a drop of water be drunk.

Calm down Q breath of the twins
Olachen, salmon, fish-twins
Your parents are painted red
The mother who digs no clams
And the father wears on his head
Flamingo fillet of bark
A bean in the hollow of the ham.

I sprinkle water at the ghostpost
Now the showers will fall, will fall
On Toradja's and Javanese house
The clouds will lower rainwall.

Paparuda and bebies of girls
Robed in dwarf elder and corn
Scream Scalol is dead', and drown
Both candle and coffin in a bourn.

Now Nurin the broomstick is come
From the window or the door my child ?
From the garret-window Nurin the dumb
Is hurled into waters wild.

Lift a corpse from out of the grave
Extract each one of its bones
Carry them far to a cave
Rebuilding its skeleton alone.

Pour water from taro leaves
Over skeleton of this corpse
And may it be turned into
A shower of radiant rain-drops

Residing in the belly of pots
Sacred skull-like stones
I pray to my ancestors
For rain, the rainmaker moans.

With the sculpin in his hand

He hears the loon call loud
He prays to the racoon's skull
To shower but just one cloud.

Rubbing dirt on the kitfox skin
He catches the bandicoot
Till he grows so weak and thin
That the rain follows suit.

Then he sings to the mimic rainbow
And he sings to the murdered snake
As the dollar-bird skyward spits
The twins sigh buried by the lake.

HILL

Each night I climb the hill
Explore the reentrant dark and still
Or over the spur I linger
That points like a carnal finger
Of my libidinous will.
And when the morning comes I grope
Towards the cliff with the sheer slope
Then search for the source of the rill.

Now I ascend the top
Fill my lungs with the pure air
Slip over the rocks, drop
A few feet down the hill
No sooner have I reached there
I hear her calling. Come down. darling
Come down, here'
But the next moment I am rushing past
The rocks and boulders down the hill
Nor slow my reckless run until
I tumble headlong blind, unseeing
Among cornucopias of her being.

Lost are my visions about the hill
I have found the true source of my rill.

SETH AGARWAL

With his mouth opening and closing like a gavial
Computing the previous day's profit and loss, we find
Seth Madangopal Chunilal Agarwal sitting cross-legged
On the divan in his old, ancestral shop

Poring over his ledgers through an ill-fitting
Pair of gold-framed spectacles, ankles and soles of his feet
Dirt-laminated, He
(In a mulmul dhoti and a home-made vest
Through which you may see
His ponderous belly protruding on all sides
Like a ginger-rhizome)
Is the founder and proprietor of Agarwal and Sons.
'Grocers And Grain Merchants Johri Bazar. Jaipur.
Retail and whole-sale dealers of adulterated
Mustard oil, asfoetida, powdered red-chilly,
Turmeric, cummin, fennel, nutmeg, gingelly.
Liquorice, lentil, dried boletus, pigeon-pea,
Wadi' and 'papad'. Renowned
Hoarders of 'vanaspati', sugar, wheat and rice. Adept
At cheating their rural clientele at the scales.
God swell Seth Agarwal's belly and his sales.

OCTINA

Part 1-A Soldier's Monologue

A soldier's drink is rum, let's have rum
She will not come tonight, she will not come.
Let's play rummy. All work and no play
Makes Jack a dull boy.
Let's empty this dull opiate to the drains
Now as the rains are falling, the rains are falling, the rains
Drip-drop, drip-drop, drip-drop without stop
Now as glow-worms are dancing down the eaves
And some have perched themselves on drooping leaves
And the eyes of the tiger are weeping brightly
And men have given up sleeping nightly
And a hurt heart here endlessly grieves
And there's no falling of rain there, not even slightly.

I am the monarch of all I survey, my eyes are wild
(Still falls the rain)
Turn from me, shrink from me, mother and child
(Still falls the rain)
I am a soul that hes sinn'd and is not pardoned again.

Why do you drink so much, my dear, why do you drink ?
So that my head gets in a whirl and I may not think
So that my eyes grow red and my mouth may stink.

My midnight's sun is the day's moon

It dazzles at midnight, dims at noon
My dusk is dawn, my twilight gloaming
And tonight, I am sure, she won't be coming.

Part I1-The Land of the Dying

Never a bird beneath the welkin flies
have never seen any rainbows in these skies
There is no beauty in this sunset and this sunrise.

Listen to the songs of the solitary reaper
Whose cobs of maize are bereft of corns
And apples of Sodom grow on his creeper
He harvests cactus and xanthium thorns.

Necrophagus ashplants sprout on the plains
Fed by the waters of radioactive rains.

Part III- Song of the Indian Beggar
"This priest is greedy, this priest's a glutton
In secret eats onions and mutton
In his temple keeps a woman
But forgive him he is human.
Pilgrims through him have been robbed
He says it is the will of god".

Thus sang the beggar by the banks of the Ganges
That river, he said, is malodorous mud
(Though snows are white on the mountain ranges)
It swamps all in its lacustrine flood.

Five rivers that quench the northern soil
Lie dry and sterile and full of sand
Lord Krishna is strangled in a serpent's coil
And Yamuna is the largest sewage of the land.

Kali sat smacking blood in a shrine
And Durga was riding a tiger's back
And Kali said, O this blood is wine.
And Durga said, 'I will hunt with my pack'.

Part IV- Ozymandias of Egypt
I met Ozymandias in the oasis
He was the tallest camel of the caravan
And he said, O look how metempsychosis
Has made me a camel though I died as a man'.

O King of kings! O Camel of Pride!
For ages you will plough the desert land.
Then his Arab said it was time to ride
And the caravan left like a mirage on the sand.

Part V-Rising of the Phoenix
It's five hundred years now
O bring the fabled urn
Let us rekindle the fire
Let the heap of ashes burn
The phoenix appears now
From the ashes of his fire
Saying 'Life is but my own desire'.

Part VI- Pyrrho, Christ and Comus
Pyrrho's head was stuck in a ditch
His disciple was passing by who said
Master I follow whatever you teach
So I will not help pull out your head.

Christ was telling a nun in the church
Patience, child, though hard you have striven.
Leave, leave, leave your flesh in the lurch
And I shall lift your soul to Heaven.

Comus was dancing in a moonlit glade
Singing with his band sweet songs of lust
God for pleasure the night has made
Let's live for pleasure ere we turn to dust.

Part VII- Dialogue of the Vultures
We saw two glorious wars, two very glorious wars
One was fought here on earth and the other was fought on Mars
And we heard men whining and whimpering for a day
And now, they have left us their carrions to eat and their land here to stay.

Part VIII - Pandora's Box
Pandora re-opens her box
Calling every evil back
Now the free birds dance in the winds
Now the free fish dash on rocks
Earth once more her splendour finds
Time renews its beaten track.

And in mercy, God, from Nature's plan
Has at last excluded man.

CHESS-WAR

Two ebony knights, two eburnean-white
Trot towards the left or towards the right.

Four bloody bishops lost in battle's thrill
Hurl their slanting spears, thirsting for a kill.

Four ponderous rooks pounce from pawn to pawn
Till they, knights and bishops - all are gone.

And now, two queens one dark and the other fair
Rule the battle-field bare.
While two lonely kings on the spotted square
Idly stare.

PARTNERS

The bride
Possessed no trousseau
Save her tresses.
Her groom's wages were
A wad of words.
Yet they showered
Their meagre gifts
Upon each other
Like confetti.

A trillion times a day
She blinded him with nights
Dark as Cimmerii
By a toss of her raven head.

He squandered all
His currency of words
In scores of uxorious song.

Such monsoon-fling of youth
Left them legacies.
Aging together, they watch
Both fungus and the algae grow
As lichens upon their hyetal tree
In rich symbiosis now.

THE ATHEIST

I shall not kneel in prayer

I shall not mend my ways
Do not ask me there
How I've spent my days.

My sins I won't confess
I shall not expiate
Don't help me in distress
Archangels of my fate.

Do not allay my fears
Do not wish me well
I shall not kneel in prayer
And let me go to hell.

THIS HATBLOW WIND

this hat blow wind
top hill to crest
cool feel of mind
mad mouth of wet
why have all can't
meat, fruit like fish
as cheese we want
such fresh-tinned wind
now clouds fly dust
now fall wool reel
down strong one gust
bird swept off feet
now sails like flap
clap small all hands
slap lake on lap
see waves saw mad
smoke blue with black
lifts too soon soot
no trace of track
in vast void too
no hiss of steam
but hoot and blow
faint horn in dream
dun paint of coal
no glance but bound
sunrise and daze
one dance of sound
blind dare and may

no rash will race
but crash craze hill

bind wing as face
sing hat blow wind

EPITHALAMIUM

A shamiana blocks the road.
Fallal and bunting flutter, balloons wave
At passers-by. An arch of festoons
Welcomes you at the entrance gate, where
Loudspeakers splutter film music-and sometimes,
Lata's voice breaks into a banshee's shriek.

The baraat arrives. A hired band's
Piccolo and cornet bring the groom, astride
An aged hackney barnacled at the nose. Suddenly
Euphonium and timpani crash and break,

Inside
The bride waits with a garland
In her henna-dyed hands. Aquarelles
Of dreams colour her eyes.

A week after
The marquee is struck, romance
Comes to an end.

In the scullery of her new home
She cleans brass utensils with charcoal-ash,
Pounds with a pestle the family's
Laundry against a stone, The quotidian grind
Wipes out her nubile look.
Quarrels with in-laws, squalor, want
Add years to her face, make
Ugliness inquiline,

Now her wedding is a faded flower
Between the leaves of a book.

DIALOGUE WITH A PALMIST

"Your tape of life is five feet long
(Each inch a year)
Count the two as almost gone
And three left here."

"But I was told that I would live
To ninety years.""

"Know you who the palmists are ? Forgive
A pack of liars."

SWIMMING POOL

When the swimmers left, the water
Settled down in the pool.
Its stone-framed looking glass
Lay still, reflecting
Its green bottom and the setting sun.

You could almost fill
Bottles of myriad colours from its sides
Now it seemed so serene in its liquid contemplation;
A wavering green solid in its concrete casing - changing
Its poise suddenly. A little while ago
It was full of the merry riot of children
At its shallow end, replete with sounds
Of splash, its bosom seesawing gently
And the ripple and dance of its waters
Commingled with movements of little limbs.
Now when a wind wandered it tried to blend
These films of dying hues; two wrinkles of colour
Suffused its crinkled green, one magenta
The other soft orange. I left the place before
The night fell, but the pool's protean image stayed
Building a far vaster vision in my mind;
My ears were full of the sounds of far-off waves
And my eyes culped blind
Bottles of vague colours from vast sunsets over the deep.

TALE OF A COW

Not so good-looking, perhaps,
As the cow they show
On a grocer's calendar
Krishna leaning against
Tootling on his flute -yet
I had a bovine grace when young.

My Nagaur bull
Was handsomer than Pasiphae's.

And when I calved
For weeks the Kisan's pails
With my beestings overflowed. (But
Should I narrate

These old wives' tales ?)
-Here I sit
Tethered to a Keekar tree
Beside this midden of crumbling clats
Flitting daylong
My feeble tail to unsettle
Crows and egrets astride my back.
Before my eyes, flies shimmy.

Now I belong
To the Kisan's
Superannuated herd. Senile.
With udders dry. Kapt
Away from haystacks. Starved
And beaten. Wounds
Fester in my stave-lashed hide.
Who says cows are sacred in this land ?

HY POTHESIS

Suppose you resolve not to wind the clocks
Stopping forever the swing of pendulum
And cause every watch and time-piece to be dumb
Maiming their hands and dashing their dials upon the rocks
You'd still be able to synchronise
Chronometers with sunset and sunrise.

Suppose you send an army to each pole
To seize the globe at both ends of its spindle
Such that the Sun won't set, nor the Moon wax or dwindle
And half the planet in light and half in darkness roll,
Yet the solstice and the equinox
Will meter hours, more precisely than the clocks.

And after fixing the earth's axis
You have still to battle with the Sun
To demand a separate orbit for its run
Then contend with all the other galaxies.

No, feathers in the wind, drifting rafts on the sea
Are freer to chart their course than we.

DIRGE

Grief my girl abides
Siked in spathes of ears
Green in talanced dabs

Nube in yarring beds
Grief's my girl for years.

Shy and slad my lads
This atal wight of tears
With silt of salt on lids
And sladen sea of diles
Sulls eye that slob in fears.

Tibed congeries teased
At cripple in reening knares
A wretch on crutches seized
To mock the maimed, diseased
My girl will say no prayers.

AUBADE II

a rhododendron
red sun
arrow-glancing
through anole-green
leaves of the neem.

bee-eaters shift on telephone wires
and cobalt pigeons
shuffle in the eaves,

as I go forth wife-bidden
to buy eggs from the market

and the first person
I encounter
is our dhoban's child
easing unembarrassed
over the pavement
in front of his timber
laundry.

he gives me a knowing look
and smiles, showing all his ivories.

groups of old men
from the direction
opposite
briskly walk towards
waiting fields, chatting

and chewing
margosa datans on the way.

a cyclist skims past, singing
'hum tum kamre me band
hon aur chabi kho jaye

and, at the junction
of Uday Marg and Prabhu Marg
bhajans from Vashnoi temple
and the interminable
skandpath of the gurudwara
seep into my unwilling ears
remove
any shred of sleep
still lurking in my eyes.

in bazaar
the wavy, corrugated
iron shutters
of Stylo Tailors
and Parvana General Stores
are drawn up partly

I collect eggs from the stall
return home and wait
patiently for my breakfast.

HEAVEN

Each one has his dream of Heaven. I have mine.
I think it is a small primary school
Which is quite overcrowded as a rule.
The students are all adults who cannot sign
Their own names even, nor count up to nine.
(I don't imply each one of them is a fool).
The school indeed has quite a tight schedule
And God as Principal is simply divine.
And among lady teachers that take the classes
Some wear mini-skirts and some dark glasses
One day - But I should not -It won't speak well –
One day the Principal was caught making passes.

They have scholarships too, those who excel
Are sent to earth; the failures, expelled to Hell.

TIME STRUCK IN MY HEART

Time struck in my heart
An hour in the night
As laughter rang on the stairs
Loud knocks on the door.

But let none enter
Save a lone moonbeam
Sensing the stranger in mind
The devil in dream.

TONGA-HORSE

crop held high, thong tracing
sickles in the air, the tonga-wallah
cracks the whip on his blinkered face

a born tracer went to harness
he hauls now
a woman with two daughters and three
massive trunks of steel

(even Atlas would resent the weight)

tarmac and cobblestone
have frayed
calks of his shoes, bars
In his hooves ache

a tug at the reins
and a lash
the senile ungulate breaks
his trot into canter
awkwardly shaking
hackles, poll, mane.

they say
the slave and the indigent between them
usually hold bond
not in this land
of baffling mores. - Ask any
bull, camel, ass. Here the poor
not only yoke the dumb for bread
they also flog them for a song.

FILL THE LAWN WITH VACANT STARES

Fill the lawn with vacant stares
Leave the doors of mind ajar
Waiting for the winds to stir
And the red dawn rid of stars.

O the night is full of croaking
And the mind is rife with thoughts
How long will you keep thus smoking
Piling heaps of cigarette butts?

Go and as your neighbour snoring
Sleep the night so full of stars
What though sounds of frogs be jarring
And your mind proclaiming wars!

STRAY DOG

He sits nutant in the sun
A bone
Between his flews. Paws
Cannot shake off ticks
From his dewlap nor release
Mange mites and fleas
From his withers. Evening
Makes him itinerant. He enters
A thoroughfare, barks
At strangers, cows,
Craven sheep. Growls
Before the porch of a house
At an Alsatian under leash
Tail pointing downwards.
Urchins stone him
At the corner of a street. Later
He is almost overrun by a car
As he scumbers on the highway.

Something in the faineant beast
Keeps him at large, until
Night and a shanty's fetor
Draw him into a lane, where
A bitch in oestrus
Ends his odyssey. He sniffs
Hocks raised, stifles quivering,
Pasterns gripping the rump

The act of mating is his day's
Only deed of grace.

UNKNOWNING WE MOVE

Unknowning we move a million miles each day
Along with the circling axle of the earth
Presuming it shall not crash or explode midway
While we all suspire, girdled to its girth.

Meticulously we plan our day ahead of us
(Except the event of our ultimate sorrow)
Our work, our leisure, and even our partner's coitus
Certain that the sun will rise again tomorrow.

ENNUI

I sit in my office
Bored with work.
Once in a day the clerk
Brings the official mail
I sign the meaningless
Letters, reminders, returns.
I am paid for the
Accidie
I endure each day
And my role in society
Is to occupy
The prison of drudgery
To fill the vacancy
Of a useless drone.

And with nothing done
I leave my office
Sharp at one
Returning
Next morning
Like Sisyphus
Back to his stone.

ALL TRAVELLERS, ALL, ALIGHT HERE

All travellers, all, alight here
This is the end, the terminus.

Friend, we have met before but
Where ? I can't remember. Where?

More friends will you meet here
This is the end, the terminus.

What of those we left off there
Some weeping and some stunned with fear?

Your snap lies, Lady, in an album
They look at it without a tear.

We crossed a bridge at set of sun
Then strange the landscape did appear.

Yes, strange was this journey, Dear
Stranger than all the rest.

Sleepless we have spent the night
O sleepless now for many a year.

Is there any rest-house near ?

This is the end, the terminus
Sleep without a fear.

THE COWARD

They say
Those who commit suicide
Are basically cowards
For they
Are afraid of life

How many times I
Have held
Mock manoeuvres with my Webley, thinking
Cyanide is a better bloodless way
But failed

I, a far greater coward
Afraid of life

Afraid of death.

SOOTHSAYER'S PROPHECY

Carved in rocks and stones
I have read the past
On hieroglyphics and colophons
And from your apocalyptic hands
The wrecks of seas and ruins of lands

And I can so prognosticate
From the tributaries of your plams
The catastrophe of your fate
And earth a cataclysmic vast
Of wrecks and ruins and holocaust.

ORISON

Though I am old and dying
I have tried to rebuild
From this fallen cement and stone
New house of my own
But I am tired of trying.

From this débris of deeds
I have tried to construct
Walls against winds of time
And a terrace toward Heaven
And I would even sow the seeds
For a garden within my walls
But I am tired of trying.

So let me languish in my shard
Of broken bricks and mortar
(Where a pipistrelle is flying
On burdock and broom-rape
Resenting a ravaged human shape)
And humbly beg His pardon For I am tired of trying.

WITH YOUR SHOVEL AND SPADE

With your shovel and spade
Walk into the cemetery
Dig up grave after grave
Open the lids of the coffins
Peep from face to face.

This is your corpse when a child
This, when a boy, and these
Year after year when you died
Their ghosts haunt your hollows
Their phantoms flit in your eyes
And still more corpses are lying
Buried in your heart and mind
And more will follow.

And now without a sob or a sigh
Shut the lids of the coffins
With your shovel and spade
Fill up grave after grave
Keep count
For with the coming of days you will add
More deaths in life.

CHANNO'S TANDOOR

In Ghaziabad
From mid-April to June when the loo blows
All the wives of Multani Mohalla make a pact
"Dal and vegetables we shall cook -but chapatis, never".
Let the tawas lie cold in the kitchen.
For who can bear to sit so long by the fire
And cook in this summer heat ?

And they all flock to Channo's tandoor
Carrying lumps of kneaded dough in brass patilas
Covered with a wet cloth.

And Channo's wife makes small balls out of this dough
And sprinkles dry flour over them from a parat,
She then ranges them in two rows in front of her husband
Who slaps and flattens them between his hands
And makes them saucer-round
And sticks them to the inner wall of the tandoor
Which is blazing and candent like a volcano;
And the baked ones he takes them out with his tongs.

The Channos have a son who goes to school
And two daughters who do not.
Now the elder is picking lice in her sister's hair.
In the verandah, over a cot, sits Channo's father
Puffing at his narghilly which gurgles.
He eyes around him the crowd of chirping women
And suddenly yells at his son

"Tell me Channo, what use are women these days
If they cannot cook for their families ?"

But Channo cares not to reply.
And all the wives of Multani Mohalla
Keep chatting as before.

AMORET

Since I know you love me now
All my wars are at an end
Having won I wondered how
Ever made your will to bend.

Lesser fighters would have fled
Long ago the battlefield
I hung on though almost dead
Because my heart refused to yield.

Captive now I'll make you feel
All the strokes your sabre dealt
Make you wipe my blood from steel
Till your stony heart should melt.

Force you, yes, my Warrior-Miss
All my body to caress
Every single scar to kiss
Every single wound to dress.

TEMPLE LORE

Ghazni's hordes may have pillaged
Gold from its sanctum or between
Architraved pillar and pilaster
Disfigured scroll and frieze. Tourists
May have swiped its icons for antiques.

Peace prevails now.
An old banyan broods like a rishi
Upon the socle. Its stilt roots
Drop like mats of hair over the moonstones.
A pagoda tree leans over a well
Profuse with flowers. Doves
Roost and dung in corniced eaves.
Iron clamp and dowel preserve
The ancient stance of stone.

Festival alone
Breaks this tranquil spell. Once a year
Finlals spear the dawn. Devotees
Cram the temple's vestibule
Panelled with terracotta
Myths of apsaras, chariots,
Beasts. Ashlars flash
Like quarrels of glass.
The trabeats hall
Heady with fumes
Of camphor and joss-stick reverberates
With mantras, bells. Pilgrims
Orbit round
The ambulatory, stopping by
Each transept turn by turn. An anchorite
Freezes into a seance. Doves dart
Like arrows from the eaves.
The Kalash, above, burns. The delty
Receives oblations of coins, flowers, fruits.

Under the camerated rock beyond
The pagoda tree rains blossoms in the well.

The banyan converts its branches into roots.

SONG

Ten dancers stranded in the verandah
Watching the rain drip-drop, drip-drop
Though dance and music have now all ended
But the midnight rain won't stop, won't stop.

The band has departed. the floor is bare
And only murals upon the walls
Are dancing on unaware, unaware
That the midnight rain still falls, still falls.

Ten pens and swans weary of sails
Dreaming no more of dancing floors
With pelages wet and soggy tails
But the midnight rain still pours, still pours.

O why didn't the rain fall during the dance?
Ask, please, ask those fluorescent trees
Ah, this is no time, no time for romance
And still the rain won't cease, won't cease.

THE PATIENT

I am a patient
sick in the ward of words
the physician of prose says
mixtures of phrase
are good for the
affliction of diction

the nurse of verse gets
pills of rhymes, epithets
many times a day

but they do not reveal
I show
other symptoms of rot

for they know that I know
the throat of my mind
has cancer of thought

GRANDMOTHER

They live on her charity.
A gymnosoph
With trisul and shell of: gourd
For alms, calling
Jal Shankar' every morning

A stray heifer
Loafing the neighbourhood
With a halter dangling

The mangy street-dog.

She plucks basil
And jasmine from the olitory
For gods squatting in a row
On the mantelpiece
Brahma Vishnu Mahesh

In between prayers
Hurls invective
At the sweeper in the courtyard
Who scrimshanks with his broom

Or screams
At the skivvy in the kitchen
Sifting bran from flour
The pantheon impassive, quite
Oblivious of offence.

RHYME IS A CURSE

Rhyme is a curse
Critics hold
To write good verse
Take the Victorians and the Romantics
Wasting their time in
Fatuous rhyming
Without ever delving into semantics
And what's their rhythm ?
But tum-tee, tee-tum.

Now poets thrive in every street
Who don't even know iambic feet
And would like their verse to pass
As free as Whitman's Leaves of Grass.
(For critics no longer applaud
Poems like Kubla Khan and Maud
Nor Eliot when he wrote Gerontion
Care at all about the scansion.)

And though you sound a trifle sweeter
By the use of rhyme and metre
If you want to appear in print
Remember they are both extinct.

NIGHT

Now let light fade
and darkness fall
The world to bed
and sleep on all.

Now let voice cease
From end to end
a silent pause
Without one sound.