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In the recently-published fourth edition of *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry & Poetics*, Paul Kane describes Stephen Edgar as ‘a writer of unsurpassed technical facility’ (102). *The Red Sea* is Edgar’s sixth book and, in one hundred pages, this collection of new and selected poems formalises plaudits made by Clive James on the book’s dust jacket: ‘Here is the poetry of someone who has been granted all the gifts, including a sense of proportion so concentrated that it sings.’ Edgar’s lyricism acts as a harmonic force, and he follows that mode and tradition of poetry-as-a-supreme-fiction: this book of sonnets, madrigals, villanelles, and idiosyncratic forms is a songbook of ontologically-curious inquiry, a defamiliarizing exploration which extends across vistas both local and cosmic.

*The Red Sea* opens with ‘Lost to View’, which is not at all about loss but instead about that which we are able to apprehend with our human faculties. The lines step back and forth, iambically, in five stanzas each of five lines –

A film of what the day so far had done:  
A wind that tries to scrape  
The breaking waves up as they run  
Across the bay  
And shatter at the foot of Fluted Cape. (1)

This bears a slight resemblance to Peter Porter’s ‘Landscape with Orpheus’, which begins ‘It was as if the film had stuck, he was always / Back at the point where he moved up the latch/ And stood facing down the street’ and, indeed, there is something Orphic at work in Edgar’s poems: in ‘Lost to View’, each quintain is a perfect iteration of the next, as if the syllables (10, 6, 8, 4, 10) represent those natural shapes surrounding the poet – birds undulating across altitudes, waves that trough and crest – which Edgar, awed, stands and records.

He positions himself as apprehending shapes of the real but, rather than proffer a unity perceived by the narrator (who remains peripheral), ‘Lost to View’ proffers a blackbird as ‘The one who is required to see.’ Edgar is offering a singular way (viz. Wallace Stevens’ *thirteen* ways) of seeing self-in-context which remains intersubjective, sublime, and *almost* capable of revealing reality (as if that were possible). The poem ends with a segregated final line –

The spray will hang its veils and the trees sway. (2)

Beyond this, Edgar knows, all is indeed lost to view: just as that inscription carved on the ancient Temple of Isis (viz. ‘mother nature’) states, ‘I am all that is, and that was, and that shall ever be, and no mortal hath raised the veil from my face’, so too these carefully woven rimes tell stories of apprehending dimensions extra-human and non-logical. ‘Lost to View’ founds this *New and Selected* in wonder, which remains Edgar’s speaking position throughout: this is poet-as-Orphic-wanderer, able to both see and sing of shapes which contain and enact him.

We might say then that Edgar is a transcendental humanist; indeed, much of *The Red Sea* scans like the music of a particular kind of wisdom literature. These poems are meditations that take place under water, in air (so often filled with flight), and on *terra firma*: Edgar carefully connects zones at once real, mythological, perhaps even pataphysical, but the poet is...
always aware that his poems operate paradoxically, as connective tissue which both reveals and obscures the view, as in ‘Chiaroscuro’ –

I view all this behind a gauze, a scrim,
As from behind a delicate waterfall
That makes me want to wipe my eyes
Of something caught in them.
Pulling it back,
I zoom to focus like a lens, or that
First moment when,
Awake,
I put my glasses on. (32)

However, rather than making claim to some romantically-conceived destiny complex, Edgar’s vantage point persistently verges toward the eco-poetic: alongside privileging the participatory, instinctual blackbird in ‘Lost to View’, these are poems to defamiliarise the dialectical, infrastructured world: a crow crosses ‘the twilight in its silhouette’ (10) and elsewhere, the ‘absence that is afternoon is filling / The house again, like a substance’ (30); a ‘breeze fills up the manna gum’s huge lung’ (71). In this book, those solid and stable boundaries we are accustomed to blur (as in the final poem, ‘Coogee’)

The east looms heaven-high, black and horrific,
A cloud of nothingness that holds no trace
Of the Pacific,
A maw that tells the sheer end of the world (100) –

where the blank watery seascapes echo with foreboding and alarm. Edgar is more forthright on vacuity when turning his gaze back toward the landscape, as in ‘Penshurst’ –

The great Australian emptiness: the men
Away at work, the faceless wives indoors,

Possessed by their invisibility,
Streets in suspense, deserted like a scene
From The Quiet Earth. (47)

A complex interplay is at work here: Edgar conflates those origins of the Judeo-Christian tradition – the crossing of the Red Sea – with a re-reading of the Australian landscape as a red sea: sand or perhaps the blood of vanished indigenous cultures? Edgar scans the horizon for meaning and connection, but finds only either a ‘Golden Coast’ or the strangely unreal, carnivalesque Coogee –

The sloping esplanade bends round the beach,
Flanked by a row of golden globes on poles. (99)

Partly acknowledging non-emptiness and absence as a particularly Australian malaise, Edgar’s poetic is founded on principles of seeing yet not-belonging, a milieu in which further
disappearance seems distinctly possible –

They say the end might come with little warning,
The climate breaking and the ecosystem
Collapsing almost overnight to pay us
The recompense of our belated wisdom,
Presenting in the morning
The advent and the only light of chaos. (85)

Meanwhile, the role of the poet is apprised in ‘The Annexe’ – while television flickers, sound
down but ‘flourishing its phantoms’ (the poet brandishes his talent for compression when
surmising next that ‘history can perform only in tantrums’), he yet remains sensitised to the
inner sounds of sense-making –

A subdued music plays
Its tireless permutations and upstages
Time in more subtle ways

and, to this unsurpassed lyricist, poetry yet sings particularly, universally, of strange
connections –

The passages and stairs
wind through the middle of the night until
Their pattern and the night are ever more
Inwoven (3-4) –

so that again there is tension between common places when re-viewed by Edgar. This, then,
seems to be his objective: to revitalise connection between readers and their instrumentalised
realms which are not only preternatural, but which have also been terraformed with a version
of reality that has only recently arrived, and which acts as a carapace covering older,
disappeared connections.

This book, which is full of erudition and clarificatory gestures, may well formalise the
dialect of the tribe if, by tribe, we understand humankind in the early twenty-first century as an
urbanising, globalised, homogenising mash operating to the logic of late capitalism. This is a
book to savour for its resonant sense-making: read its songs slowly, for Edgar is poet who
would retune his readers notions of being and being ethical. Ronald E. Moore (poet and
publisher at Baskerville) writes on the dust jacket that ‘This is magisterial poetry.’ The object
itself – shining black vinyl hardcover, embossed gold lettering on the spine – implies authority,
mastery, and a seriousness both of intent and content. This is a book that looks like it means the
business of meaningfulness; its sounds are technically sophisticated and authentically-made,
and require our closest listening.

Dan Disney

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*The Welfare of My Enemy* is a sustained work on darkness and loss that revolves around different meanings of the term ‘missing person’. It is not only about those who become lost, but also about family and friends who are left behind to continue living with the absence and often an unresolved mystery.

None of the poems is titled. With the exception of two poems, one being the first, all are presented in rhyming couplets that are enjambed, that is, which flow to the following line rather than being syntactically contained. Occasionally, the effect is intrusive and there is the odd wrenched rhyme but reading for the voice rather than the page lessens the occasional sense of dislocation or contrivance. Once the reader is tuned in to a more fluid reading approach, the sense of the narrating character emerges more readily.

That element of narration is important for this collection. The range of characters is wide, at one extreme embracing the unsuspecting and/or vulnerable and at the other the cruel and vicious. It is to Lawrence’s credit that within each of these, there is a subtle shading that allows the reader to discern difference. Not all villains are the same, nor all victims. In less capable hands, they could have become blurred.

There is no continuous narrative but rather a series of poems that each act like momentary openings to light a situation of vulnerability, loss, grief, or despondency leading a person to become missing in one sense or another – if they are not already so. That distancing and disruption may relate to their own feelings of low esteem or loss of hope, perhaps from a relationship breakdown or mental collapse, or to having suffered at the hands of a violent predator.

The overall effect is not, as one might fear, ghoulish, although it is certainly chilling at times. Many of the poems speak to the idea of our tenuous hold on life, as in these lines (11):

> … Everyone knows  
> How lightly we are here, and how easily we go  
> From spark to smoke in a shuffling of years.  
> Abandonment or being lost are among the fears  
> We truly dread, and children affect us most.

Lawrence can produce a stark and appropriate image too, describing a night scene where ‘A single light burns / over the white, overlocking stitches that divide the road’ (13), and the earth itself as an animal in the permanent symbiotic meshing of life and death (15):

> … a world  
> of abundant flowering, where even sunlight  
> filtered and diffuse, is redolent of wet  
> ash and the presence of animals, and birds –  
> and here, under a thin pelt of earth, the blood …

After a number of contemplative poems, and just when more bite was needed, we encounter the mind of a sociopath with a jolt: ‘You won’t find my job description / in the weekend classifieds. I’m a sole trader’ (17). The narration shifts just as suddenly to the viewpoint of a hunting dog, which is virtually as intense in its focus as it tracks a criminal (19), and then to that of a detective who has learnt of a missing couple (20). These shifting perspectives are at the heart of the collection, allowing the reader to dip into states of fear, indifference, defiance, grief, and so on, as they arise with each character. Most are accomplished depictions, although a passage from page 34 does not ring true due to over-formality, and there is an awkward transition between conversational and a more poetic inner voice in another at page 44.

The intensity of a fierce dance through a manic episode is beautifully laid out from page 47:

Medication is one option, but so is a punch or hot wire
to the right hemisphere of your dream-acquired brain injury. Best to set fire to the scene

The publisher’s blurb tells us that Lawrence wrote this sometimes disturbing book after two friends went missing in 1978. Ultimately, it was finalised as part of a creative writing doctorate and whether read as a novella of mixed voices or as a poetry collection on a theme, it provides compelling reading.

Steve Evans

Adelaide poet David Mortimer has two prior poetry collections in book form and a 2010 CD recording of poems. He has been short-listed for poetry prizes, including the major Montreal International Poetry Prize 2011, and also published in *The Best Australian Poems 2012* (Black Inc. 2012). While a review of his new work has to put such considerations aside, *Magic Logic* does reveal a poet keenly attuned to his craft.

Introductory notes indicate that the poems were all begun between 2003 and 2009. They are disposed in four chronologically ordered sections, plus a smaller postscript one, though the ordering does not seem vital to the experience of reading them. The title of the book is intended to pose a tension, as if between left-brain and right-brain thinking. At one level, it could also be seen to explain different approaches taken in the various poems themselves.

Mortimer has made it clear in public talks that he places a high value on the sound of the poem, especially as reading it aloud – putting it in one’s mouth – emphasises the shifts and balances at work in shaping the lines. The music in them becomes clearer; there is a pulse in each case that is particularly evident when observing line length and, therefore, the breath of the poem. But more of music below.

Perhaps it is no surprise then that long lines and long sentences are important to Mortimer (see ‘cloud philosophy’, [67]), and he negotiated a wider format for this volume specifically to accommodate them. That said, it should be noted both that there are short poems with short lines here too, including some of just two or three lines, and that sound can be equally important in those.

While he sensitively harnesses the push and pull of the words’ inherent rhythm, Mortimer occasionally risks distracting from the underlying and key engine-work of the poem when, especially in longer ones, he becomes occupied with the arrangement of glossier effects. When this happens in something like ‘over the top’ (32–3), it is at least offered with a wink, and in ‘confession (with recurring puzzlement)’ (34–5), as an immersive experience. Less engaging is ‘orbital’ (68) with its torqueing, runaway images that end up justling each other before being abruptly winched back in to some order by a vivid closing couplet. These poems are generally better geared to the ear and energetic delivery than to closer and slower analysis. They offer most pleasure taken in the former mode.

Mortimer offers small but strong epiphanies in the shorter poems. In ‘momentary’ (69), that is built around a brief observation while waiting for a train. It begins with a sense of imminence:

> the sunlight  
> in the upwardly-brushed pine tree  
> seems ready to be dramatic

Normally, the third line’s resort to looseness and telling would signal a lack of will by the writer, but it is used here to carefully open into uncertainty, where it becomes apparent that the power to imagine is the actual subject of the poem. There are trains and birds and skies in number of poems collected in *Magic Logic*, including this one. One can play Jung with such things if one likes, but I would simply say that they often link to notions of attachment and release, and perhaps of wishfulness.

Music is another recurring motif, with specific composers and works used as the centre of a meditation, such as in ‘leopold’ (43-4), the Montreal Prize listed poem. Mortimer also sneaks in the odd intertextual flicker that is not so obvious; a borrowed line here, a nod to Magritte there. A crisp balance is apparent in ‘little birds’ (62), which playfully combines jerky visual elements with the sound. This is the poem in full:

Little birds are motoring in the thick air  
After rain and before more rain  
Being blown at heights and speeds  
Over and above and beyond, beneath and below,  
Ahead of, and besides themselves,  
Over and under the power of their wings

One does not need to know where the birds are going. It is enough that the lines depict the churning motion of the individuals and the flock against a resisting wind. Whether one finds a metaphor in this is up to the reader. On the whole, it is more satisfying than the further detailed ‘second-born’ (63), which seems content with the imagery of a moment when an infant looked out a window at trees and weather rather than leading to a larger understanding. Here, it seems, the picture is the thing, and little if anything more.

In all, the long line poems offer more pleasure and engagement when they are read aloud, as this stresses their rhythmic heart and discursive nature, whereas the short poems’ success hinges more critically on the precision of the images. Each approach has its impressive moments in this collection.

Finally, a niggle … the closing notes include a heading, ‘Thankyous’, that is plain ugly English: ‘Thanks’ would have done nicely. And a note of caution … David Mortimer and I are members of the same writer’s group, though it is one that focuses on the experience of being a writer rather than work-shopping or critiquing each others’ material. I have known him for a long time; the poetry scene is like that, and especially intensified in smaller cities such as ours. David may have wondered whether I would say something damning about Magic Logic, but I think he will be relieved. As I re-read it, I am, in my own fashion, singing along – and especially to the more spacious and musical poems in this impressive collection.

Steve Evans

*First Will and Testament*, the first collection of poetry by Indian poet and scholar Debasish Lahiri, touches on themes and topics that celebrated poet Tanure Ojiade appropriately describes in the preface to this collection as ‘the human condition’ (5). Lahiri, who teaches in the Department of English at Lal Baba College in India, has previously published his poetry and creative writings in various international journals. The poems in this collection are comprehensive and eclectic in addressing a large array of human concerns; the miracle of birth, the loneliness of death, love and loss, hope and sorrow, reflections on nature, and contemplations on art and the craft of writing. Accordingly, the seventy-three poems in this collection are divided into seven sections. The poems also have a broad scope in their invocation of diverse historical eras, geographies, and bodies of folklore, which gives the collection a comprehensive and all-encompassing feel. These poems speak to anyone and everyone; they cross geographical, historical, and cultural boundaries, and address universal questions and concerns. Lahiri’s genius lies in his ability to bring a variety of significant themes together. This is beautifully achieved in ‘Aurora Mortalis’ where he weaves the unsettling presence of death into the creative process of writing:

The pen
Pushes suppliant hands of papyrus
Away,
As mere things are born into this world.
Now the fugitive ink
Between folds of leather
Is all a-tremble with the tang
Of death. (20)

Here, as elsewhere in this collection, Lahiri’s strongest skill is his ability to render startling concrete images which appeal to the reader’s senses of sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. The poems consistently surprise in their ability to condense layers of meaning, emotion, and thought into a single concrete image. The picture that ‘Autumn’ paints of the night and the description of summer in ‘Firing Squad’ are telling examples of this stunning use of sensual imagery:

At the ripening of the evening’s violet
Into the black juice
Of night
That stains the moon’s old dentures. (23)

Summer was like my coffee going cold,
Too tepid for a swallow’s roosting dream. (30)

Lahiri’s penchant for crafting short poems that centre on sharp images places him in the Modernist poetic tradition, and even calls to mind the tightly wrought poems of the Imagist poets. True to what Ojiade identifies as Lahiri’s ‘classical modernist impulse’ (6), each poem is honed to evoke the strongest response in the tersest possible way, abstaining from verbose descriptions. The result is poetry that is compact, concise, and sharply focused. Despite the
Modernist tendencies in his style of writing, Lahiri is also adept at looking back for inspiration, infusing his poems with classical influences. This classical Latin influence appears in the epigraphs to the first two sections of ‘Three Labours,’ taken from Virgil’s Aeneid. The second half of ‘A Dog-Night’s Day,’ in its choice of Latinate diction and the allusion to Horace, is also a telling example of this Latin influence:

The horror of staying,
Of always staying,
Stalks Horace inside his sabine word.

In every dead afterlife of the dogs,
A peroration of the perished (21)

Horace is only one of various eminent personages that Lahiri invokes in this collection, alongside Van Gogh, Descartes, Beethoven, F. J. Haydn, Handel, and Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber von Biber. These figures come from different countries and diverse historical eras, and each is representative of a distinct area of human knowledge and culture. Lahiri’s reference to them, therefore, emphasises the eclectic nature of his poetic skill and expands the scope of its inclusivity.

There is a Romantic streak in some of the poems in this collection, especially in the third section entitled ‘Along Came a Writer …’ The more personal tone of the poems in this section, as well as the intimate references to the writing ‘I’ and the reading ‘you,’ provide a different reading experience than that of the other sections. Lahiri is exceptionally adroit at employing repetition to great poetic effect in this collection. His flair for sustaining a repetition of word, phrase, or image throughout a poem and deftly manipulating it to great poetic and emotive effect is demonstrated in these lines from ‘Home’:

In my house
Everything deserves to pass away,
Being my house,
Because everything passes away. (31)

The second half of ‘By the Sea I’ contains my favourite lines from the collection. It is unique and avoids the streak of sentimentality of description that sometimes appears in the other poems. The juxtaposition of the speaker’s detached voice with the overtones of divinity present in nature creates what I believe are some of the strongest lines in the collection:

You see a sky
That some painter used to wipe
His used brushes,
The masterpiece being elsewhere. (46)

First Will and Testament is a promising start to what will surely be a successful poetic career for Debasish Lahiri. His poetry speaks of timeless and universal issues of the human condition in a novel and fascinating way while paying homage to tradition.

Shadi Ghazimoradi

Ali Alizadeh’s third book of poetry, *Ashes in the Air*, is a finely structured collection that speaks powerfully of transnational lives and identities. Global in their concerns, settings and perspectives, the poems in this collection move between the autobiographical and the polemical. Travel and migration are recurrent themes, as the autobiographic content traces an arch including a childhood in Tehran, adolescence on the Gold Coast, work as a teacher in Istanbul, Dubai and China, and time as a student and writer in Melbourne. The poems also trace the poet’s arguments and struggle with the larger forces shaping lives: ideologies, histories, cultures. At times angry, at other moments self-deprecating and playful, this book is an important contribution to Australian writing which – as is increasingly recognised – traverses borders, cultures and languages.

Born in Tehran, and migrating as a teenager with his family to Australia, Alizadeh completed a PhD in professional writing at Deakin University in 2005 and has maintained a solid literary output since then, with seven books published. As well as poetry, these include a novel *The New Angel* (2008) and a biography *Iran: My Grandfather* (2010), which was short-listed for the New South Wales Premier’s Literary Awards, Community Relations Commission Award in 2011. He has also translated Persian poetry with Kenneth Avery in their book *Fifty Poems of Attar* (2007). Alizadeh is reviews editor for the literary magazine *Cordite Poetry Review* and he now lectures in Creative Writing at Monash University. In 2012 *Ashes in the Air* was shortlisted for the Prime Minister’s Literary Awards and 2013 will see his second UQP publication, a work of fiction titled *Transactions*.

*Ashes in the Air* comprises 40 poems, beginning with ‘Marco Polo’, and ending with ‘Staph’. Both of these are autobiographical and both involve a confrontation with death, a central concern throughout the collection. Throughout the book there are suicides – actual and contemplated – beheadings, assassinations, death by chemical attack, a near drowning and, perhaps most startling of all, instructions for the disposal of the poet’s cadaver to be dismembered and fed by his son to vultures. A fitting end, the poet writes, ‘To a lifetime of feasting / on birds’ (80). This comes from the poem ‘Sky Burial,’ also autobiographical in its inclusion of details of the poet’s life, with references to Iraqi bombing raids during his childhood in Tehran, schoolyard abuse following his family’s move to Australia, his move to Melbourne where he intends ‘to ‘make it’ as a poet’ (82), and where he meets his future wife, a vegetarian with a love for travel. Their travel leads him to countless meals of poultry through Asia and the Middle East, and thus the guilt for which he feels the need to atone.

... I cringe
past the glistening corpses of Beijing ducks

but my mouth moistens. So please
a secular sky burial for me. A machete

doing the work of maggot’s teeth
on my dead body. And proffer the chops

to the vultures to apologise for a life
-time of eating their kind. ... (84)
It is a brilliant, touching and, in places, funny poem which exemplifies the best work of this collection in its easy, uncontrived movement from the poet’s personal circumstance to large-scale concerns of globalisation, consumer culture and climate change.

Personal circumstance provides the material and setting for many of the poems but always with this movement outwards towards histories and ideologies. ‘The Suspect’ compares the poet’s younger self in Iran, where he was identified as ‘gharb-zadeh,’ or ‘west-smitten,’ with his identity in ‘Our land’ where he is labelled a ‘Muslim immigrant’ and ‘Muslim rapist’ (10). Suspected in both countries of not belonging, the poet concludes that where he would be welcome is in Tehran’s infamous Evin Prison, or the West’s equivalent, Guantánamo Bay. A similarly structured poem, ‘Us & Them’, superimposes the images of mourners for a Gold Coast teenager who has committed suicide with the mourners for an Iranian adolescent ‘charred by another Iraqi chemical / attack’ (21), to prompt reflection on the ferocity of impersonal forces which take young lives and channel grief amongst those who survive. ‘Culture and Its Terrors’ compares the coercive operations of culture to the violence of natural disasters; migrant assimilation as hurricane: ‘And / your winds try to suck me up, have me / twist, submit to the cycles of your national / psyche.’ (8). In the poem ‘Shut Up’ an Iranian dissident writer, first incarcerated in Evin Prison and later held in detention in Australia as an illegal immigrant, finds himself unable to write as

… anger
blocks the passage of language
from the heart to the page. So he’s

shut up. (19-20)

These poems illustrate that issues of belonging and unbelonging, of nationalism and identity, are not confined to West or East or Middle East, but are challenges that replay across geographical contexts.

It becomes clear that it is language or discourse – its tendency to reify, to delineate and constrain possibilities – which is the focus of Alizadeh’s struggle. Nearly all previous reviews of the book have selected the poem ‘History of the Veil’ to demonstrate Alizadeh’s poetic critique of discourse and history, in this case an outline of the historical processes involved in the control of women’s bodies, in both Middle Eastern and European cultures. One poem in the collection that has not received comment yet is ‘Language(s),’ dedicated to South African-born Australian poet John Mateer, and it deserves to be highlighted as it is particularly relevant to a discursive framework that often remains unexamined in the context of Australian writing. ‘I’ll speak you mine, you speak me yours’, the poem begins, ‘to mangle the Master’s eavesdropping / on subalterns’ whispers.’ The poet’s first language, Farsi, is ‘the fierce Real or the sad Other of the Master-/ Signifiers’ (32). The argument here is with the constraints of monolingualism, a mindset that limits the possibilities of expression.

… Forge a discourse
to chain your/my tongue/s. You’ll write me
yours, I write you mine, and we’ll relish
the mystery of the written sign, the tricky
similitude between things, incoherent
thorn in the monoglot Master’s eye. (32-3)

One doesn’t need to stretch a reading of the poem very far to extend its critique of monolingualism to the Australian literary landscape, where Australian literature is presumed to be in English, where writing in other languages by Australians from diverse linguistic backgrounds continues to be perceived as Other. ‘Language(s)’, on the contrary, suggests an embrace of linguistic diversity, and delight in difference of expression and in mystery.

_Ashes in the Air_ is an example of Australian writing that pushes against everyday understandings of nation and national. From one perspective, Alizadeh’s work can be read as part of a worldwide Iranian diasporic literature, to which a number of other Australian writers have contributed; there is certainly enough Iranian-focused content in the poems to support such an approach. Yet the poems are as much about Australia as they are about Iran, not only in reference to place, but also in reference to processes of becoming in which being Australian is, by necessity, an ongoing argument with ideologies.

Michael Jacklin

A.N. Dwivedi’s collection is a dialogue of ideas and the exploration of modern condition of man. It is about some of the most prominent themes that preoccupy us on any side of the great divides. He shows us that divides make no sense, as for instance when the persona of the opening poem ‘a Journey to Yemen’ meets a man who flaunts Allah as some form of exclusive deity and pits him against the persona’s Ishwar. The persona answers: ‘Ishwar, Allah ’n’ God are one / ’n’ the same’ (26).

Each of the forty poems occupies a place on a spectrum ranging from concrete to contemplative lyricism. A poem such as ‘Nuclear Holocaust’ truly packs a punch:

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Today’s war will be the war of nerves,
of deadly gases ’n’ infections bacteria,
of stealthily spreading flus ’n’ fevers,
sending chill down the spines.
No protective umbrella can safeguard
a nation from the nuclear holocaust. (33)
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The concrete poems are often prosaic narratives of autobiographical-sounding journeys, often linear but fragmentary. They stand in contrast to more cerebral and philosophical verses which attempt to quickly prod the issues such as freedom and tradition, intellect and one’s place in the world. The poem ‘My Religion is Humanity’ reads in part:

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I’m a born Hindu,
a brahmin by rituals
a universalist in view.

Narrow-minded considerations
of caste, creed ’n’ community
are aery nothing to me. (34)
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The contemplative poems often use the first person ‘I’ and the possessive ‘my’ while the concrete poems often turn to the second person ‘you’, the author’s play with distances and closeness, with separations and intimacies. I do not mean that the ‘I’ necessarily evokes closeness while the ‘you’ creates a distance. The dialectic of close/far, just as that of Self/Other, shifts within one and the same verse. There is a sense of Otherness in the Self as it finds itself in exile, in a foreign place such as Yemen in the poem ‘Going Abroad’:

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Living in exile
is like putting a bird
in an iron cage.
The bird wants to fly
but its wings are clipped.
A foreign government imposes
its own rigid rules –
You can’t move even an inch
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without ‘Exit & Re-entry Visa’
’n’ unsavoury security checks. (51)

Although this poem contains some typical metaphors, it still moves at the level of mundane
details of bureaucratic worlds that the exile has to manoeuvre. In contrast, another poem
called ‘An Exile’ reads the condition for the reader, rather than leaving her to draw
conclusions from the imagery as in the previous poem:

Living in a foreign land
for so many years
at a stretch
makes you an exile,
dreaming ever of your home ’n’ hearth.

You breathe in strange air,
consume others’ food ’n’ water,
’n’ learn another language,
’n’ partly behave as they do –
as the situation compels you. (46)

There is, to me, a dialogue between these two types of poems, concrete and contemplative.
Dwivedi alternates between them and thus does not allow the reader to get stuck in any single
kind of thinking and writing the world. I am more drawn to the narrative poems which play
with the author’s autobiography, and possess some essayistic qualities, with sharply observed
details such as ‘you are asked to come bokara / But bokara never comes in Yemen / the clock
stops, the sun doesn’t run. / In the Gawaja office, conditions are no better.’ I am particularly
fond of the sequence of poems beginning with ‘Nativity Breeds Bewilderment,’ then
‘Pinddans in Gaya,’ ‘A Pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya,’ and ‘A Visit to Bheda-Ghat.’ They display
more complex relationships with home affected both by the matters of heart and intellect in a
different way from the poems about exile to Yemen and the return to the native land.

It is the balance between the different kinds of poems – and in fact the changes that
take place within the persona (assuming it is one and the same) – that make the collection
work as a whole. In this reading, the poem called ‘Maintaining Balance’ seems to be a meta
gesture that reflects the structure of the collection itself as much as the world it attempts to
grasp:

The universe is kept in balance
thru contrarieties. Without this balance
the order will go haywire. (50)

Dwivedi does not let the reader rest in one place, time, thought or sentiment. He tries to
create a journey on several different levels, which seems to me a gesture that goes against any
fundamentalist call for fixity and rigidity. There is a sense of both spiritual and intellectual
freedom at play here, which is the way the ‘inclusiveness’ of world functions.

Adnan Mahmutovic