

FORAY

Ashok Niyogi

2004 chapbook

This baker's dozen is dedicated to Nicholas Roerich, whom I never knew, but who saw the Himalayas as I do. Expat Russian painting in my mountains, expat Indian back home.

Nick, (as they would have called you in America), I saw the same mornings and evenings and never knew.

It is also dedicated to Drs. Sushanto Mukherjee and Rajeev Khosla who tinker and tanker with this defective machine, old and dilapidated, alcohol-fueled and still make it go; I did eleven hundred kilometers on the hills in three days with many 'pit-stops' as you can imagine; thank you.

Most of all, it is dedicated to the sisters of Holy Family, Delhi, India who pray for me in their Chapel everyday.

My everlasting gratitude to Mithu for bearing with me, to Bonnu, Ajay and Amlan for our 'one-to-ones' and to Ku for doing all the donkey's work and loving me still.

FLOWERS

They open up like petals
Of a huge huge flower,
Sexual,
The mountains do;
Range after range
Only the colors change,
Green to blue to gray
Heights change, from near to far
Decimated forests are brown
I ask why?
Petals reaching for the sky,
Serene, content
Immovable; no scent.
Layer after layer
Enmeshed in mist
Petals don't talk back with intent.

Down below the Beas insists
Over rock it demands it flow,
Beds of pebbles
Laugh all the while.

I go the other way,
Against the flow
Into the snow.
The pines they see
How will this eucalyptus man be?

Son of fire,
Rise up and catch the moon.
Forever, forever the mountains try,
I wonder why.
I see no glory
In that pock-marked
Half-eaten story.

In my sketch,
With stars
The mountains will fight wars,
And the Trout in the Beas
With their fish eyes
Will look at the mountains
And wonder why.

DONDERSTORM

(Is my Afrikaans right?)

On mountain roads
When you make a left
You normally look right,
And this was a long long left
Believe you me.

So I took an occasional glance
At the plains of the Punjab,
Shimmering in the summer heat,
I was high up, you see,
In my mobile retreat.

I stopped my car
On the narrow road,
For a nip, just a sip,
And what do I see?
Streaks of lightning
On my left,
Tearing mountains apart,
Dark dark clouds
Coming low and fast,
Entire ranges vanishing
At the blink of an eyelid.

The first drop fell,
Big as water on a lotus leaf
Then nothing more.
For one second
That was an eternity,
Nothing more.

The rains came, when they came,
Like water in a car wash,
The berm started running away
In rivulets of mud,
The trees bent this way
My tiny car swayed
Weighed the possibilities
And stood its ground.

But I was human
Cowardly and cirrhotic,
With an inhuman desire to live.
It was primal, this fury,
Like an animal with unclean fangs,
The smell of the earth was so.

Suddenly the storm went away,
There was bright sunlight
The crickets came out straightaway,
In them I saw God.

STRATA

Beneath the overhang
As you turn left and right,
And right and left again,
You feel the weight
Of the entire mass
Of rock and earth
And trees and bees,
You feel overawed.

You hear the river
Traveling over rock,
You see the sky come near
And go far away,
You envy the monkey
Swaying from branch to branch
With baby firmly clutching breasts,
Makes you puny though.

There is almost nothing you can do
Except for keyboards and a car
Lenses and batteries will win you a war

On the evolution tree,
Where are you?
Where will I be?

LOVE

Like the morning mist
Like the first drops of dew
I love you.

I saw the hunchback
And the treetops
I saw the sky above
The mountain line
And then I decided that
I love you.

Birds talk to me
Sunshine shines
It will be hot
In the middle of the day,
What will Ganichka do?

The evening rain
Will assuage your pain
And life will go on
With the Jazz and razzmatazz,
I will drink the same cocktail
Made with wine,

It's summer
Or didn't you know?

QUILT

The intricacy of stitching of a quilt,
On this, fortunes are built,
If only you knew,
I could have given away a few.

In summer, they flower
Wild trees in untended forests,
The snow rests,
The ladybird has her day,
Either which way.

Go home to the Clarion call
Go home to the shopping mall,
But buy a quilt for me today
Stitched any which way.

TUNNELS

Tunnels are like funnels,
Light in the beginning,
Light at the end
What letter do you want to send?

Once upon a time,
I was a chimney sweep,
Claustrophobia caught up with me
Now I only weep.

At the railway crossing
We had to stop;
A train was in the way,
As something usually is;
Only, this was a little guy
Huffing and puffing
On the hills.

I see these Hondas zipping by
And wonder, whatever happened to time,
Does it no more rhyme?

But then I see the tiny cows
Grazing on the massive hills,
I see the lady with a load of wood,
I see the upside of the mountain road
I understand the load.

THINK

Before I can wink,
Shut my eyes to tomorrow,
Think.

I saw the trees,
I saw the birds and bees,
I saw the mountains
In the morning glow,
I made them show
Ladybirds in bushes
Hummers in nests,
But then again
I saw the snow.

And when I saw the snow,
My lips were shut
It was as if I had seen
A six-foot Irkutsk slut,
'Krasiva blondinka devushka',
Now I know,
On the road there was a cut.

But,
Fortune they say,
Smiles on the brave,
So what, if they are grave,
It suits them
Like their ill-cut suits,
Delivered to a hotel
In Bangkok,

To my eyes,
I will put a lock.

NATURE

Nature has stature
As you see,
Or else,
How can the tree be?
At angles that you can't contemplate
Only monkeys know the math.

All said and done,
It is about fun;
Now, if retardation is fashion,
Then monkeys will have bread
Thrown from bus windows.

To hell with shadows,
To hell with the setting sun
The smells are not the same,
The creepers know the game,
They adapt.

To live is to win,
All else is a long-drawn whine
Crooked houses on the Marina
Which will never belong to me.

But the blue is blue
On the mountains before dawn,
And the air is air
The sun is sun.

Horses at the gallop
With sunshades half drawn,
Yachts in the bay
Red-oxide on the Golden Gate,
Negroes acrobatic
In front of the quay,
Songs from Sony rule the day.

I give your weekend back to you,
Come smell the hay
In the valleys between the hills,
Humble as they are,
Come; be frantic on your brakes,
As a cow decides it has to cross,
Because it has to cross;
The lack of reason engrosses me,
As does the smell,
The only smell.

AMBALA - DELHI

This is a freeway
As you know,
Toll-tax,
They learn
The economics fast,
But the bullock-carts
Go out last.

At a hundred and twenty
While switching lanes
I had the indicator on;
A turbaned gentleman
Waved me down
To an unscheduled stop.

I turned on my blinkers
And parked my car.
He asked 'is anything wrong?
Why do you use your indicators so?'
'To change lanes' was my subdued reply,
He didn't understand why.

Sand-melons from roadside stalls
Honey from apiaries subsidized,
Pickle from a roadside shop,
Who has already declared
That he wins the gold medal for 2004,
Ambala ^Delhi is great fun.

MY LOVE STORY

Mist
Insists
That it wrap itself
Around my legs
My heart begs.

The ants come out
In single file
Military that they are
Looking for food
Going to war.

Pine needles
From yesterday's shower
Pine cones
That will flower
Into trees
Where birds build nests.

I saw this bird
At first light
Beak full with thorns
It will build a nest
It will lay eggs for sure.

Dappled sun
On the hotel carpet
From a chink
In the armor of the window drapes
Specks of dust
Dancing in the light.

And outside
The river roars
Rock is shaped
Divinely sculpted
Water flows.

Waiters scurry
With garden chairs
And umbrellas
To prevent the tan
On skin that is brown
And will never be white
Despite the TV ads.

I walk barefoot
On manicured grass
See a bird of colored hue
And fall in love
With the dew.

BEASTS OF BURDEN

Donkeys, of course, you know
And humans with misshapen backs,
Water from a river ten miles away,
Handkerchief plots with terraced cultivation,
Maybe one crop a year,
I carry a burden too.

So many tears in my breast,
The wind of the pines in my ears,
Wild flowers to take away my fears,
Mountain goats on precipitous slopes;
I'm afraid, I don't need you.

Raise the sun when you will,
Set the moon to highlight the stars,
Tear rock apart, let water bubble forth,
Grow your pines in impossible elevations,
Show me the Plains way down below
And yet, I won't believe you.

Beasts of burden are 'dumb heads', you know,
Mulish in their extremities
Tough in their fear
What else do they have?
To them, fear is dear.

BOLSHOI

They are big
Mountains that are mountain size,
Like one of your Babushkas
In the meat shop.

And yet they kiss you
If you love them true;
Delicate, oh so delicate to the touch,
Such music in their winds and water
Madness, madness big.

Otherwise
How do you see green mango
At five thousand feet?

OVERTAKING

A game we play
Just as we play with ourselves,
Sexual no doubt
If played with gorges and ravines,
Now they have these unbroken white lines,
But pay the police a hundred rupees
And they will testify you had gout.

I overtook one day
I overtook a child with firewood on his head
Torn shirt covered with sweat
Legs bandy from the weight
And I honked because he was in the way
I had to change gears in my air-conditioned car,
Now, is this fair?

ACCEPTANCES

India:

A-4 Creations Pvt. Ltd., Kolkata

Books:

- Reflections in the Dark
- Padchhinh (Hindi)
- Crossroads
- A peek at Pandoraland

USA:

Poems:

- Feelings of the Heart
- Poetry Motel
- Famous Poets Society
- American Poets Society
- Down in the Dirt
- Real Eight
- The Powhatan Review
- Meridian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry

UK:

Poems:

- Erratica
- First time
- Linkway
- Poetic Hours
- Poetry Now
- The Snoring Cat

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