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Complete Creative Writing: Poetry and Translations

Poetry editor: Alison Flett

Feature on Singaporean Poetry:
With a view to increasing cross-cultural interaction and introducing readers to contemporary poetry from different parts of the world, Transnational Literature includes a small guest editor slot in its poetry section, curated by – and partly featuring the work of – an established poet from a country other than Australia. In this issue we’re delighted to have as our guest editor prize-winning poet and mover-and-shaker in the Singapore literary scene, Cyril Wong.

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Singaporean Poetry: An Introduction by Cyril Wong

For all its urban gloss and ostensible multiculturalism, Singapore has not only managed to preserve much of its fundamental draconic conservatism – this aspect of our society seems to be harmonising quite nicely with a general hue of political conservatism deepening across the globe. Maybe this is the result of feng shui; our late, founding Prime Minister had been rumoured to consult fortune tellers in order to militate against us failing to succeed as a world-class nation state. Since the caning of Michael Fay, an American citizen, for theft and vandalism in 1994, to the vehement prosecution of teenage blogger, Amos Yee, on charges of hate speech (he was later granted asylum in the States in 2017), Singapore has remained more or less the same country – full of repressive bite, but supported by a populace largely pragmatic about maintaining the status quo (while venting online about the minutiae of train-breakdowns, ministerial gaffes and skyrocketing costs of living).

Singaporean poetry, then, becomes a literature of subtle to overt resistance, in spite of attempts to instrumentalise it for nationalistic self-congratulation (this early trend didn’t last). Poetry’s capacity for strategic ambiguity, as well as aestheticised self-criticism and social critique, allows for alternative records of thoughts, feelings and philosophical what-ifs that many Singaporeans would prefer not to read about (if they even read at all). My small curation of poems here features a preference for works reaching into the self to derive challenging answers to difficult questions. They are deeply personal; the voices come from different cultural contexts; and the poems evince an inevitable back-and-forth movement between the dignity of the particular and the realm of the numinous.

Cyril Wong. Singaporean Poetry: An Introduction
Transnational Literature Vol.10 no.1, November 2017.
The Singaporean Poet

Late reply to a writer that asked, “What are our poets like?”

Let’s begin with an elder who called our colonisers “perfidious albion” and wrote like Yeats to outdo them. The religious poets, both old and young, so full of pity for everybody else unwilling to meet heaven. The ones for whom obscurity is a metaphor for the closet. The ones that shun the topic of selfhood because their lives are boring; with no interest in parsing individual suffering and its transcendence. The lyrical flâneurs, the masters of irony and detachment, the intellectuals with their love of form and their ability to convey just about everything and nothing at all. Confessionals with their scars and unsteady hearts. The multi-hyphenates on social media, spreading the good word about their good work, their artistry and their relevance, locally and abroad. Champions of minority languages, proudly indignant for taking second place to the lingua franca; fanning the flame of their mother tongue in the hearts and minds of the young. Migrants who remain determined to matter. The rebel and the marginalised, preaching to the converted so they never feel alone; or howling in the echo chamber of themselves, walled in by censorship and indifference. The ones who refuse to perform their work and those who choose only to perform. Those who never publish or have stopped, given up, moved away; who nonetheless write with or without readers to love or condemn them. The poets who are some-of-the-above or none-at-all. The poet for whom the poet is but an image amongst images; who crosses the mountain of the ego and never looks back;

leaving words behind like the moon still irradiating
that long way ahead into an infinite morning –
this poet doesn’t exist.

*Cyril Wong*
Incoming Reports

World’s longest-ruling political party

Every school becomes an elite school

Park connectors merging once-outlying islands across reclaimed land with the mainland and extended into the peninsula to form an unbroken lasso

Every train station married to a mall

Changes to the national pledge include “to uphold” in place of “to build”, while “democratic” is now “sustainable”

Largest fountain, tallest hotel (again), biggest public garden, priciest public housing, highest Gross Domestic Product based on Purchasing Power Parity valuation, first skyscraper that looks out into space, first zoo to acquire a dinosaur

Every constituency is a mall

Education system and rising costs of living blamed for rate of student suicides

Amos Yee to head new opposition party

Fault line unzipping along Strait of Singapore

Greatest number of megachurches with the highest recorded attendance

No “historical” site that cannot be refitted with a café or boutique hotel

“Freedom of speech” rated as lowest priority in nation-wide survey below “censorship”, “gender equality”, “gay rights”

No longer the poor or homeless hiding out after dark in parks, hawker centres, void decks, common walkways, dried-out canals

Tension builds upon successful development of nuclear capabilities

Performance artist jailed for defecating on flag at Venice Biennale

Most educated country in the world

Local arts funding cut by fifty percent

Cyril Wong. 'Incoming Reports'. Transnational Literature Vol.10 no.1, November 2017.
Top ranking in global happiness index above Switzerland and Denmark

Nobody reads poetry

_Cyril Wong_
Equivalences

Nothing=Bluish white light I imagine waiting to be discovered, peeking behind every object, body part, even the skin of ordinary light itself, if I look hard enough or remember to look=Change=Impermanence as afterglow=Everything we feel in relation to the unknown=Threshold=Origin without end=Not detachment, a word that leads to its own attachment; but not over-attachment, too=An easy bag to fill again, but even harder to unfill once more=Released, not releasing=Freshly alive after private ablutions, how even this will be over=No credit claimed, but once seen impossible to unsee=A beautiful soundtrack=Instants when I let go of that which I thought I could never relinquish=Clarity=Behind closed eyes, the darkness with its spots and welts shimmers with a light of its own=At rest, a sensitivity=Not caring anymore about this and that, but doing them and caring anyway because since I’m here=One Diwali when I was so exhausted that I closed my eyes without falling asleep while everybody was talking in the living room and I heard everything but didn’t react because to do so from one’s conditioning is a choice I didn’t have to make=People sicken me; I sicken me=Every act of avoidance when (uncountable) others refuse to acknowledge my queerness, my difference, manifested by the lack of expression, an indifference, which is practised (not always successful) stoicism=With every perspective waiting to compete with each other, why compete at all, or for too long=Unfixing fixities of ideation=More vital to brave countless possibilities than to impose perfection=To settle what is right in front of you/me with neither the wish to blame nor prescribe a comfortable narrative="But the self is always there, right?"="Nobody is saying there’s no self, but why be attached to it?"=Behind one mental wall of prejudice, yearning and habitual responses, lies another wall and further behind this wall=The mirror when we leave the room, but not before we embrace to form a two-headed Janus in the glass=Untroubled autotelicism=Blue light I’m almost convinced is love as nothingness-in-action; light that caresses the underside of shadows=Then when such light is no longer as I imagine it, when hope is the closing track on the album=Infinity

Cyril Wong

Daryl Qilin Yam

Drain Circling, A While Ago

For John Taylor Funeral Service, Leamington Spa

1
John Taylor: tell me you caught a glimpse
of that streak across the sky

or perhaps I am delusional, John Taylor;
perhaps I am simply seeing things

but John Taylor, reassure me
that although the dead are right round

the corner, you still believe in water,
John Taylor, and its passage across

the blue space above you, the white light
clear and radiant above your service.

Have faith, John Taylor. I say that to myself
all the same, John Taylor. I say it now.

2
The smell of rain this early evening
suspended in the air. Just water.

Daryl Qilin Yam. 'Drain Circling, A While Ago'.
Transnational Literature Vol.10 no.1, November 2017.
It is half past six, and the sky is grey though light. Earlier this morning
two men came, and repainted
the old tables in the courtyard.

Now there is water on the new paint.
Somewhere the sound of straw
scrubbing against a dirty floor;
somewhere near and yet I cannot see.

(Tonight my window
will remain open.)

3
It rains in the dark, John Taylor.
I sit by my window and,
on top of smelling the rainfall,
I listen to its harmonies
played in the courtyard. John Taylor
tell me you hear its music:
the blue be-bop. Tambourine.
Tom-tom. All you can see of me
is a narrow bar of light
in the gap between the curtains.

John Taylor, John Taylor, my 10 p.m. suitor
pray me you dancer

4
Hey John. It’s been a while.
I’ve tasted freedom but it was raining all week
and so I could not meet you
even if I wanted to.

Yesterday we had sunshine, briefly
and this morning, again, the illusion:
a red-leafed tree, overlooking the courtyard,
and a circle of seagulls
casting illusions over George Street.
I had a friend named George, once.

Does he care for me. Will I care
for you. Shall anything happen, another time.

*Daryl Qilin Yam*
What Now Old Woman

What now you old woman, flesh like dough, what now? Who do I ask about the constant kneading? The divisions of water and ghee for \textit{rotlis} so thin you can look through them like windows to childhood? Who do I ask when I need to know which \textit{shlok} will make my wished for things apparate? Who will tell me how many times I should let the words vibrate small hummingbirds on my lips as I caress \textit{rudraksha} beads, tuck them under my pillow? You see it’s been hard times and I need a talisman of your making. So what now old woman? Can you hurry up your limping gait? Can you untuck the handkerchief from your sari, unfold it to reveal turmeric for my wounds? Say you are watching me. Tell me I am doing it all wrong – I have been too liberal with the salt again and this is not what Arjun would have asked Krishna as if you taught me nothing with those stories. Come look at me in disappointment, say I am a sorry excuse for a

Gujarati girl. Speak to me from wherever you are because the nights keep falling and nobody knows how I could be any grand daughter of yours.

*Pooja Nansi*
Noorhaqmal Mohamed Noor

Jalan Ibadat (Al-Firdaus Mosque)

emigrated early morning
starting from the sweat of children
wiping knowledge
from the scriptures of longing

believers of Prophet’s life journey are far
from the crumbs of reason’s grasp
children who are shallow-minded

no caliph of Tawhid
from the continuous fragments of advice
reaching the ears of the naughty soul

but the path that spans a cubit
the imminent meeting...

between
guidance and hope
pillory of compulsory Islamic duty
the ministration of blooded lovers of God

the unfading serenade
between the darting of trees
the timely departure
come and go

Noorhaqmal Mohamed Noor. 'Jalan Ibadat (Al-Firdaus Mosque)'.
Transnational Literature Vol.10 no.1, November 2017.
that promise is definite
eternal human dignity
in the eyes of the divine

paradise is certain
or is this life already lost

Noorhaqmal Mohamed Noor
Translated from Malay by Annaliza Bakri
Featured Poet: Jill Jones

Transnational Literature is delighted to be featuring the work of renowned poet and academic, Jill Jones. Jones’ most recent poetry collections include Brink (Five Islands Press), Breaking the Days (Whitmore Press) which was shortlisted for the 2017 Kenneth Slessor Prize, The Beautiful Anxiety (Puncher & Wattmann) which won the 2015 Victorian Premiers’ Literary Award for Poetry, and a chapbook, The Leaves Are My Sisters (Little Windows Press). Her work has featured in recent anthologies including The Poet’s Quest for God (Eyewear Publishing), Contemporary Australian Poetry (Puncher & Wattmann), and Contemporary Australian Feminist Poetry (Hunter Publishers). In late 2014 she was poet-in-residence at Stockholm University. She is a member of the J.M. Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice, University of Adelaide.

Jill has kindly allowed us to include three previously unpublished ‘transnational’ poems in this edition of the journal. The following is an insight into the process that produced the poems:

These three poems are part of a longer series of works I wrote when I was living overseas, for five months over 2014-15, primarily in Sweden, but undertaking some travel to other parts of Europe. Because I was living and working in suburban Stockholm, I wanted to write poems that were not typical travel poems. I wanted to catch what it was like for me living everyday life in Stockholm, or elsewhere (eg, laundromats in Paris), albeit of course as a foreigner, that is, a stranger. For instance, I was living in a suburb which was right next to a big hill (Hammarbybacken), used as a ski slope in winter. And that seemed, to Antipoedean me, a touch unusual for a suburb close to a CBD,
but obviously not to your average Stockholmer or, at least, those who used the slope day and night during winter. I could see this hill every morning from my apartment window, so the poem’s subtitle is a modest, even tongue-in-cheek salute to Hokusai’s ‘100 View of Mt Fuji’ paintings. The poem moves through other ‘views’ of the city that I experienced over the months: the train interchange at Slussen, the paid dog walkers, the ever-present candles in windows, the beauty of the harbour and inlet waters of the Stockholm archipelago, kids playing with joyful abandon in snow (although I had decided, quickly, that actual snow is miserable, wet and dangerous, much safer looked at than moved through). However, one of these poems, ‘Arctic Express’, could be regarded as a more standard ‘travel’ poem, in that it is about a journey, in this case, via the Arctic Express which we boarded in Stockholm and alighted in Abisko, north of the Arctic Circle in Lapland. Although it is, more than the other two here and a number of others I wrote, about travelling through a landscape new to the poem’s narrator, I hope it also presents a sense of ordinary life, domestic and industrial, taking place along the route as well, along with the fact the travellers in the poem are actually rather unwell (indeed, we were and should not really have been undertaking this journey at all). In summary, I hope that a sense of both cultural and bodily displacements within the ordinary, or commonplaces within the new or strange, has worked its way into these poems.

Jill Jones
Approaching the Magic Number
Views of Hammarbybacken

It’s far too stifling though it’s early in the morning. Everything has a ticking sound today. I don’t know that I’m terribly gracious. Thought is a burden. I slept in a small space.

Skating is an odd activity. It only leads to ice. The air lisps. There’s a crack in the hill. The skiers are well aware. It’s not a race. The dogs take their time. Tell me if it was the white one who growled.

The dark is no darker than the dark. It’s hard to tell. The harbour spreads light. Light a candle and smell your gloves. Remember how children turned round each other. How they’d fit no matter what. It’s another medium. And hopes are dashed.

Standing in an old kitchen surrounded by famous photographs has an attraction. You play along with a type of thinking. The glass approaches the magic number. There is no evidence. But I remember how the ship turned and rammed the Baltic moon.

There’s warm breath across the platform at Slussen. It will arrive in two minutes.

Don’t be confused by the Red Line.
Each vagabond had a place.
The trolls are getting cuter.

Don’t tell me the old town smiles.
If I set sail, do I return?

Jill Jones
Laundromat Near the Corner of Passage Alexandrine

Here’s to centuries of laundromats
and cigarettes, boundless fluorescence
and the coin slot, time and heat, clean towels
for all, the warmth of euros as they descend,
detergent named for animals or angels.
It’s minus one, it’s six pm and the moon
is already busy. Here, everything folds
after it spins, according to the politesse
of strangers. The room is full of greetings.
Water runs all over our clothes as though
it had always meant to do so.

It’s time to turn and let the colours be.
They will never stay sharp, not even
in moonlight, as fibres fray and fall till
they can no further. This is no longer
important, although we have nowhere
to go that’s changed from this morning.
It was sunnier then, of course, but
what metamorphosis could we accept
so late in the moment when we have
nowhere else to go in our centuries,
our waters, or our winters that are shiny
in each uncertainty.

Jill Jones
Arctic Express

There are footprints of deer across the tracks, light over the lake, crystals in the snow. You fall on my side and sleep as if it truly was dark or as if I was a witness or the one that held you. Birch trees flicker in strobing engine light. Factory fumes rise into the constellations.

The north is psychedelic as a fat yellow moon rising over the Baltic, in the veer of the journey the moon falls behind, mines are lit, the ore moves into carbon or munitions. Supermarkets fluoresce, cargo in neon a black and white blur. Electric candles are still occasions.

While the north star, if that’s what it is, shines clear after days of cloud and our long sick nights, (as if our fevers go like a journey you never intended) in the wash of days the train pushes past into the ice latitudes, into a glittery Arctic and to be gone.

Jill Jones

About Roots

My ancient words
self mutilated...
moving beneath me
in my veins and muscles
or just sitting in my eyes
like skulls of birds.

These words, my heritage
sun themselves on the mind’s terrace
like turmeric coated raw mango slices.
I seek to lacquer them with gold leaf.

I’m looking for Grandma’s patois—
a new heaven, a new earth.
I want to scrape them clean of rust
I want to bring out ethers snuffed by the sun
I want to bring alive the fulcrum of an embrace.

I am lost in an acquired language.
It smothers me like moss and lichen
My lineage grunts
I feel a riverbank drying
My lips part into a map of thirst.

I want to speak like my ancestors did.
inhale once more the lingering incense of their words,
at the edge of paved stones.

Come back... my heritage
Come back disguised as a tree.
Keep me in your shade
I’ll polish your every leaf
Come back wearing morning’s clear light
at my naked window.

Vinita Agrawal
Ghazal for The Sisters of Mercy*

Bowl cut, bumfluff, bucktooth: Other. Russia
bore moonshine, soul & gilt. Oh, brother. Russia.

Billeted in a Saint Petersburg Khrushchyovka
(stairs’ bare filaments, piss), I wanted to smother Russia.

Lake Ladoga’s roaches, three white nights,
I’m seeing double ... Another Russia ...

On black market postcards I could scrawl no more than
Dear Grandfather & Grandmother, Russia

Cocooned by headphones, cassettes by The Cure,
I overthrew ‘Dominion/Mother Russia’.

Stuart Barnes

* This poem is a companion piece to Из России published in Transnational Literature, Vol 8, no. 1, November 2015
https://dspace.flinders.edu.au/xmlui/bitstream/handle/2328/35651/From_Russia.pdf?sequence=1

Stuart Barnes, ‘Ghazal for The Sisters of Mercy’,
Transnational Literature Vol.10 no.1, November 2017.
Kali

to transform a goddess into a gas mask large eyes bulging with millennium’s rage and red slash of tongue twisted into a spiral round and round towards the source of air somewhere there in your throat’s clenched plea where hibiscus blooms stretching its tongue breathing while the ruff of petals raised in praise of evil cleansed oxygen while yellow billows of exhaust fumes and spume of chimneys waste the land stagnant drain by drain round the gas mask’s neck a chain of skulls from culled sacrifices landfill land felled dripping tube tongue lolls half in anger half in shame who to blame the goddess saviour cries fish eyes swimming into oblivion drawn out by that shout into round circles from brow to bone the alien form emerging through smoke hoarse breathing echoing from a million frames the horror the horror of that visage unreeling all prayers to a dark dancer lost image blurred in the appearance of evil guardianship disfigured in beleaguered time’s passing

Anjana Basu
In Memoriam
For David and Gregg, October 2016

My poor father has paid the last debt of nature.
- Matthew Flinders to George Bass, Sydney, 8 August 1803.

The light is different over there;
The angles and the planes
Confound my eyes and brain with deep-felt misled faith
On north perimeter or in cathedral town.

I lost a father too, a dozen years ago.
I knew the sudden catch of memory and lack
Among the day’s demands.

The light is different
But the pain persists alike
For poet or philosopher, or curious wanderer.
Though hemispheres and centuries divide,
In words and photographs we meet
In bright uneasy rooms of memory.

Gillian Dooley
Scaffold

Neither bare nor ruined
stirred or shaken
by seventy times seven
types of ambiguity

the almond-tree
continues its shape
in early Spring
with a few low leaves
and a handful of nuts

mostly
as an architecture
of glowing curves and knots
in last year’s wood
and for years before
un-pruned

a sculpture
of a hairstyle
hat and veil and net
neck
face and fascinator
gestalt
and quantum observer

while all around the world is bent
and bends
into evergreen
and new green
caves of camouflage

here
is the chosen stage
and stance and statement
frame and arch

David Mortimer. 'Scaffold'.
Transnational Literature Vol.10 no.1, November 2017.
play-space
and music-box
and jewel case

well-wrought maze
barricade
and see-through fort
and sky-changed
light-drenched
air-drowned cage
and skull
for all-seeing birds

David Mortimer
Translator of Hope

At the end of this sentence, rain will begin.

- Derek Walcott

I am that link; a purpose.
I possess powerful bones
Uncanny powers to breathe life,
To transfer images and idioms
From one code to another. My words
Are milestones for generations.

I change dress code, wear kajal
And gloss my lips to look deshi.
My tanned skin glows brown in Malabar.
As the wind blows old tales make me blush.
I write for Bengal tigers.
Elephants dance in jazz.
Old, yellow pages from the diary
Exalt in a lithe summer dance.

No language is mother tongue,
Not mother’s biopic.

My sweet fingers pluck tea buds
My brown skin dazzles in white.
My friendship with other camp
Keeps up hope for survival.

It rains somewhere, near my village.

Jaydeep Sarangi
Three Poems by Nader Naderpour, a Poet of the Sun
Translated, introduced and analysed by Rouhollah Zarei

Nader Naderpour (1929-2000) is a mastermind bridging classical and modern Persian poetry. His power of description is so strong that in modern Persian poetry he stands unrivalled. The sun is the most frequent image in his poetry. With the exception of one book, in all other books of poems the sun is used figuratively on many occasions. Naderpour can thus be safely called a poet of the sun with no rival in modern Persian poetry. Disregarding numerous literal uses of the sun, there are over a hundred figurative takes on it, including personification, Naderpour’s favorite trope, similes, and metaphorical and symbolic representations of the sun.

The titles of ten poems contain the word sun and there are a hundred and nine poems in which the sun appears in figurative terms. They were composed between 1950 and 1995 and this is a very strong indication that time and place did not alter the manna of his poetic vision. Both at home and abroad he thought of the sun though his attitude toward the sun was subject to time and place. The personification of the sun in sixty-five poems clearly shows how close the sun was to his heart. The poet in his youth has a very positive attitude toward a personified happy sun but in his old age when he is far away from his motherland he is deprived of the laughing sun which appears in many of his poems.

Reminding the reader of John Donne’s “The Sun Rising,” an angelic sun is sometimes paradoxically unwelcome since it is a meddlesome fly in the ointment and ends the love-making night:

   You Night Demon kill the Sun Angel
   I do not want her on rooftop in the morning.¹

Naderpour does not usually create a positive picture of the sun of the fall. However, when he depicts the beloved, even the negative sun of the fall becomes soothing as in “Sketch.” The sun is at times a means to help create the image of the beloved as in “Impatient,” but in “The Sun’s Blood” the personified sun prepares nature for the lovers to do their business. Occasionally, the sun is involved in erotic and sexual scenes and it is the speaker who is a witness. Like Midas, Naderpour has the magic power to turn anything into a sun: ball, balloon, bowl, cart wheel, egg, eye, finger nails, heart, umbrella and numerous other items.

The sun was Naderpour’s alter ego. It was seen in all the stages of life: birth, youth, old age, and even death; happy and sad; thriving and ailing, merciful and wrathful, an ardent lover and an avowed enemy. Naderpour lived to the tune of the sun. The rising and setting of the sun represented the ebb and flow of the poet’s fortunes. It is no surprise that the poet clairvoyantly speaks on behalf of the sun: “The smiling sun called me ‘The Poet.’”²

Below are three poems celebrating the beloved, incorporating images of the sun. The following poems, translated for the first time now, were expurgated from Naderpour’s collections of poems after the revolution in 1979 in his home country.

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²Naderpour, “Dream Interpretation” [“Ta‘bīr”], Collected Poems, 775.

Impatient

Morning: carving the marble of her body curves with the sun’s golden axe, splashing the sun’s fragrance on her body with pine needles.

Noon: every sweaty bead dripping sweet drops of the wine of her body, her chest like the soft throat of pigeons throbbing heavily in her shirt.

Night: going to bed nude as the moon and the moonlight hatching her body. The wind: spreading the hot scent of her shirt more lightly than the fragrance of convolvulus.

Leaning on the pillow, lecherous and lustful, in her heart she raises hopes for my sin, ever awaiting me to burn her body with hot kisses.

Sketch

You naked houri in the paradise of my fantasy! charming as the willow, tall as the cypress, do not sketch your silhouette in the air in vain, I am your closest acquaintance.

I unveil the spring of your limbs; with my wild claws I peel the willow of your white body, a fresh and juicy willow, clear as water, cool as marble!

I watch the red fish of your lips swimming in the waves of your forehead and behind the fish of your lips the sparkle of laughter is more soothing than the rising sun of the fall.

From the secret heat of your body you at times see clouds in my arms, ready to rain.


At other times, the radiance of your laughter
creates the rainbow of sorrow and joy
in my tears.

You naked houri of the paradise of my fantasy,
do fill the chalice of my clear poem!

**The Sun’s Blood**

The spring permeated alleyways with fragrance
and the fine powder of dews dancing in the air,
the drunken soil at the end of sleep
had thirstily gulped a cup of the night’s rain.

The morning sun dripped molten gold
on the enamel of leaves
and his lips sucked the moles of the night’s raindrops
on flowers’ bodies.

Like a drunken serpent
she was sleeping in the grass,
through the cleft of her lids
sun rays shone on the crystal of the eyes.

Sweet drops of laughter
dripped from the drooping eyes,
the sun’s hot blood simmered
like pungent wine in my vessels.

With my kisses, she was mad;
with hers, I was burning.
We tore and sewed
the green velvet of the grass,
I bit her moist and acrid cheeks,
the ripening raspberries of her lips	
tasted of the sun and soil.

Soft wind like morning birds touched her limbs,
drunkenness had robbed her of the calm
and her chest heaved like waves of the sea
I buried my head in the cup of her chest
I smelled and drank her in one gulp!
I covered her with my shadow
barring her from the lecherous sky’s glance!

---

A chance meeting in a railway compartment,
I hadn’t thought would ever be possible.

In the past I had often seen her
in a red-coloured sari –
as red as the pomegranate flower;
that day she had put on a black silk dress,
covering her champak-thin white face
with the aanchal resting on her head.\(^1\)
The black colour seemed to have drawn
a deep circle of aloofness around her.
My whole being shook,
finding so familiar a person so reserved.

Dropping the newspaper abruptly,
she greeted me with a namaskaar.\(^2\)
The way to intimacy opened;
we began to talk –
How are you? How is everything going? etc.
With a distant look in her eyes,
she sat looking out of the window,
gave curt answers to some of my questions,
and utterly ignored some others.
Through the shaking of her hand,
she made me understand –
there’s no point in talking,
it’s far better to keep silent.

I was sitting on a different bench with her companions.
At one time she gestured me to come closer.
It was so bold of her, I thought,
and sat on the same bench.
Under the cover of the noise in the compartment
she said softly:
Don’t take it otherwise please,
we don’t have time enough to waste.
I’ll get down at the very next stop;
you’ll go far,

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\(^1\) Aanchal is the loose end of a sari.
\(^2\) Namaskaar is an Indian way of greeting.
we won’t meet ever again.
So, I’ll hear your answer to the question
I’ve waited for so long to ask.
Will you answer it honestly?
I said, I will.
Looking at the sky outside, she said,
Are those days of ours gone forever, not a shred left?
I kept silent for a while
and then said:
All the stars
lie hidden in day light.
I doubted if I had spoken the truth.
She said: It’s alright; now go back to your seat.
Everyone got down at the next stop.
I moved on, alone.