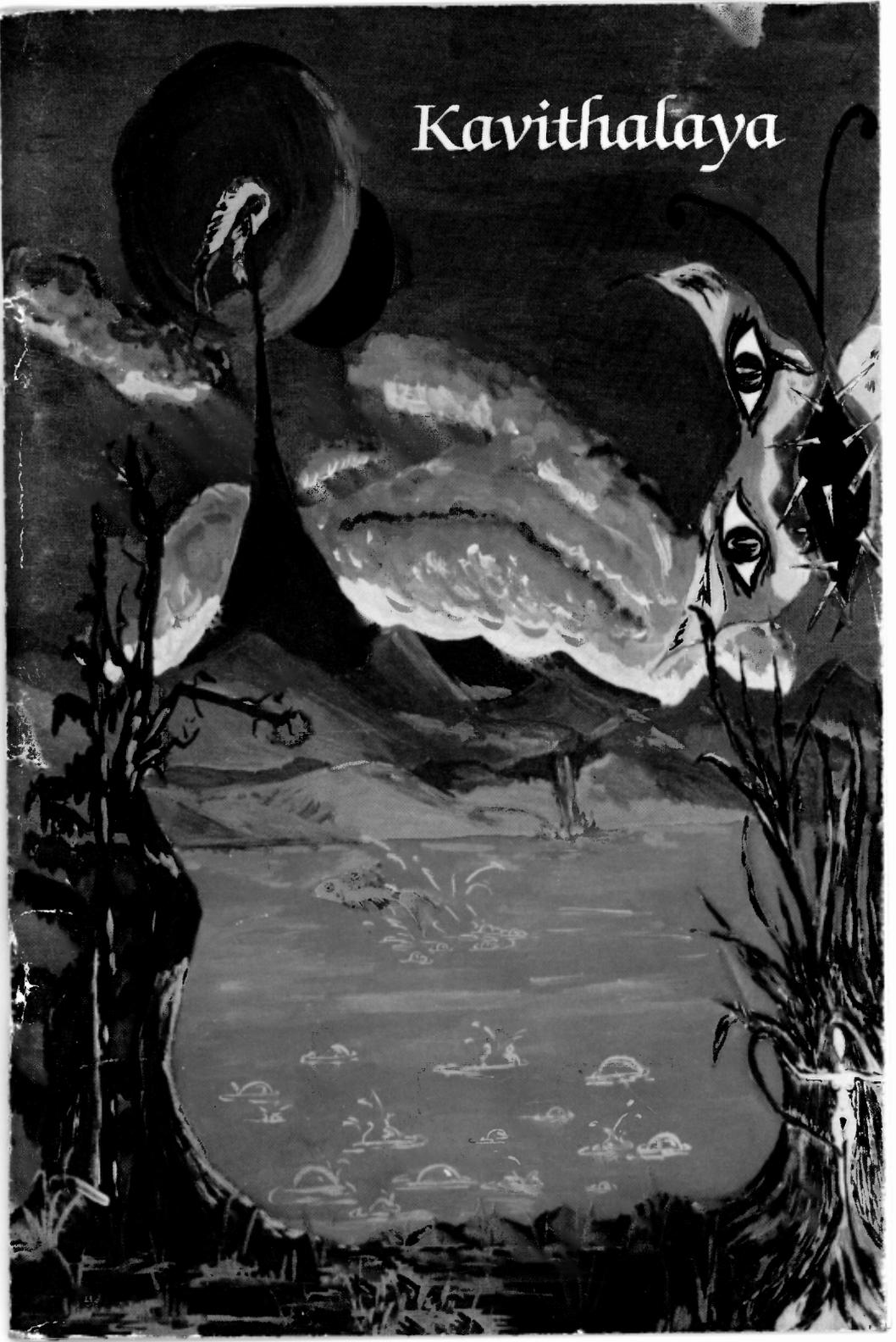


Kavithalaya



Kavithalaya means
House of Creation in Sanskrit

PREFACE

I feel privileged to be asked to write a prefatory note to this selection of poems and stories written during the workshop (February 1 - 6, 1993), organised jointly by the Kodaikanal International School and the American College (Madurai). Although I have directed several such workshops in the USA and India, my association with the workshop at Kodaikanal turned out to be a unique experience. Each participant there seemed to be fired with the zeal of creativity, eager to do a poem or a story at a short notice — and the result in most cases was truly impressive. I could hardly imagine that young writers, ranging between 16 and 20, would be able to produce material that may be the envy of even some of our established writers. I felt that there were at least a couple of poems which could achieve publication in some American or British literary magazine — such was their level of creative excellence. Take, for instance, the two poems included here by Meher and Karuna. One is almost dazzled by their manipulation of language and their vision and design. No wonder I felt tempted to suggest to the main organisers of this workshop, Bob Granner and Paul Love, to lend permanence to all this material in the form of a special publication. I hope that the two nationally known institutions (the Kodaikanal International School and the American College) will continue to encourage creative writing in the country especially when most of our schools, colleges and universities tend to lean too heavily on scholarship and research which often cripple imagination and free thinking in our students.

Shiv K. Kumar
April 7, '93.

KAVITHALAYA

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WORKSHOP PERSPECTIVE: TEACHER

Two years ago Rupen Das, Dean of Students of KIS, came to me with a simple question. "Why shouldn't Kodai School and American College's centre for Indian Literature organise a creative writing workshop?" I couldn't think of a single reason not to. So ten months later, there we were: twenty-five students and teachers from Kodai and Madurai spread out on Kodai's shaded green hills writing verse (some of us for the first time), under the gentle and perceptive guidance of the great poet, Jayanta Mahapatra, who had come as the Workshop's Director. By that time Bob Granner, Head of Kodai's English Department, had taken charge of the Workshop's daily operations, and guided them from beginning to end with skill and aplomb.

After it was all over, nobody asked whether we would have another Workshop. The only questions were When, and Who in the world could follow Jayanta Mahapatra's magnificent performance. The answers to these questions can be found between the covers of this book. One year later, almost to the very day, we came back to Kodai's hills and under the inspiring guidance of Shiv K. Kumar, this year's Director, produced what you can read here. Poet, novelist, dramatist and critic, Shiv Kumar brought out the best in every one of our participants, and more than anyone else made this book possible. That in no way denies the untiring help of Kodai School's English teachers and volunteers — Amy Stempel, Premod Menon, Chris Lutter, and of course Bob Granner again — as well as the skilled work of Latha Rengachari of the Madurai Centre.

And now, two months later, we are hard at work planning the Third Annual Kodai-Madurai Writing Workshop. For we're convinced now that the workshop won't go away. It will be back every year to challenge other high school and college young people (like those who have written here) — to animate their minds, probe their feelings, plumb their vocabularies, and produce work of which they've never dreamed themselves capable.

— Paul Love

WORKSHOP PERSPECTIVE: STUDENT

He taught the ants to scream.

And the quiet raging grew louder until it burst forth from a million restrictive thoughts.

A roaming tourist attraction sports the result of a timeless sense of dress, a jaunty spring in his walk and boundless charisma and charm lent to his brimming personality from years of living to the fullest. Dynamic and indefatigable, Dr. Shiv Kumar remains inspiration to countless bright eyes both here at Kodai, our near-perfect domain, and in the world beyond.

Lounging in grass; lit by a glow, provided not by the sunlight above but by an aura emanating unmistakably from his very person. At first, we, only the ants, surrounded him, possessed by a strange emotion identified soon as admiration, and then as the great lesson of a poet began, frustrations unleashed themselves and were given voice. Taught to express the hidden and mostly unrealized intentions of the mind, heads, under the comforting high noon glare, bent over, in deep contemplation, concentration, or were raised — speculating, wondering, eager.

Yes, the ants screamed. And they shouted and whispered and shrieked and wept and sang and then, when the day was done, the beauty created, the heads freed of poetic expanses, they held tightly precious little scraps of well-worn and scribbled-over paper — and rejoiced.

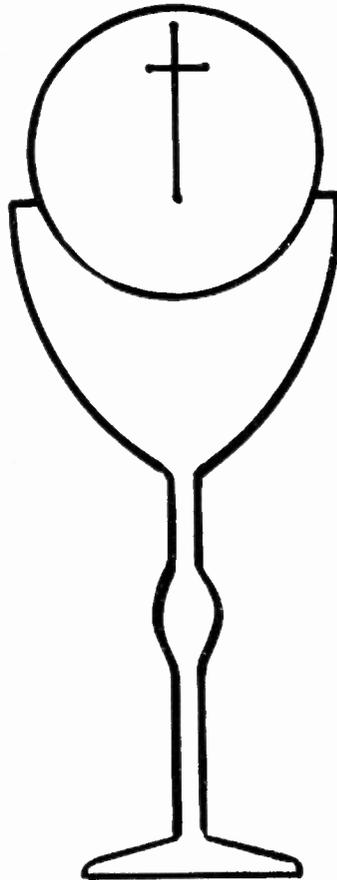
— Meher D'Mello

THE KISS

I want to be Christ
If only to be betrayed,
Not crucified,
But even then; yes,
'YES'
If you were my Judas
My love.



— A. Arputha Pragasam



Just..., simply

A garnet rose in arid land;
 A sparrow in an ocean of sky;
Her smile — a sedative,
 Soother to a weary heart;
Her eyes — a mirage,
 Slaking thirst.

I watched her,
 a hawk circling its prey;
 a tree stretching its branches;
and I, a single soul,
 mesmerized into falling.

I handed her the keys to my safe
 but, she had opened hers for another.
She captured me with her Aphrodisical glances,
 her radiance had left me blinded.
Silhouetted into the memories of my mind,
 she had left me in an air of nothingness.

A human touch caressed my hair.
 I stirred; I had been within the realms
 of clouds and fairies.
She was wearing my crown jewels.

— Kunal Kapoor

THE RAVE

Like merry-go-rounds gone mad,
blazing torches spin through the darkness;
Clinging to bulging groins and concave
torsos, flashes of fluorescent spandex
writhe in the strobe-lit mass.

Leering strangers oogle the spectacle,
swathed in a blanket of unease.
Addiction; Vibration; Confusion

Old Faithful bursts towards the light.
No longer is shape restricted;
a gelatinous pool of pleasure results.

Electricity has become contagious
The moon key has unleashed the mind.

— Brinda S.



BACK TO ORIGIN

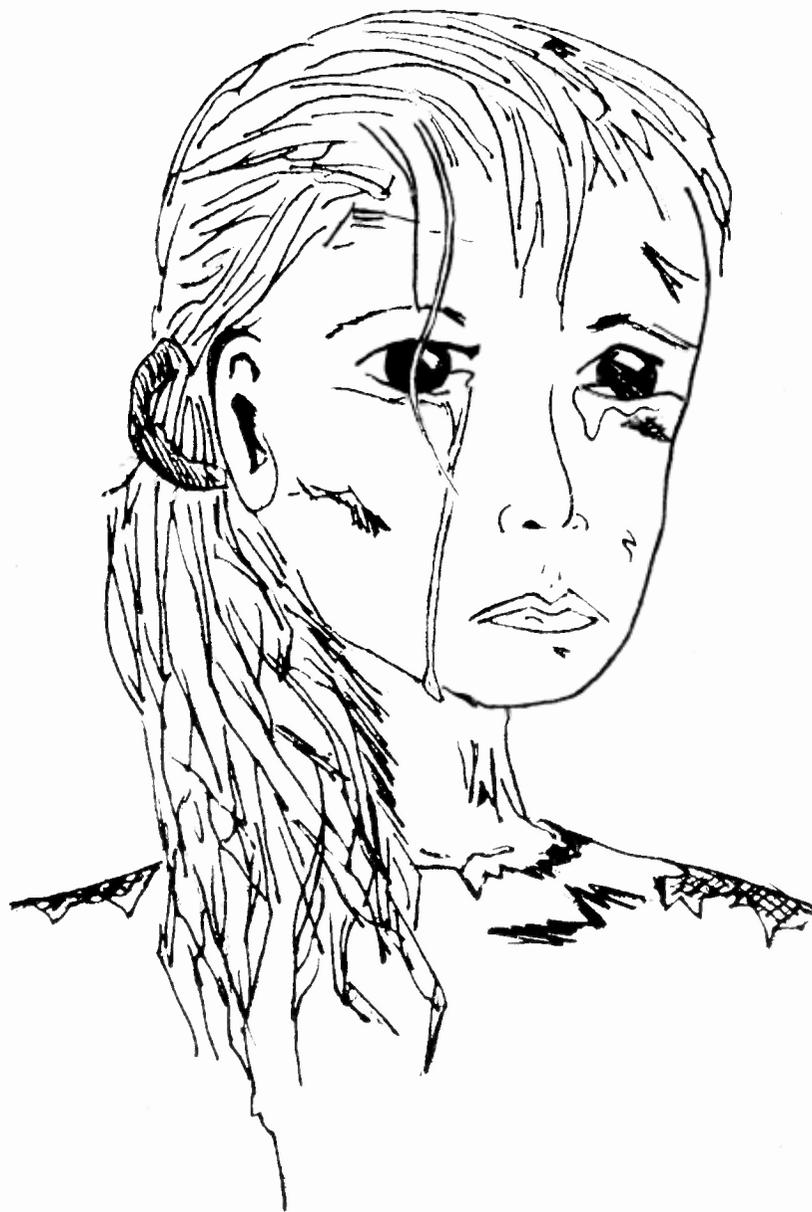
I got into her lips
As a baby to suckle blood
Like a leech on a rainy day.
Her brassiere-stained breasts
Erected themselves rising with passion
Like a dipped headlight.
Inside the Kashmiri blanket
We sinned ourselves to outdo the frosty morning.

I went into the market
Like every Indian husband
Revising my list and digging into my pocket.
Then bright red headlines flapping from vendor's awnings
Caught my eyes
And demanded a second look,
Like a homely orthodox Indian girl.
Upstood the almighty words
Proclaiming a nation's lost virginity.
Below, was a picture:
Pick axe, spade, crowbar, shovel, axe and metal-age equipments
Blown over a mental resort,
Shattering the vignette of pride,
Like a broken coconut before the hands of fake devotees:
Faith being vaporised,
I wanted to be reborn;
Brahma came to my rescue.

Back home;
Born again,
Into her I went
Like a school kid at dusk,
Innocent and uncomprehending;
Plunged myself like a fish back into water.

— Charles Dilip Roy





Streets deserted, only red lights
and painted faces of soliciting women.
I looked around, one approached with a
pubescent girl; a mother marketing her
most cherished possession.

The puerile face hesitantly, winked at me,
blue mascara to hide the black rings,
offset by neon reflected in her shallow pupils.
We crossed the street; market place of flesh.

Blue walls plastered with body oil.
A fake Mona Lisa stared at me,
with squinted eyes and an extra large bosom.
She sat down on the hard bed;
coarse, torn, wet with her previous lover's sweat.
Her knees, rubber dark on some midwestern kitchen floor,
trembled in this city of dreams; gold paved streets
denuding her bucolic mystery.

Her skirt slid down her pencil legs.
Unpracticed hands, sweating in the warm night,
innocently moved up and down my back.
The pain in her eyes, purposely killed by fake pleasure,
rolled up, pretending to drink it in.

Sanctified purity was raped by her attempts,
obscene attempts at being a part of this alien world.
Nubile, nymph-like fingers, too poor for rings,
slid down her pink cotton shirt.

I got up and left, her virgin breasts,
small angelic mountains hiding a novice heart.
I left her to other vultures that would descend
upon her that night.
Replace me in their callous gropings.
Replace me every night.

— Bharatpal Sidhu

IN THE BEGINNING

It traced down
 like a mystical blessing
At first ... a note, a divine
 Unleashed potency
In virgin soil.
And all earth's goodness,
 Innocence,
Merged into
 Solitary music,
A birth, purer
 than the creation.
Ignorance, you turned deaf ears!
 But...
A flash of clarity,
 glimpse of truth, like
 an exalted streak of
 sunlight,
Breaching the grey mists
 of the non-absolute.
It hung,
 a quivering note,
 a moment suspended;
Then —
 it broke;
Sublime ... tumultuous ... powerful,
 defying heaven's purity,
gushing ... rolling
 murmuring ... whispering
Like nectar into gaping throats.
 Thirsty souls lapped up
Every sweetness,
 And then ... silence.

— Likivi Suu

INDIA

"सुला दे मुझे आज" ("Put me to bed tonight")

She stopped, she turned, she challenged,
Hunger writ over the drunkard's face.
Men, listless, lazy, addicted to fantasy,
Tormented this alien fawn.
Wolves devouring forlorn innocence,
Unabashed, they trespassed her very being.

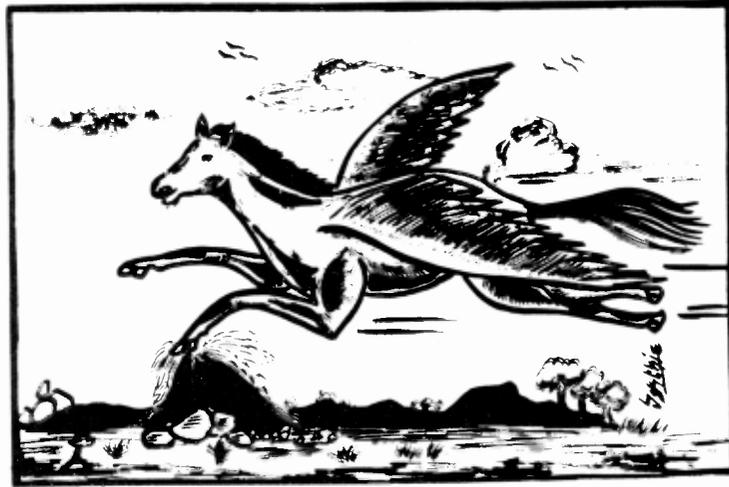
"हे रब
उठाले मुझसे मेरी जवानी
खूबसूरती का यह बोझ मैं
नहीं ले सकती ।"

("O Lord,
Take from me my youth
I can't take the burden of my beauty")

In silence the virgin child suffers
Bombay's scrutiny:
Lecherous eyes
That appraised her sculpted breasts
And yet, desired her every curve.

— Roshini Pahlajani





MY HOOVES ON HELICON

Now she must be glad
to see me with the pen!
Till this morning I was a Brahmachari,
never even thought of her.

In the spot-light of the sunrise in my bedroom,
In the pleasant pinches of the shower in the bathroom,
In the lime-yellow 'jibba' clinging to the hanger
in the five-foot wardrobe,
In the spring-like steam over the coffee-cup
my mother brought me,
She has been Monalisa.
Only I could not see her smile!

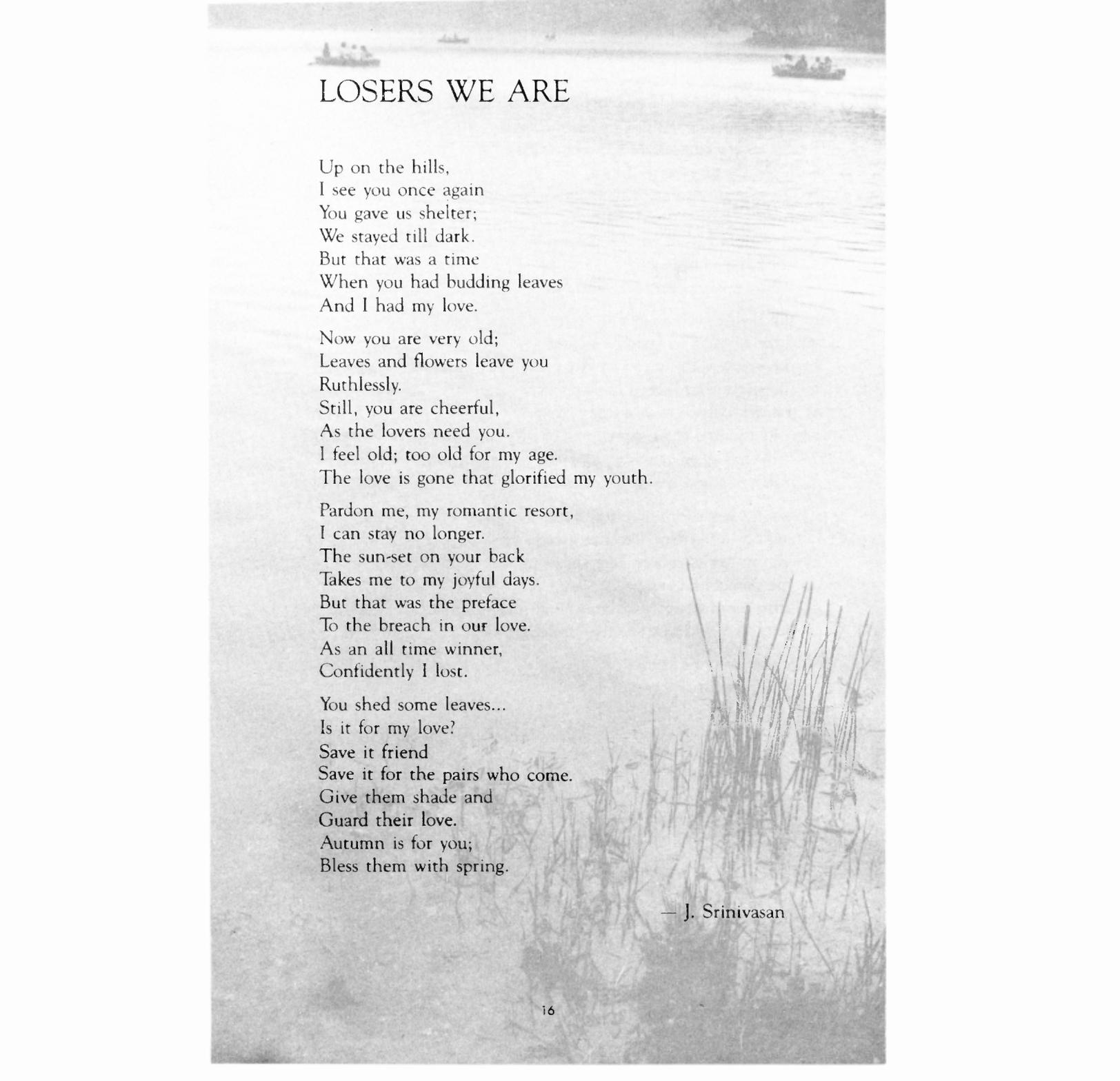
On my way to college,
In the rhymed word "vupu... vuppoo" with lengthened vowels
cried by the salt vendor on the tri-cycle,
In the chattering of the convent kids
with neatly pressed uniforms,
In the dirty old man who lay nude on the platform
with curly hair around his penis,
not caring a bit about the passers-by with blinkers,
 She has chased me.
 Only I could not see her smile!

In the biting sounds of four-letter words of guys
who try in vain to become western,
In the cries of the crow on the crotch of the barren tree,
In the petty four-legged quarrels of women-folk
at the dry corporation water pipe
who soon turn, their sarees pulled off, bra-less,
 She has tried her best to catch my attention.
 Only I could not see her smile!

Changing her shape like my shadow
Changing her colour like the cloudy sunset-sky
Changing her emotions like the artist
on the proscenium stage,
 She has attempted to arrest my imagination.
 Only I could not see her smile!

Now she must be glad
To see me with the pen!

— A.S. Arulsamy



LOSERS WE ARE

Up on the hills,
I see you once again
You gave us shelter;
We stayed till dark.
But that was a time
When you had budding leaves
And I had my love.

Now you are very old;
Leaves and flowers leave you
Ruthlessly.
Still, you are cheerful,
As the lovers need you.
I feel old; too old for my age.
The love is gone that glorified my youth.

Pardon me, my romantic resort,
I can stay no longer.
The sun-set on your back
Takes me to my joyful days.
But that was the preface
To the breach in our love.
As an all time winner,
Confidently I lost.

You shed some leaves...
Is it for my love?
Save it friend
Save it for the pairs who come.
Give them shade and
Guard their love.
Autumn is for you;
Bless them with spring.

— J. Srinivasan

I like your makeshift heaven
being sold in the black-market
to the highest bidder.
Arms, legs, the occasional country
change hands
Going
going
but
from where I'm sitting
I can see the seat of the cardboard throne falling off
its Araldite hinges.
Sawdust angels are always obese.
A naughty one has burnt a hole through her finger
and the fifth one's halo reflects
too much light.
Cutting corners on quality has left you
with plastic flowers
and only a wooden spoon to ladle out eternal life.
I see you have substituted wallpaper for a
firmament bearing a moon fashioned from a golf ball
craters and all.
In the corner lie two cans of whitewash.
Good, good.
You sit back, pleased
and you plump hand pats a well-contented bulge of
money
The hammer falls.
But one more thing —
The great, white man
With a great, cotton beard
And a great, gold heart,
How much did you save on him?

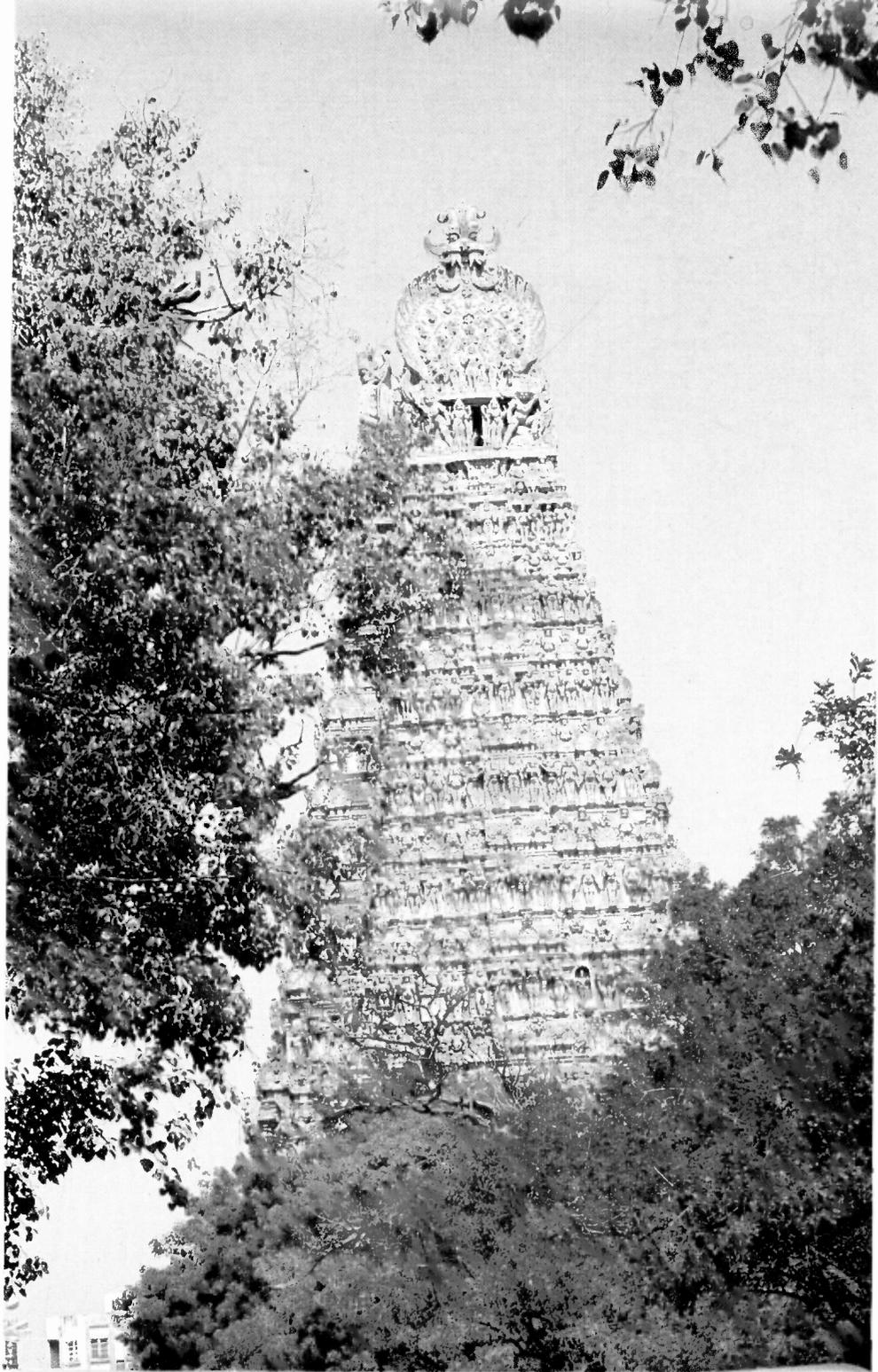
— Meher

NOUVEAU PROPHETS

under the grinding fan,
crucified to a t.v. antenna
instant coffee spirituality.
street corner shopping:
watered milk, russian cigarettes,
adulterated gods, bulimic prostitutes.
canon backfire compensation
for ten thousand years of celestial dreams.
the nail is driven deeper,
sitting in front of the box,
six packs and wives with black eyes,
frozen dinner stained tablecloth.
still born humanity
waiting for the black station wagon.

— Sohailrekhy







To stand
on top of a hill
Is to conquer the land.
Gather the flames of the sun.
The sharp, cutting smell of pine.
Clutch the treeshade,
The clouds impaled on forked talons,
And the wildness of the wind
Grasped, vice-like in your grip.

Conquer.

You're blinded by your eyes, as
The strength and delicate decay of nature
Razes memory from your mind.
You will forget.
You will forget the knife-edged sprawl of cities,
Its jutting steel mountains lost, in a concrete desert.
Conquer the memory, claw the bleeding sky.
Rivers will froth and gush force
Into the empty spaces of your mind.
Yes, grasp and forget,
And conquer the land.

— Eva Rahman

IF LEFT TO HIM

Everything destined for him:
Birth, placement and death, at last,
Why not make it himself?
Then, that explains life--
The unseen mystery decides.

If left to him,
All ten fingers he would have wished
Were thumbs and forefingers in pairs
To work for triggers and bombs,
Never stopping to care.

Therefore... a check on humanity
To stop self destruction,
Offered by the Ultimate Power,
Holding man back,
Teaching him to love and not to hate.

— T. Vijayalakshmi



Thoughts swarm to my mind.
Eyes rove to the twig — dry, brittle, sapless —
still as a stone, skyscraper, or mountain.
Surrounded
by plants, insects, moss and pebbles
as lifeless as the twig.

The branch —
empty, hollow, lonely...
blown to nowhere.
Pushed, pulled, tackled, shoved,
carried up, down, and around
by nature, man, and animal.
The power of others
lacking control, power,

in the same way as man.

— Leena Datwani



I squatted on the dusty ground near the tea stall, ignoring the river of sewerage flowing by in the gutter. I lit a beedi. Through the smoke rings, in the evening twilight, the marketplace looked very different. I was no longer a thread woven into the fabric, but a stranger peering through a window, seeing not merely the single pattern to which I belonged, but the carpet as a whole.

Vegetables were being sold under the shelter of a neon sign, which flashed plastic promises into the growing darkness. Trouser-clad merchants stood proudly in front of their castles of glass and plywood, behind which the articles of an alien technology gathered dust. A cycle rickshaw rattled by, coca cola bottles clinking in time to the pedalling. I looked across at Hinduism. It was a beast, a beast of burden. It held the burden of a civilization. It turned towards me with an unconcerned grind of its jaw on a banana leaf, painted blue horns reaching for the sky, a dull bronze bell anchoring it to reality. I winced, as my ears suffered the piercing sound of a bus horn. The beast turned towards me, not seeming to care about the temporary obstruction it caused this new India.

The beedi went out. I stood up and walked towards it all.

— Xavier

WORKSHOP COMMENTS

BY DR. SHIV K. KUMAR

Meher D'Mello: Untitled poem (p. 17)

This poem shows a young writer with mature, sophisticated sensitivity, often lacking in some of our published poets. What makes the poem an outstanding piece of writing is its urbane, ironic perspective ("the fifth one's halo reflects/too much light..."/"a wooden spoon to ladle out eternal life..."), and a skillful use of the language that is truly refreshing. This young writer, I feel, should definitely shape into a major poet even before she moves into her early twenties.

Bharatpal Sidhu: Untitled poem (p. 11)

Here is a poem on a bold theme, presented with a disarming candour that lends it both beauty and power. What makes it come through to the reader is its striking imagery ("neon reflected in her shallow pupils..."/"Blue walls plastered with body oil"), and an occasional turn of phrase that illuminates the central structure ("gold paved streets/denuding her bucolic mystery..."). Ingeniously patterned, with pleasing dramatic twists and turns.

Sohail Rekhy: "Nouveau Prophets" (p. 18)

"Nouveau Prophets" is a poem that holds its reader with its sequence of terse, incisive images that fall like unexpected hammer strokes. Not a word wasted, not a line redundant. The poem derives its power more through suggestion than statement.

Karuna Morarji: Untitled poem (p. 30)

This young writer has dexterously exploited juxtapositions of opposites as a strategy to bring to focus the central theme. Irony and paradox propel the poem forward to its dramatic end-line: "The train moves on.". As the poem gathers its momentum, the reader is held both by its subtle irony ("Inter-racial marriages are common/amongst the authentic immortal enthusiasts...") and a cluster of exquisite phrases: "a paper book of imbecile words..." "stained by the blood of ignorance...".

Nishq Mody: "Fragment" (p. 48)

If memory and nostalgia lie at the core of most creative writing,

then this "Fragment" seems to shimmer on the borderline of fantasy and reality. As the old man, burdened by the deepening shadows of his yesteryears, broods over his past, this sketch acquires intense poignancy and despondency. Here is a sensitive piece of narration that might be developed into a novel.

J. Srinivasan: "Losers we are" (p. 16)

A sense of loss and despair lies at the heart of this poem which derives its sustenance from an overflow of sentiment. A typical, romantic piece — love, frustration and nostalgia.

Charles Dilip Roy: "Back to Origin" (p. 8)

Designed as a narrative, this poem juxtaposes dream and reality. What lends credibility to this poem is its unmistakable Indianness, its use of concrete particulars ("pick-axe, crowbar, shovel, etc....") and an occasional flash of striking image ("passion like a dipped headlight...").

Naga Sundara Lingam: "Lines Written on the Destruction of Babri Masjid" (p. 34)

Generally speaking, a poem on a topical theme tends to lapse into rhetoric and didacticism. But here the mosque emerges as an expanded symbol of unbridled orthodoxy and fanaticism. Suggestive and evocative, this poem uses contrast to generate tension: "You promise me a building/But prepare a burial.". A poem with a plea for liberal humanism.

Reeba John: "The Flower Girl" (p. 43)

A short story packed with drama and suspense. Ordinarily, stories portraying hunger and deprivation tend to sound rather sentimental. But this writer has eminently succeeded in handling this theme with sensitivity, compassion and great technical skill. There is not a sentence that doesn't contribute to the central dramatic effect. The writer's main forte is her ability to vivify a scene or character.

Arputha Pragasam: "The Kiss" (p. 5)

A short, short poem that has successfully transformed a traditional, religious theme into a facet of contemporary human experience — disillusionment in love.

NIGHTFALL

The Nightfall.

Now the streets have gone dry,
There's not even a sign of cracked beggar.
The dreamy glare of sodium lights,
Reveals — dogs, donkeys, and horses.
A faint cry of despair sings its way to my instinct.
Passion has shattered its glass cage.

Whirlpools of ignorance disperse the marching soldiers of fortune.
Like an overflowing fountain these animals conquer inch-by-inch.
Erasing all colors of human footsteps,
The escaped passion rules the kingdom of fours.
Wildly they jump, scream, and fight
To summon salvation to their passion.
Surrounded by the fragile, empty eggshell,
called life,
They pray for their drowned innocence.

The candlelight of realization lights up the mirror of sin.
The reflection is dark, empty;
Drenched in the sweat of mutilation.

— Shafayet Imam



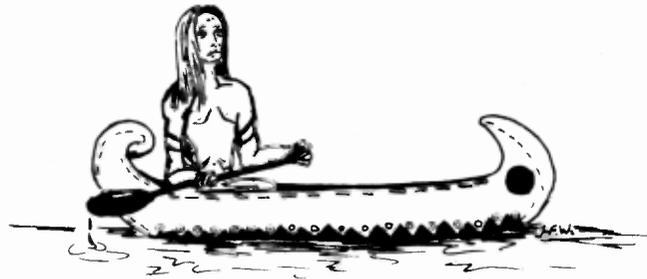
FORGOTTEN RACE

Merely a shadow, it came,
Sliding along fields of water
With a gracefulness found only in nature,
A tiny vessel of birch bark.
With no strain or effort, it came with the current,
A glimpse in the fog of early morning.

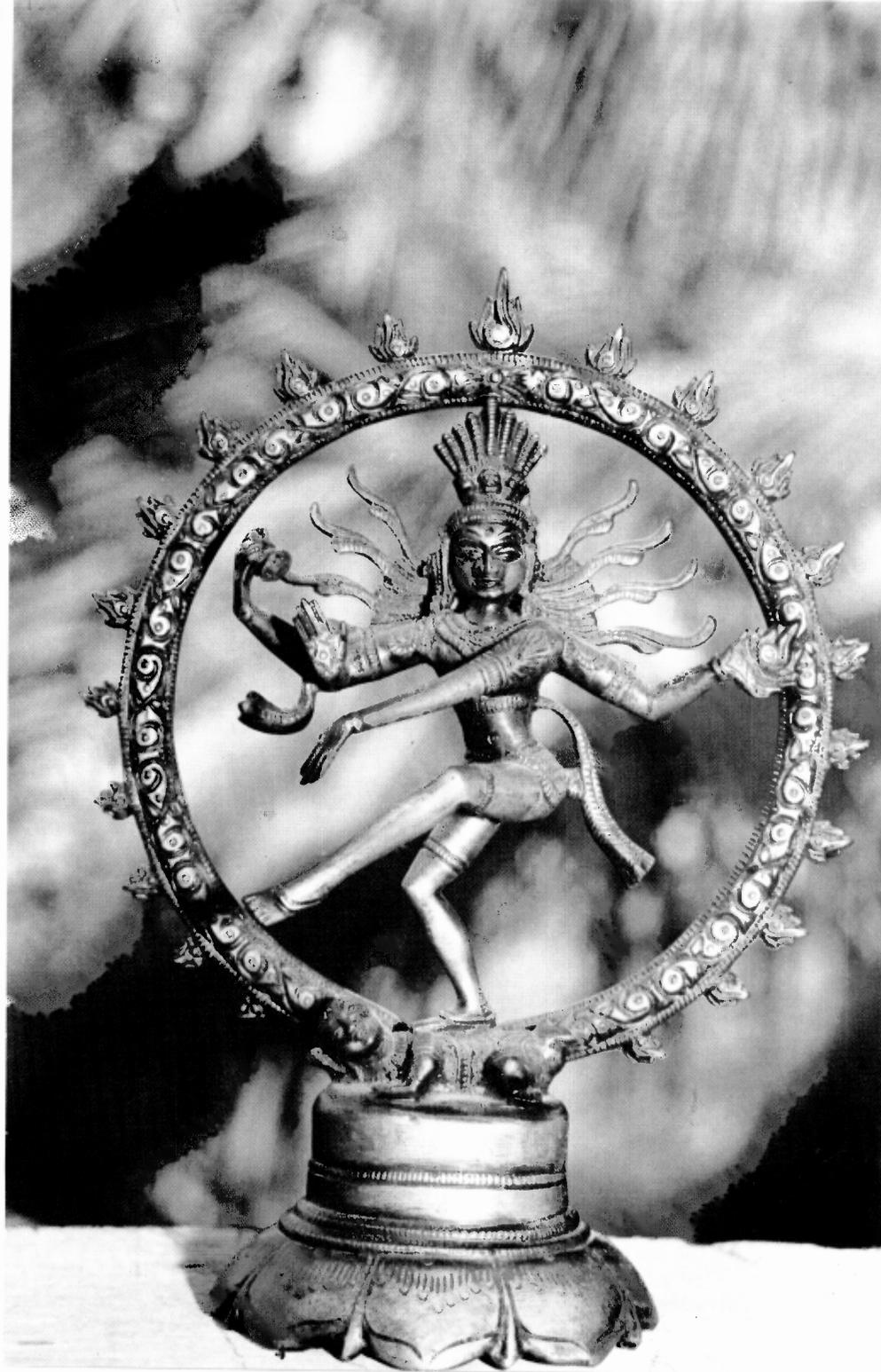
Like the motionless heron, a shade of blue in the mist
Sat a solitary figure, positioned at the stern.
Skin like brown velvet, hair like black water-falls off the land.
A hard chiselled face containing eyes of the hawk.
A single fastened feather fell across his back.
A perfection of nature, this Ojibwe father.

Morning sunrays glint in falling water droplets,
As the carved elegance swept across the water
To silently plunge once more.
His stroke, like his heart, in perfect rhythm with nature.
In true harmony with the land he follows its course,
The last ghost of an ever-dying race.

— J. Free. W.







CITY TO SANDS

The blazing sun burns
Holes into the scurrying crabs,
Whose voids are then filled by the
Groping tentacles of water.

The split soles of my feet,
Leather-like,
Tangle themselves with every
Step taken.
Shall I tie them like shoelaces?
Yes,
Proof of my learning.

Why do my feet bring me here?
To see the idiotic pool-filled
Crustaceans dance about the
Broth of sand and water.

Wading, letting the ancient,
Endlessly lapping
Water lick my parched,
Thirsty sole.

I once danced among the
Metallic blocks which will

One day themselves crawl like sand
To the beach.
Give me wiry feet so as not to burn,
Give me a peace of the hollow crabs.

— Sachin Dheer

Dangling her force-fed hind legs
off the opposite seat
The pink piglet from South Africa,
roasting on the coals of the smouldering sun
setting beyond the peaks of disgust
A lollipop-red apple in her snout,
Waiting to be purged
As a sacrifice to the obese god:
Society

Her husband, a hound of war,
protectively glaring in a cage beside
Showing filed-sharp teeth to an intruder;
popping the rosy bubble of Jo'burg suburbia.
Inter-racial marriages are common
Amongst the authentic immortal enthusiasts,
Licking up the invisible dirt
On their eternally flourishing lawns.

Their friend, the original Indian ape,
Still strives for a bite of a banana
in the concrete jungles of modernity,
Recording the content of his primitive brain
in a paper book of imbecile words,
Their ritualistically printed shadows leaving him dark,
his thoughts devoured by the superhuman Mouth.

Still recovering from the plunders of his god,
The Ape crawls in white vomit for his plastic plantain
— the Blacks have eaten it all,
he cries in 'Hollandese', not Hindi.
The piglet nods her bloated head,
Wiggles her salon-permed tail
While the Master adds the final seasoning
to his prefabricated meal.

The Gorilla and the Canine creature,
both hairy and stained by the blood of ignorance,
dumped in the universal heap of death,
poisoned by the rotting left-overs of society's food.
Fooled forever; leaving the occupied seats
Empty

The train moves on.

PEDLAR

He was a small man with a glorious past, now making ineffectual gestures. Trying to gain again days of bygone vitality. He had positioned himself in the midst of youth, hoping in vain to recapture what was lost forever. His work of the past had him on an inaccessible pedestal. But that was not enough. To him acceptance had to come from even the youngest. Praise and laughter worked on him like a potion. An aging icon refusing to retire gracefully, thirsting for acceptance still. He wouldn't let his past achievements speak for him — though they could speak volumes. Here he was, after several decades of hectic creativity, spinning out glib insincerities. Here he was, compromising old value systems — standards that gave him his greatness — to accommodate new lesser yardsticks in order to stay within the range of photographic flashes. He ceased to be a Creator, but became a performer instead. Bowing and scraping he lapped it all up — the applause, the laughter, the praise. The antics and the clapping increased proportionately. The world laughed along. The ring, the arc lights and the crowds were his element. The world egged him on with its cheers, finding in him a conveniently distanced caricature of its own foibles. What was once a providential gift now was part of a factory assembly line. What once sprang from fountains of inspiration was now motivated by massive additions to pass-book credit columns. Inane critiques and superficial responses made his day. Meaningful analysis and careful improvement kept company with bygone days of penury and creative insecurity. Not for him was all this anymore. The ring, the arc lights and the crowds were now his element. In an age of “one-work wonders” launched by Madison Avenue blitzes, he was a venerated antique, selling technique and skill, peddling junk and monstrosities to an insensitive age. He performed still and more was generated for today and to be forgotten on the next. He was a pathetic relic, successful in the three-ringed business of art, bartering intellect and imagination in a million ways for the gloss and glamour of a crass era. Behind the rubbery grin and the droll looks lay fear, the world to see, if it cared to. The performers of the world are to entertain, not to be studied. For that would be too close for comfort. Who was he anyway? You, Me? Any man perhaps?

— Latha

DECEMBER 6, 1992

LINES WRITTEN ON THE DESTRUCTION OF BABRI MASJID

Forgotten?

Shame,

To forget even my name.

Bridge... bridge... bridge am I
Who filled the breach
Between 'you and you'.

You burnt me,
Though I am a Phoenix.

You marked me black,
Though I am a Sun.

You send souls 'abroad'
To find me an abode.

You promise me a building
But prepare a BURIAL.

— N. Naga Sundara Lingam

Chip 'O' The Ol' Block

I am, and therefore will be,
... Pretty well-off too,
The coziest hole in the
choicest tree is mine.
The tree... His,
He has his name carved in it.

I like him. He's tall,
has black hair and ooh!
so lively.
I could give him my very soul.

There he is now, on his terrace,
fooling around with his airgun,
... Restless...
So much like us.

Wait! I think he sees me,
You can't hide your
beauty all your life you know.
I think he wants a better look,
He's using his sights.
Here, let me spruce up my tail.
CRACK!
Wh-ouch, Christ — that hu... .

— Edison Thomas

TOMORROW...

Loganathan came out of the office. Today was the day of his retirement. The orderly saluted him — perhaps for the last time. Though he was accustomed to these salutes, he realised now how much smug satisfaction they gave him. He climbed down the stairs.

Raman Nair was waiting for him near the cycle stand and they started walking toward the barracks.

“So,” Raman Nair said questioningly, “What’s your next plan?”

“I don’t know,” answered Loganathan, “I am not sure now. I have not planned anything.”

They walked in silence for some time. The trees by the side of the road stood erect like soldiers on parade.

“Do you remember the days when we were at training together?”

“Yes...yes...how can one forget those days?” Loganathan answered, pondering over the past.

He thought of the days when they were together. He still remembered the day when he went with his father for enrollment in the army. It had been a terrible time for the family. They were seven, besides father and mother. Father was a head constable of police and a heavy drinker, so his income was not enough to keep the family going.

When the announcement about the enrollment came, he decided to send Loganathan to the army. He took him to the high-school grounds where the selection process was taking place. They reached the place early in the morning where there were many men in green uniforms. One havildar was checking the weights of the candidates, and there was a long queue ahead. Father asked Loganathan to stand in the line. When Loganathan’s turn neared, father brought two bananas and some water in a jug, which he said would increase body weight. When Loganathan cleared the weight test, his father was overjoyed and felt as if he had already been selected for the job.

Loganathan did clear all the tests. In the evening an officer announced his name with the names of the selected candidates,

and asked them to pack up to leave for training the next day. When they went home, Loganathan found himself being treated like a special person. Here was a break from his routine. He was not scolded for anything.

The next day he boarded the train with other selected candidates. When they reached the training school they were lined up, briefed about the rules and regulations, and given instructions on how to conduct themselves. Later they were taken to the barber inside the campus and they came out looking like scraped monkeys. It was at that time that Loganathan met Raman Nair. When Loganathan came out, he saw Raman Nair and the look of Raman Nair with the haircut made him laugh. They remained together throughout the training period. He remembered the days when Raman Nair used to bring edibles as he returned from the mess duty. When the training was over, both of them were posted at different places. The only contact they had over the years was the wedding invitation that Loganathan received from Raman Nair. They had reunited only three years ago. All through these three years they would sit down to talk for a long time. Mrs. Nair used to tease them, saying that they seemed to discuss *The Ramayana* or *The Mahabharatha*.

Loganathan had retired today and Raman Nair was scheduled to retire next month. Oh! how time flies.

Suddenly it struck him that he had always been reflecting on the past and never getting beyond the present. He had never thought of the future. He had never felt the need to do so.

They walked slowly...it was a long road ahead.



— S. Gopinathan





THE FLOWER GIRL

The dream girl of the silver screen turned Chief Minister, Jayalalitha, was due in town later that day. The whole town was agog with excitement. Jayanthi watched the people putting up streamers and arches as she sat cross-legged on the pavement with her basket of flowers beside her. The Malligai flowers were in season. She tenderly strung them together, barely letting her dainty fingers linger for more than a second on a flower. They were so delicate they'd even fade by the heat of her fingers. She shooed away a couple of flies that had descended on the tear stains on her baby's cheek as he lay asleep, hungry and exhausted. Poor thing! He was too young to drink from a glass and her breasts had gone completely dry over the past week. The baby had never ceased howling, and each time she tried to force her dry breasts into his mouth, he only thrashed about violently and screamed louder.

A rupee and a half was all she needed today, and she'd be able to buy the feeding bottle she'd seen at Khader Bhai's shop. She was a little impatient. No one had bought her flowers that morning despite the fact that everyone was dressed-up for the day.

Leela Acca had taken pity on the poor baby and offered to spare some milk from the cleverly adulterated stuff she sold in her neighbourhood. If only the baby's father could offer some financial help, even if he was too ashamed to acknowledge them to the world.

"How much is it for 100?"

Jayanthi woke up from her musings as a barrel shaped woman, with thick lips darkened with pan, jabbed a pudgy finger towards a roll of jasmine flowers strung together.

"Eighty paise" she replied.

"Okay, let me have 500. How much will that be?"

"Four rupees, Ma!" Jayanthi said.

She carefully wrapped the flowers in a piece of banana leaf in a corner of her basket. She even tied it up with a fibre from the banana tree.

At last! She had the money to buy her baby the feeding bottle. She wanted to jump for joy! She decided to cross over to the other

side of the road immediately and buy the bottle before she had to use up the money for something else.

She left the baby by the flower basket on the pavement while she dashed to the shop and back. The traffic on the double road had become quite unruly. Gaudily dressed people competed with vehicles and recklessly driven police cars in an effort to make headway. She made it to Khader Bhai's shop dodging expertly, and panted out her order for the bottle. She was slightly irked when Khader Bhai took his time to get Anacin for another customer. He then slowly turned to her. When she saw the bottle her irritation vanished and she dashed back again. Half-way across the second road there was a sudden screech of sirens, and lights blared. Someone screamed.

The next thing she knew she was lying a few feet from her baby. She tried to move but it was agony. She seemed stuck in some sticky glue.... Her vision dissolved into a whirlpool of bright lights. Her ears heard the pounding of a thousand hammers. She sighed, "My Baby!"

The roads were deserted. The night stretched into the early hours of the morning. A fast car ran over the feeding bottle while the orphan's wail shattered the stillness of the night.

Notes:

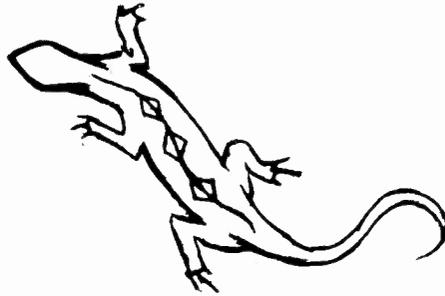
- Acca* — *Big Sister*
Bhai — *Big Brother*
Malligai — *A kind of flower (Jasmine)*

— Reeba John

THE GECKO'S FUNERAL

At the gecko's funeral I smelled the future
And watched his old bones burn.
As frail and shrivelled skin grew cracks
His soul dripped off the pyre
And seeped into the ground.

— Satya Giordano



Like the last respire of a giant,
the peaked mound slowly smoothed down,
the jagged points flattened into curves,
the same way the tip of a knife turns
blunt with use.

The piercing wind slicing away,
against the rigid body
of the mountain,
relentlessly breaking it
into a shapeless,
slump of
soil.

— Stan Sam Kuruvilla

ARABIAN NIGHTS

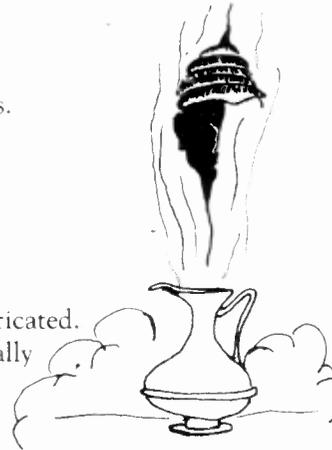
Awakened by the roar of a fighter jet,
Shattering the stillness of a graceful dawn,
Groaning like a raging Cyclops.
I curse the pilot for spilling my serene slumber
And slip into the TV. hall for CNN's war news.

My hall mates gaze at the box leisurely
Their eyes hypnotized by the screen.
The bulletin registers in their memory
Like data processed on a computer.
An old-timer's battered ego decrees enmity;
History altered overnight; fresh accusations fabricated.
Tornadoes pursue stealth bombers — mechanically
Cleaving the blue sky of a muted night
Merely to devastate Aladdin's Baghdad.

Our souls vanish; we are tearless from our 'amusement'.
Fascinated by the night games, we hunt our 'Rambo'.
Mercy, Grace, Peace, Pity, and Love vaporize.
Petrified eyeballs erupt in surprise —

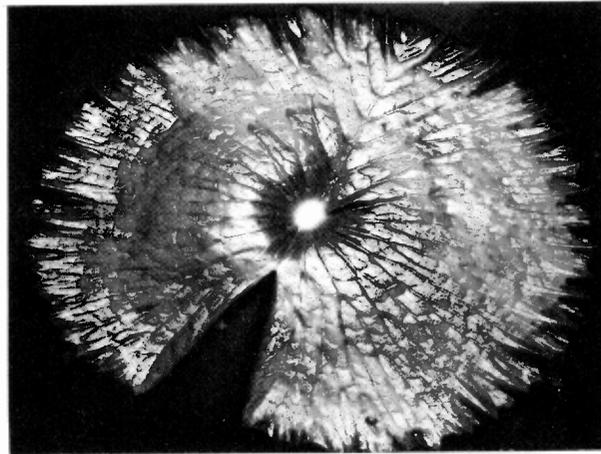
A baby suckles hungrily on its dead mother's breast
Near the door of an exploded bunker.

— Dev Anand Paul



I can still vividly recall the exhilarating refreshness of the fine white spray; a part of the Victoria Falls, sweeping past my face. I held onto the railing and stood gazing at the swift endless flow of water, dropping abruptly and mysteriously disappearing beneath yet another sheet of falling water. Shimmering on its surface was the reflection of the rainbow, mingling with other distorted images of green vegetation and misty azure. As I looked around I saw entangled, untamed trunks supporting masses of glistening green leaves, which extended down into the distant depths of brilliant white foam. Above, a streak of winged blue and green glided and, for a moment, disappeared into the mist ... emerging again to be balanced skillfully on the rush of flowing water. My grip tightened and I, fascinated, reflected on how soothing this world's nature could be. My eyes wandered endlessly over the exquisite wilderness encircling me; encountering immortality, power and beauty. I resolved to treasure and preserve it; knowing that, once lost, it would be gone... forever.

— Manika



HURTING

His hurt suppressed
Like angry water frozen to ice.
The contours of his face scratched
Like tired lines across blank paper,
Mercilessly.

His smile, a colorless flower
Inexpressive and Unreadable.
I reach out;
There is no warmth in his response.

His words are brittle,
Like seared leaves;
I need only touch him
To hear them crackle and break.

He turns away.
I smile helplessly, unresisting, powerless,
The taste of ash of my tongue.

— Maya Thiagarajan



fragment

Memories are your only true possessions, which you guard jealously, a child gloating over treasured toys, revelling in the privacy of your thoughts. But secrecy grows tedious when abandoned to itself. Or perhaps it is the desire to preserve some part of yourself, the grains of experience you gathered, when faced with the certainty of death. For if even the memory of your existence, who you were, and what you stood for, disappears, then to what purpose did you live? In the end, if you are strong enough, you will expose your juglar to society's judgement. Their verdict is of no consequence, your life a small price to pay for immortality.

But I am an old man and I ramble. The words I speak are not my own, merely adapted to my purpose. There is nothing original to say. I am not bitter, merely an old man with rotting teeth, sightless eyes, deaf ears, useless hands, a twisted spine. And I ramble.

The nurse comes in and helps me shuffle to the bathroom. I can no longer walk, reduced to the status of a three year old. She hates her job, this woman, helping decrepit old men stretch out the agonies of life. I don't really blame her.

I would have died years ago if it hadn't been for my son. At every flutter of my heart I'm mobbed by doctors anxious to save their paychecks. He is a good son, and I love him. He couldn't live with my death. Says I'll be professionally taken care of in the home. He's right.

Dinner-time now. My pulse is high today, so I have my green pea soup in bed. I'm looking out the window and catch my reflection on the glass. It makes me self-conscious. I feel like I'm on TV.

After dinner it's the rocking chair by the window. The cliched sentimentality hangs in the air uncomfortably. It should be funny, I feel, but I don't laugh. Here, while looking out onto the carefully manicured ground below where some of the fitter patients occasionally venture, I live my life again, escaping into my memories. The doctor says I am attempting to regress. He is right. I don't belong here in this country, speaking this language, in this

culture of which I am a part. I belong to my childhood, a different culture, a different place, a different time. The air-conditioned room, thermostat faithfully monitoring the temperature, fades. I can sense it dimming as my mind numbs itself to the present; as I open the dark closet, but I am now a stranger to who I was, and the memory is not real, only a warped reflection.

But the images are real. Nothing can change that....

— Nishq .



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