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## Contents

### Poetry

Shaiq Ali	1
Jeevika	2
Tuhin Bhowal	4
Siddharth Dasgupta	8
Aranya	13
Zufishan Rahman	14
Megha Mittal	35
Priyanshi Singh	38
Shivangi Mariam Raj	39
Tanuj Solanki	42

### Fiction

Shahidul Zahir ( <i>Translated by V Ramaswamy and Shazroha Nabrin</i> )	15
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### Miya Poetry: A Selection

Shalim M. Hussain: Why Miyah Poetry (and not Char-Chapori Poetry)?	44
Hafiz Ahmed	50
Shalim M Hussain	54
Abdul Kalam Azad	56
Rezwan Hussain	58
Shahjahan Ali Ahmed	59
Siraj Khan	60
Kazi Neel	62
Rehna Sultana	64
Ashraful Hussain	65
Abdur Rahim	68

### New in Poetry

G.N. Saibaba, <i>Why Do You Fear My Way So Much</i>	70
Smita Agarwal, <i>Speak, Woman</i>	75
Rohan Chettri, <i>Lost, Hurt, or in Transit Beautiful</i>	79
Sridala Swamy <i>Run for the Shadows</i>	84
Jeet Thayil, ed., <i>The Penguin Book of Indian Poets</i>	87
Avinab Datta-Areng, <i>Annus Horribilis</i>	90

<i>Author bios</i>	94
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**Shaiq Ali**

**My Hibiscus Skies**

I'll collect my hibiscus skies and the black storms,  
The skin that beats, the crackle of the last burning smoke,  
Silhouettes of ghettos, its smell and dread.  
The possibility of a horizon on a racing pigeon's head,  
Songs and waters of memory,  
the zam-zam, the ghazals, the rubai.  
The abandoned houses and its lamps, still  
glowing over the pavements' lost graffiti.  
The lacerations, the winters, the kitchens  
safeguarding graveyards, the hawkker that sells  
wedding dresses just outside on tricycles,  
the morning seasons of daily beginnings  
lost in the inevitable autumn of endings and evenings,  
breaking stones in the music of the inaudible calypso,  
in search of the smell of history's heaves, its deep tones.

I make this my new blood language,  
And I'll make you not understand.

## Jeevika

### Visa

The state  
of despair  
is not a seed,

it doesn't grow,  
it eats

the space  
to which I submit  
is not vast

it's a sponge,  
a moss-bit canoe,  
four ores, no more.

I crawl  
into the cracks  
of this appeal,

where the tear ducts  
stay punctured and full.

All time  
is wasted.

I come back  
to the finish line,  
I come back

to the boxes,  
check, and checked.

## Memorizing लोकोक्तियाँ with papa

My one less than perfect paper.  
98/100.

Turn boxes into bigger boxes, dare  
to perceive my devotion.

Simple rides across the water, body  
in crisis tomorrow.

I was graded on our proverbs.  
Hindi cradled in my mind like braids.

We are wont to find things  
in the rugs, not under them. Sun—

burned terror. Your hair will not teach mine.  
Little fingers in the namkeen bowls,

tricks for remembering.

Tuhin Bhowal

### Another Elegy in Lieu of Musculature

This is what all final verdicts must sound like:  
Leave. Death is singular; dying a conglomerate—  
the bodies, & their spirits couped in riots or  
a protest. The courtship of hands is numinous  
& small. Wild is the wind & yet evenings pass  
by as though surfacing only through time.

*Sometimes you realize the value of a thing only  
at the end of that thing*, the girth of my right  
hand just as meagre as my left—incapable  
of planning emergencies. I do not know where  
I am heading but I know I am moving towards  
you. Why was there movement against  
movement? What is the definition of anything?  
Can speech tantamount to answer, ever?

What is it about light that it escapes  
experiencing time? If you can see eternity today,  
you're living a life. On the trope of people wanting  
to understand each other, you want to know more.  
I don't. *The world*, you once said, *is made up of only  
two places*,—while your fingers kept spiralling the  
elliptical loci of my nipples. *It is time we began to  
exist in one*, I had laughed. I've been practising  
patience for far too long but only to the extent  
of memory. Hitler was patient, I'm told.  
So must have been the English & the Mughals  
before them. Though, love is more of a  
convenience, like the idea of a threesome until  
you propose to bring *their* best friend into the mix.  
Hello! We recognize only the shapes our mouths  
allow us, the holes proving to be either too many  
or never enough. The most beautiful part of our  
body is not where it is but where it has been.

Imagine the body as a chariot, or a god  
on a chariot. *I have always loved the nights here*, I say.  
Truth, truth, & the no purpose of it. At parties,  
I remained sober. Woke & alert. When alone,  
I passed out drinking. The excess of people,  
their foolishness bored me, & so  
began my swearing, the cursing, sometimes  
leading to even muttering. Can you believe that?  
Pets with their fancy diets. Dresses scanty as  
currency. What used to look like memory,  
now resembles loss.

No word, no thought, no meaning.  
In the beginning, there was the mouth.  
The rest has not mattered.

The other day, in an excuse of stirring  
a conversation with his son, my father  
started telling this story of an atheist protagonist  
from one of his favourite Bengali novels  
(he'd read at 15), who at the end speaks out,  
praying, *If there is God, please, save me!*

My deductions were few: First, at the end of  
what? Second, he had lost me at *If*. He, my father.  
That speculative wound—faith, like narration  
in itself. He missed the point & I dodged a bullet.

Near Kensington Point, Bangalore  
after a beef-steak dinner, you burped & blurted,  
*I am afraid I am not making enough memories.*

Evenings lie and they let us forget. *Who isn't.*

What separates memory from history  
is the motion of my hands running down  
the indentations on your face.

What separates history from truth is our looking  
away from each other when we came.

If there's a place each one of us is meant to  
leave for, then why are we so fond of travelling?

Again, that speculative wound coercing pain  
out of nothing—its only use cheating the body  
for hope. That a city is now crammed  
for two but empty for the rest of the world,

advancing, is grief. That someday, undoubtedly,  
one of us shall return, is also grief.

For the metaphysical poets, everything got  
lost in translation but the body. *Beauty is difficult*,  
said Pound, that fascist bastard.

The most beautiful part of the body is, in fact,  
that it is a body. A difficult organ.

*Now, I am seeing everything*, begins the play,  
*Kaumudi*;—a blind man thirsty of only that  
ancient urge inside all of us called sound.

Someday, I will gather the right words  
& there will be no coming back from music.

## Now That We Survived

The revision of lines.

Green snake and its green  
halo: Valentine.

The growing girth of jujube trees.

Tree frogs on the regurgitating moon.

The stars on the kitchen table as  
we cut a fruit:

Naming the sacred after the manner we destroy them.

Blue noses of rain puddles  
—these good dog  
days; an open well.

The cheerful worms  
in the reticent ground.

Jive religion placing man in this  
universe, somewhere.

Just in the past year, a rotund porcupine, a mongoose.

Cabbage and mustard.  
Vinegar and oil.

The grammatical function of your eyes.

**Siddharth Dasgupta**

## **A Map of Mahatma Gandhi**

### **I—Thursday**

On Mahatma Gandhi Road, I find  
no Gandhi. I find a statue though,  
adulated by pigeons and other flights  
of belonging. I find Parsis, Muslims,  
Hindus, Sikhs, and Catholics. Perhaps  
that's the same thing as finding  
Gandhi.

Ambling across one in a muddle  
of arterial breakaways, over at the  
old Victory, even new films come  
frozen in the art deco filigree of a  
faraway yesterday. 'Cinema, Cinema!'  
a young lad yells, as though whisked  
away via a timeless improbability.  
But mind you, still no Gandhi.

Biscuits imbued with wine and  
cakes birthed through the rich  
fulsomeness of thickened milk make  
for an extravagant breakfast, agreed,  
but this is Poona and this is Kayani,  
and some things go together as  
though sewn through providence.  
Savouring the crumbliness of heritage,  
the thought lingers still: *Kabaan*  
*hai Gandhi?*

The shoeshine man near the signal  
on Sachapir has old Hindi film songs  
on his mind. He hums, mindlessly,  
something about a head masseuse

having the answer to life's ills—be  
it swirling head or sinking heart.  
I listen, I peer, this street and its  
elect phrases. But yeah, no Gandhi.

A sip of chai, and the world tastes  
better. This guy's thela has seen  
better days; I'm sure, so has he.  
I scan its battered paint and sunken  
eyes, coming upon the line: "Chai,  
kaafee, drinks, and snack" (singular).  
"Aakash Gandhi Tea Empire".

Ah.

## II—Friday

I sift through the past like  
a conman shuffling a favoured  
deck, these names I've known  
since I was a child, having  
memorised them as one does  
Ghalib, or wisps of fleeing Hafez:  
Boocha Traders; Chandan Stores;  
Raymond (the first shop,  
as worn as a favourite coat);  
Royal Café; Persian Bakery  
(with its smiling old proprietor  
and forever dour descendant);  
The Bombay Store; Elegant  
Tie Shop (wedged beside  
a mosque, if you required  
proof of the elegance);  
Karachi Sweets (not anti-  
national, just sweet);  
Needlewoman (name, not  
a suggestion); Furtado  
(with its guitar tuned  
to notes of blue); and so  
many others, cumulatively  
unspooling like yarns  
of ghazal. It's as much  
poetry as this sequencing  
of religion, carefully mapped  
and plotted within a quadrant  
of sky—Burhani Masjid  
fluttering into the paeans  
flowering from the Hanuman  
Mandir, their dalliances  
bisected by Gurudwara Road;  
this fable framed edge-to-edge  
by the stoic belief of the  
Ohel David Synagogue  
and the fiery stillnesses

of Komra Agiary; each  
prayer jiving to the chimes  
escaping the throat  
of St. Mary's Church.  
And what's left to tell you  
but that here, a skip removed  
at Bishop's Catholic,  
is where I learnt to let go  
of books. I needed no  
lessons or lectures for my  
tryst with Gandhi.  
I had my imagination.  
And I had this city.

### III—A Ghazal for Gandhi

You store dreams. You memorise hope. You savour the élan of fragrant azaadi.  
Between Mahatma Gandhi Road and East Street, the mehek of this abundant azaadi.

From the balcony at Marz-o-Rin, the world seems stilled in a faraway dream.  
A nineteen fifty of sandwiches and coffees, wrapped in the lure of ancient azaadi.

Bakeries and cafés—both Irani and Parsi—reminisce over forgotten fruit.  
Because what is resurrection if not the remnants of a delectably abandoned azaadi?

A homeland fled, over famine and faith. A homeland birthed, in truth and tears.  
I pore over words like tolerance and oneness. Dil par kuch to kar rehmat, azaadi.

The sweet surrender of baked manna, within the early morning flutter at Kayani.  
I pluck memories from childhood, a time dissolved, lush this haven. Azaadi.

This could only be an Indian fable, this cornucopia of faiths and amalgamations.  
Biting into bread first birthed in Pars, I meditate on flux. Patience, patience, azaadi.

The day is yet to stir, within this Camp Quarter of aromas and deliverances.  
Love smells sweeter in spring. And chai tastes better at dawn. Thus migrant, azaadi.

Over at Dorabjee, Darius stirs his staff towards dhansak that dances on tongues.  
Over a century counts for something. It's myth. It's legacy. It's pure fragrant azaadi.

I suspect this is what Gandhi had meant all along, this mélange of spice and soul.  
Yezdan ki mehfil. This land, its mitti. I abide by my trysts. Heed this claimant, azaadi.

In early hours, ghazal blossoms. A cantonment arouses its slumbering splendours.  
The fires have been lit. Hearts will leap. With Siddharth the riotous, vagrant azaadi.

## Aranya

### The work of living sits on the skin of my scrolling digit

- half a found poem

Even my dreams are harvests  
of eyes hemmed open.  
The news fortifies into backbone.

*In Jabangirpuri, bulldozers leave trail of despair: 'What have they proved with this?'*  
*Ranchi violence: 'Mob assaulted us after asking our names'*  
*'Is My Existence a Disturbance?': Disabled Woman Denied Entry by Restaurant*

Vertebrae click into place  
as the country sways,  
forehead red with godstain,

an immortal cyborg bred  
by the insomnia of its prey.

*How Much More Polluted Did the Ganga Get Because of Bodies in the River?*  
*Communal anarchy sweeping the country paints a dark future for India*

I stitch the feed into a quilt, each panel, a scar.  
I heave a sigh, for all their sighs,  
the eyes that keep vigil,  
so that I don't dream, as I find sleep.

## Zufishan Rahman

### Hari stands at his *dwar*

Dada spoke seven languages. I have debris of two and full three.  
*And yet we can't wake someone who is pretending to be asleep.*<sup>1</sup>

We eat the palaver of debaters in our dinner. In the walk after meal,  
tongue of denial in my land shrieks loud to erode the oppressed's weep.

The history major asks me not to loathe the bloody man's grisly deed,  
The presage is that—from a dreadful epoch a sanguine river seeps.

Their glasses of water detest the saliva foam behind your teeth,  
And your breath abandoned you too singing the country's song in a heap.

The 'lovers' of *Bharat Ma* barged inside her heart two years back in February,  
burnt homes like a stubble. Today, a harvest of rioters the king reaps.

I take it mother, I limited my love in lines of my last name from this eve,  
They made me a headless man. I wish my head on your lap I could keep.

Nymphs sanctify themselves sacrificing meek beasts in the mountain's slit,  
*Hari* stands at his *dwar*, seeking a true lover among the infidels who creep.

The guardian angels—impenitent—emptying barrels in air—on thirteen leaves,  
The twins who head out as sucklings, go back to the womb but six feet deep.

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<sup>1</sup> Ancient Navajo proverb

## Shahidul Zahir

### The Thorn

It was learnt that the people of Ghost Lane went through a prolonged crisis; after Bangladesh became independent, during the 1980s, the second period of military rule commenced, and around this time, when Abdul Ali pulled down his old hair cutting salon located at the precise spot in the western end of Ghost Lane where it trifurcates and goes towards Twin Bridge Lane, Padmanidhi Lane and Rankin Street, and replaced it with a new and modern one and gave it the name “Your Choice Saloon”, people from Rankin Street and Bonogram to Twin Bridge Lane, and from Padmanidhi Lane, Shahsaheb Lane and Narinda arrived at Abdul Ali’s new salon to get a haircut, and they then learnt about this problem of the people of Ghost Lane. Subsequently, the people of all these mohallas said that the people of Vojohori Saha Street, i.e. Ghost Lane, suspected that they were caught in a kind of time warp. Because one day then, when, with spades in hand, they dug the earth to seal of a well inside the compound of Abdul Aziz Byapari’s house, they discovered that the framework of time had broken down as far as their lives were concerned, and that the present had entered the past, or that the past had become attached to the present. In that state of bewilderment, they carried out the task of digging up earth and filling the well, because they thought that if they didn’t do it, Abdul Aziz Byapari’s new tenant, Subodhchandra, would fall into this well in the past, the present, or the future. The people of the nearby mohallas learnt about this dilemma of the Ghost Lane folk relating to Subodhchandra when they had a haircut or a shave at “Your Choice Saloon”, and they said that the day a tenant arrived at Abdul Aziz Byapari’s house, the people of Ghost Lane heard about it and after that when they became aware that the tenant’s name was Subodhchandra Das and his wife’s Swapna, they then said that they already knew this; because they had realised from their experience that the wives of Subodhchandras were always named Swapna. Towards the end of the nineteen eighties, the people of Bhojohori Saha Street, or Ghost Lane, had been severely oppressed by a heatwave and the foul stench of rotting animal and bird carcasses, and they had been extremely perturbed to hear about the arrival of Subodh and Swapna in the mohalla; they were annoyed too, because with the arrival of Subodh and Swapna a kind of helplessness and sense of guilt arose within their

busy and disorderly lives. Unsettled by the heat and the foul stench, they spat and exclaimed, 'Where does this bastard keep returning from!'

The mohalla folk then hoped that this was some other Subodh, and some other Swapna, but that hope was soon doused. They found out that those in the mohalla who went to meet Subodh and Swapna didn't really recognise them, but even though they felt relieved then, it was as if they knew the fact of the matter in their heart of hearts; they sipped the tea prepared by Swapna Rani and stared at Subodhchandra's face and asked him, 'Why did you come as a tenant to this house?' The people of Ghost Lane contend that when the dark-skinned and gaunt Subodhchandra heard that, he was silent, and his wife's dark-skinned yet radiant face turned pale, they perhaps thought that the people of the mohalla didn't like them. Observing their crestfallen faces, these mohalla folk turned silent, and after that they asked, 'Isn't Poran your brother?' Aziz Byapari's new tenant, Subodhchandra, was astonished to hear them say that, and he felt ill-at-ease; when he nodded his head gently and admitted that he had a younger brother by the name of Poran, who lived in a village near Sirajganj town, it then occurred to the people sitting in front of him with tea-cups in their hands that they weren't surprised, and then when those in the mohalla who were middle-aged or elderly heard about this, they said that they already knew about the matter, because Subodh's younger brother's name was always Poran. When the people of the mohalla heard all this, a kind of anxiety was noticeable in their demeanour, and when they remembered that even after piped water arrived at the mohalla the well inside the compound of Abdul Aziz Byapari's house continued to exist like before, their anxiety turned into fear and some of them remarked to Aziz Byapari one day, 'Subodhchandra's come to your house once again as a tenant!'

'So what can I do?'

'The bloody chap's wife's name is also bloody Swapna!'

'Yes.'

'Do you know his younger brother's name?'

'No.'

'Poran.'

‘Is that so!’

‘You still have your well, let’s hope this fucker doesn’t fall into the well now!’

‘Oh, don’t worry.’

The mohalla folk couldn’t feel assured by Aziz Byapari’s words, because they couldn’t forget that many years ago, deceived by these very assurances on the part of Aziz Byapari, they had carried out the most shameful and despicable act of their lives. They could not remember clearly now which year it was when they learnt one day that a new tenant had arrived in Abdul Aziz Byapari’s house, and that this tenant’s name was Subodhchandra, and with him was his wife, Swapna. They then went to Aziz Byapari’s house to enquire about the matter, and these mohalla folk had the tea and nimokpara prepared by Swapna, and they observed that a tulsi sapling had been planted beside the courtyard wall of Aziz Byapari’s house, in a slightly isolated spot, and they surmised that it was Subodhchandra’s wife who had done this. That day, the mohalla folk had felt terribly upset as they gazed at this tulsi sapling, and when they remarked to Aziz Byapari that they hoped Subodhchandra and his wife didn’t fall into the well again, Aziz Byapari had then replied, ‘Oh, don’t worry’, and the people of the mohalla had been deceived by this assurance of his, and subsequently they said that, as a result of this, during the Liberation War, that incident in their lives happened. The people of the mohalla remembered that in the month of March in 1971, when the situation in the country turned grave, among all of them it was Aziz Byapari’s tenant, Subodhchandra, who became most perturbed, and when he thought to send his wife to her village house in Satkhira, the mohalla folk realised how apprehensive he was; but they then simultaneously remembered the nimokpara and tea prepared by the dusky, sweet-natured Swapna, they couldn’t forget about having had all that, and so they wanted to assure them, and said, ‘Aren’t we there, are we dead or what!’ But on the Friday morning, the day after having stayed awake all through the night of the twenty-fifth of March, amidst the shelling by the Pakistani Army, when the western sky turned red with the blazing flames of the fire engulfing Nayabazar, the people of Ghost Lane had no clue about whether they themselves would survive! Yet, even in that predicament, they subsequently remembered, they had been worried about Subodhchandra and his wife, and two days later when many people in the mohalla, including Aziz Byapari, fled to Jinjira, they took Subodhchandra and his wife along, and after that when they returned to the mohalla following the sudden military counter-operation on Jinjira, Subodh and Swapna too returned with them.

Subodhchandra then had no option but to remain in this mohalla, because he had neither any place to flee to, nor the time, since his village house was very far away, and he had felt strengthened by the assurances of the people of Ghost Lane; in fact, like the mohalla folk, he too had been deluded, and hadn't realised that after the twenty-fifth of March in 1971, even the Muslims of the mohalla were uncertain about whether they could protect themselves. When the people of the mohalla returned from Jinjira and encountered Subodhchandra, then, despite their own state of acute insecurity, they looked at his haggard face and enquired, 'Are you doing well?' But no one in the mohalla was doing well then, and when Subodhchandra heard them and smiled cheerlessly, the mohalla folk realised their mistake, and they said, 'Why are you afraid? Whatever happens to us will happen to you; if we survive, so will you.' At that time, although the people of the mohalla couldn't remember how many days later that was, but only after having gradually become accustomed to the terror did they realise how disoriented they had been at the time; because some time during that period their wives told them that Subodhchandra's wife had wiped off the sindoor on her forehead and removed the conch-shell bangles from her wrists, and that the two of them were memorising the kalema; when they heard that, it seemed to them that they had returned to their senses, and they could remember that on the twenty-seventh of March, while curfew was on, when they slunk through lanes and alleys and reached Sowarighat and crossed the river, the only Hindus with them then were Subodhchandra and his wife, Swapna. And they remembered that Swapna did not have sindoor on her forehead or the conch-shell bangles on her wrists, but at that moment, it seems they didn't notice that; later, after hearing about this from their wives, they recalled it, and they felt a kind of shame then, and they became dejected. Then, when they themselves were unable to ensure their own safety, they went to Subodhchandra's premises in Abdul Aziz Byapari's house and fell silent as they gazed at Swapna's face, and then for the third time they said, 'Don't be afraid, there's no point being afraid, after all we're there!' But the people of the mohalla later realised that they had been entirely wrong. Subsequently, the mohalla folk gradually remembered all this and their hearts were bestrewn with shame, because they could not forget that not only had they failed to protect Subodhchandra and his wife even after all the assurances, in truth they had abandoned them. The people of the mohalla remembered that until moments before this final incident occurred they had repeatedly emboldened Subodhchandra and his wife, and the mohalla folk once again failed to remember exactly when, but they recalled that with the situation turning even more dire and survival more uncertain after Moulana Abubakr from their adjacent mohalla became Chairman of the Peace Committee and the razakars

arrived, they once again heard from their wives about Subodhchandra and Swapna Rani reciting the kalema, and they again landed up at the premises of Subodhchandra and Swapna in Aziz Byapari's house. The people of the mohalla later said that after entering their premises that day, they found Subodhchandra lying on his back with his eyes shut; they then observed his wife, Swapna Rani Das, slouching as she read a book near the cot, sitting on a low wicker stool. Seeing the people of the mohalla, Subodhchandra sat up and Swapna shut her book, and then seeing the title of the book, "Namaz Made Easy", the mohalla folk realised that their wives weren't wrong; they then gazed at the silent husband and wife duo and observed sadness in their faces and they didn't know how to begin a conversation; they too were then immersed silently in the sadness of Subodhchandra and Swapna, and after that they said, 'What's happened to you?'

'No, nothing's happened!'

'Why did you buy this book?'

'Oh, I'm just flipping through it.'

'Are you memorising the kalema?'

'Yes.'

'Let's see if you can tell me how many kalemats there are.'

'Four.'

'Let's hear you recite the Kalema Taiyeba.'

Hearing the mohalla folk say that, it seemed Subodhchandra and his wife became upset; in the dim light of that small room, they raised their melancholy faces and stared in silence at the mohalla folk, and then the mohalla folk realised their error and became perturbed; they then thought that they could no longer say, 'After all, we're there'; in that situation, they said, 'Allah's our hope.' The people of the mohalla saw at that time that even learning the kalema failed to suffice for Subodhchandra; soldiers entered the mohalla one day and as terror and panic swept through the entire mohalla, Subodhchandra and his wife were killed that day. The people of the mohalla couldn't get over their mortification over the incident, and after the Liberation War, when a general amnesty was declared,

Moulana Abubakr and his razakar disciples returned to this locality and the people of Ghost Lane found out that Moulana Abubakr had said that Subodhchandra and his wife died because of the unnecessary panic and stupidity of the people of Ghost Lane. Moulana Abubakr held that after all the Hindus left their homes and fled from various mohallas of Dhaka, for the sake of publishing a picture in the newspapers, the Pakistani army was looking for a Hindu, but they weren't able to find one; he then learnt about that, and he recalled that he had heard that there was a Hindu family in Ghost Lane. He contended that army men arrived at Ghost Lane twice to look for Subodhchandra for that reason, but the stupid folk of Ghost Lane hid Subodhchandra and his wife the first time, and the next time they pushed them into the well, and thus killing them. In silence, the people of Ghost Lane heard about what Moulana Abubakr said, and it wasn't very difficult for them to deduce why he said all that; they asserted that no one had forgotten about 1971, Moulana Abubakr hadn't forgotten about the people of the mohalla, just as the people of the mohalla hadn't forgotten the specifics of his conduct. The mohalla folk retorted, 'The son of a swine is telling lies', but at the same time they couldn't get over the incident of throwing Subodhchandra into the well. Subsequently, they couldn't clearly remember the exact date, but they said that soldiers arrived for the first time at Ghost Lane in May or June, but since the people knew that the army could show up at any moment, on any day, they were prepared for that. That day, on getting the news of the soldiers' arrival, they put up green flags with the white crescent moon and star on their roofs and waited, and right then those whose houses abutted the main road heard the sound of heavy boots, and those among them who peeped out saw Pakistani soldiers in khaki uniforms with Chinese rifles on their shoulders, accompanied by the long-robed Moulana Abubakr of the nearby locality of South Moishundi. The soldiers tramped through the mohalla silently that day, without saying anything to anyone, and later the mohalla folk said that there was a young Pathan lieutenant with the soldiers, and upon entering the mohalla he was overjoyed to see green flags flying from the roofs of all the houses, and he exclaimed to the robed Moulana Abubakr, '*Yeh log toh sab Pakistani hain*. All these people are Pakistanis.' Moulana Abubakr knew that the Pakistani army officer was wrong, but owing to the language barrier, it was not possible for him to explain to the Pathan lieutenant the complicated matter of why despite hoisting the flag of Pakistan the people of Ghost Lane were not Pakistanis, and so he walked along in silence with the Pakistani soldiers with a sense of despondency. The people of the mohalla say that Moulana Abubakr then explained to him that all these people were Hindu, he said, '*Yeh sab Hindu hai*. All of them are Hindu' The Pathan lieutenant returned to his senses when he heard that, and the Pakistani soldiers went and banged on

the door of the house on No. 64. Hearing the sound of military boots and banging at his door, the owner of the house, Haji Mohammad Abdul Karim opened the door and stood at the doorway, and the people of the mohalla say that Moulana Abubakr then faced another kind of dilemma, because when the Pakistani lieutenant observed the white beard of Haji Karim, who was clad in a white punjabi and had a skull cap on, he fell into confusion once again and asked, '*Yeh aadmi Hindu hai?* Is this man a Hindu?' Moulana Abubakr was then able to explain in his broken Urdu mixed with Bangla that not all of them were Hindu, but he was certain that there were Hindus in this mohalla. After that, the people of the mohalla were tested in regard to their religious identity; the soldiers lined up the forty-one adult males of Ghost Lane on the main road, and observed that all of them had skull caps on their heads; the people of the mohalla later said that Subodhchandra was also standing in that line wearing a white cap, and that day his having memorised the kalema worked. The Pakistani soldiers made the men recite the kalema one by one and then let them go, Subodhchandra too passed the test successfully and returned to his silent and terrified wife at home, and after that when no one remained on the main road, the Pathan lieutenant turned furious and Moulana Abubakr fell into confusion, because he had learnt that there was definitely a Hindu in this mohalla; he gazed silently at the lieutenant's livid face. That day, the Pakistani soldiers left the mohalla after that. The people of the mohalla later said that after the soldiers left the first time they thought that they had survived, but this notion of theirs was wrong, because they later saw for themselves that there was no way of surviving in this country in 1971, and then on the day the soldiers arrived again in the mohalla, they threw Subodhchandra into the well, but they were unable to protect themselves either, and they bore this shame all their lives. The people of the mohalla say that although the Pakistani lieutenant was befooled hearing the kalema recitations, Moulana Abubakr continued to be suspicious, and on account of not being able to identify the Hindu family among all the others in Ghost Lane, he was left with a kind of unease as well as a sense of anger against the people of Ghost Lane. But because the situation in the country was changing rapidly, circumstances became very complicated for Moulana Abubakr; the people of the mohalla then heard the name of the Mukti Bahini, or Bangladesh Liberation Forces, for the first time, and learnt that five youths from the mohalla had joined the Mukti Bahini. When Moulana Abubakr heard about this, he forgot about finding a Hindu person, and instead he sent his razakars to identify the five families, whose boys had joined the Mukti Bahini. So one Thursday evening, four razakars, wearing khaki uniforms and canvas shoes, marched through Ghost Lane, to the accompaniment of their 'Left, right ...' call, and the people of the mohalla say

that these razakars had no clue about how they would find out about the freedom fighters in this country where they were surrounded by enemies. After marching through the mohalla for a long while, they banged on three doors, and when the people in each of those houses opened the door and stood at the doorway, the razakars asked them about the freedom fighters, and when the residents said that they knew nothing in that regard, the razakars became dejected and presented themselves before Moulana Abubakr with crestfallen faces. That day, as Moulana Abubakr gazed at the razakars who were silently awaiting his instructions, he understood the matter, and growled in a low voice, 'Couldn't you find them?' And hearing him, the razakars standing in his courtyard shook their heads.

'Whom did you ask?'

'We asked in three houses.'

'What did you ask? Whether they knew who the freedom fighters were?'

When the razakars were silent, Moulana Abubakr swore at them, 'Idiots, is that how you get information? Stupid goats!' And the mohalla folk say that the same night they learnt that razakars had come to the mohalla to find out about the freedom fighters, and they became perturbed about that. They say that seeing the razakars marching, left, right, once again the next day, with lathis in their hands, they locked the gates outside their residences and sat inside in silence; but they say that the razakars fell into another trap that day. Because they had been snubbed by Moulana Abubakr, this time the razakars didn't knock on anyone's door and instead walked up and down the lane, and kept an eye on the one or two people who came out onto the street. The people of the mohalla later said that this time, by trying to be too clever, the razakars fell victim to a new blunder; that day, like seasoned detectives they observed the people walking along the street, but they couldn't pick on any one, and that was when Kulsum, a young maidservant, emerged from the house on No. 38 and went towards the provisions store. When she was returning from the store after making her purchases, she spotted the razakars loitering near the mohalla's mosque, and the razakars too spotted her; the people of the mohalla say that this encounter invited disaster. They say that, on account of being a maidservant, Kulsum was a somewhat independent woman, and she was of an age at which she was bubbly and flirty, and so she failed to recognise the inner desire of men, or the razakars, and she began engaging playfully with the razakars, and as a result, the first person to be killed in Ghost Lane during the Liberation War in 1971 was the vivacious,

young, ever-giggling maidservant, Kulsum, who worked in the house of Ali Akbar Miya in No. 38. The people of the mohalla say that Kulsum went and stood near the mosque, right in front of the razakars, with one hand on her hips, and exclaimed loudly, 'Why do you do so much of "left-right", don't you get fed up?' Hearing that, the razakars halted; more than her fresh body, it was the inner warmth within the liquefaction of her voice that startled them; and it occurred to their commander, Abdul Jabbar, who carried a .303 rifle on his shoulder, that they had finally found the key person in this unfriendly mohalla, so they surrounded Kulsum and asked her, 'What's your name?'

'Kulsum.'

The razakars then called Kulsum to a shaded, somewhat concealed spot beside the mosque, and enquired, 'Where do you work?'

'Right here, in Ali Akbar's house, why?'

The people of the mohalla say that till this point in the conversation with the razakars, notwithstanding Kulsum's unnecessary giggling, everything seemed normal, but they say that just after this she went the wrong way, and although there was a rifle on one man's shoulder, she forgot that these people weren't just men, they were razakars too, and that even if she could play with men, it was dangerous to play with razakars. The people of the mohalla, who later heard about all this, say that when Kulsum's giggles ceased, Abdul Jabbar said in a grave yet soft and quiet voice, 'Do you know about the Mukti Bahini?'

Hearing that, mischief entered the mind of this uneducated, immature and somewhat independent woman, she effaced her skittish manner and stared at him gravely, and she replied, 'I've heard the name!'

'How many people from this mohalla are in it?'

'I know the names of two people.'

'Who? Who?'

The people of the mohalla say that a coy snigger once again bloomed on Kulsum's face, and biting a corner of her anchal with her teeth she replied, 'I've heard that Rahim Bux's son, Sohrab, joined the Mukti Bahini, that's the house

next to the house next to that of the family of seven brothers, and Zahiruddin's son Ajmal, from the lane behind the temple, also joined.' The people of the mohalla say that after releasing Kulsum that day, the razakars rushed back to Moulana Abubakr, and after he heard the details, a hint of a smile spread over his face, he raised his right arm upwards and waved it a bit and muttered to himself, 'I've got you!' After that, following that day's Jumma prayers, in the afternoon, he sent the razakars to fetch Zahiruddin and Rahim Bux. The mohalla folk learnt about everything later, and they say that when the razakars entered No. 25, behind the temple, in search of Zahiruddin, the people in the house said, 'But he's not at home, he's gone out.' Hearing that, the razakars remained silent, and after that, when Zahiruddin returned, they asked him to meet Moulana Abubakr and exited the house, and then went to Rahim Bux's place. The people of the mohalla say that when Rahim Bux opened the door and stood at the doorway, seeing the greying hair on his head and his bulging paunch, the razakars thought that they had apprehended the correct person, and they said, 'Moulana Abubakr is calling you.'

'Why?'

'I can't tell you why, he's called you, that's all.'

When Rahim Bux arrived at Moulana Abubakr's house, he was sitting on a chair in the verandah outside, waiting for him, and seeing Rahim Bux entering his compound with the razakars, he stood up and asked Rahim Bux, who was encircled by the razakars, 'What's your name again?'

'Rahim Bux. Did you call me?'

The people of the mohalla say that Moulana Abubakr began to enjoy the matter, and so he decided not to reply directly to Rahim Bux's query but to catch him like an angler who toys with a fish before reeling it in, but he was floored right at the outset because when he asked, 'How many children do you have?', Rahim Bux replied, 'Allah didn't grant me any.'

'What did you say, I couldn't follow you!'

'I don't have any children, Allah didn't grant me any, why do you ask?'

The people of the mohalla recount that Moulana Abubakr and his band of razakars were terribly embarrassed by Rahim Bux's reply, but despite that they couldn't figure out the entire mould of the wily Kulsum's mischief until they met Zahiruddin. After detaining Rahim Bux for some more time, Moulana Abubakr let him go, and then gazing at the razakars standing with glum faces in the courtyard of his house, he restrained his anger and said quietly, 'Goats! Idiots!' After having stood there, downcast, when it occurred to the razakars that this elderly man by the name of Rahim Bux might be a cunning fellow and may have been lying, their disgrace reached its zenith, because they saw a teenage boy entering Moulana Abubakr's compound. The boy went up to Moulana Abubakr, who was standing in the verandah, and asked, 'I heard you called me?'

The people of the mohalla say that this time Moulana Abubakr guessed the matter at the outset; he stared at the dark-skinned boy and asked him, 'What's your name?'

'Zahiruddin.'

At this juncture, Moulana Abubakr got the joke intended through the whole affair. He asked Zahiruddin, 'Who's Ajmal?'

'I can't tell you, I don't know him.'

'Be off.'

After Zahiruddin left, Moulana Abubakr once again turned towards the razakars standing silently in his compound, and controlling his rage and agitation, he said, 'Bloody goats, hold your ears!' The razakars, who were in a state of profound confusion, then thought that they couldn't understand what Moulana Abubakr meant, and when they continued standing silently with cheerless faces, Moulana Abubakr realised that he was faced not only with the penchant of the people of Ghost Lane to play jokes, but also the crisis of his razakars not heeding his instructions. The people of the mohalla say that those who peeped into Moulana Abubakr's compound then saw Moulana Abubakr standing on the verandah facing the razakars, and they saw that after remaining silent for a while, he raised his right hand and flailed it animatedly in the air and screamed out, 'Hold your ears! Hold your ears!', and seeing him exploding suddenly like this, the razakars standing in the courtyard were terrified, they shook momentarily and then they put the lathis in their hands on the ground and stood holding their ears with their

hands. The people of the mohalla say that Moulana Abubakr regained his composure when he saw the razakars standing holding their ears, and leaving them standing there like that he went inside the house and fell asleep, and in the evening, after he woke up, he went outside and saw the razakars still standing in the courtyard, holding their ears. The people of the mohalla say that on observing such an impact of his orders on the razakars, the matter got to Moulana Abubakr's head, he didn't let the razakars off even then. He continued to enjoy the affair; sitting in the verandah in front of the razakars holding their ears, he sipped tea luxuriously and let the evening roll along, and after that when it was dusk and the azaan for the Magrib prayers sounded, he declared, 'Go, go and say your prayers now.' That evening, the razakars put their hands down from their ears and instead of going to the mosque they went to Ali Akbar's house, knocked on the door and waited outside. When the door was opened, they were very courteous and enquired about where Kulsum was. When the people in the house asked what business they had with Kulsum, they mumbled something and that was when Kulsum, who was inside, learnt about the arrival of the razakars; she then bit a corner of her anchal with her teeth and giggled, and got into the mood for mischief, so she muttered, 'Have the bullocks come again looking for freedom fighters or what?' and after saying so, when she wound her anchal on her waist and came and stood in front of the door, and in the semi-darkness of dusk, squinted at them and sniggered and asked, 'Why are you going "Kulsum, Kulsum"?', then, without uttering a single word, the commander of the razakars, Abdul Jabbar, raised his rifle and from a distance of three feet he fired at Kulsum's chest, and the people of the mohalla say that when Kulsum's dead body was lifted up from near the door at the entrance of Ali Akbar's house, the mischievous smile was still lingering on her lips. The people of the mohalla say that the vague sense of fear they harboured regarding the Pakistani soldiers and the razakars became distinct and tangible after the murder of Kulsum, and even amidst their own sense of insecurity, they were constantly anxious about Subodhchandra and his wife, because they knew in their heart of hearts that even though Moulana Abubakr had been deceived by the recitation of the kalema the first time, he would definitely try once again when he got the opportunity. After Kulsum's death, catching the freedom fighters assumed greater importance for Moulana Abubakr, but the people of the mohalla say that his fate was already sealed; instead of the freedom fighters, it was Subodhchandra who was apprehended, and as a result of that the most shameful incident in the lives of the mohalla folk occurred. They recall that it was probably a Friday that day too, because at the time the incident took place, everyone had skull caps on their heads; that day, after the Jumma prayers, eleven people went to Subodhchandra's

premises in Abdul Aziz Byapari's house, and sitting in a room inside Aziz Byapari's house they discussed whether Subodhchandra and his wife could be sent somewhere else, and then that day, Moulana Abubakr arrived at the mohalla with soldiers. The Pakistani soldiers cordoned off the street, but after conducting a search they were unable to find out who went from which house to join the Liberation War. When the people gathered at Aziz Byapari's house got the news of the arrival of the soldiers, at first they tried to flee, but when they saw that the soldiers were standing on the street with their rifles at the ready, they returned to the room in Abdul Aziz Byapari's house and began reciting the Milad Sharif and donning a cap on his head, Subodhchandra joined this group. When the Pakistani soldiers arrived at Aziz Byapari's house, accompanied by Moulana Abubakr, they found a group of people performing Milad in a large room in Aziz Byapari's house. The men standing there with skull caps on their heads kept on chanting 'Ya Nabi Salamalaika', and when even after waiting with rifles in their hands for half an hour the chanting didn't cease, the Pakistani soldiers berated them and made them stop. By then Moulana Abubakr had realised that the information about the freedom fighters could not be obtained so simply, and he remembered something from the past, because upon entering Aziz Byapari's residence, his probing eyes spotted a tulsi plant beside a wall and it occurred to him that the person they were looking for lived here, and so as he gazed at the men with caps on their heads standing silently, and declared, 'There's a Hindu among you lot!' The people of the mohalla say that at first they didn't want to admit that to Moulana Abubakr, and so they retorted, 'What are you saying, do Hindus perform Milad?', but then when Moulana Abubakr wanted to know who worshipped the tulsi plant, they remembered the tulsi planted by Subodhchandra's wife, Swapna, and they realised that after she broke the conch-shell bangles on her wrists and wiped off the sindoor from her forehead, they had probably forgotten about this plant; but still, these people from the mohalla made a final attempt then, and said that the tulsi plant had probably sprouted up by itself, but Moulana Abubakr didn't believe that. That day, when Subodhchandra could not be identified from among the people of the mohalla, the Pakistani soldiers lined up the twelve men, including Subodhchandra, beside the well in the compound of Aziz Byapari's house, and the mohalla folk subsequently reported that his fate was already sealed as Subodhchandra was standing at the very end of the line, grazing the side of the well. After that, when the Pakistani army captain demanded, '*Kalema bolo*, recite the kalema', all of them recited the Kalema Taiyaba, one by one, but that day Moulana Abubakr was prepared to see the matter through to the end, and after he spoke with the Pakistani army captain, two soldiers moved forward, with their rifles drawn, and

ordered the first man on the line, '*Lungi utbao*, lift up your lungi', and then the other men from the mohalla who were standing in the line saw the white-bearded Idris Miya from the house on No. 18 hesitate for a while and then lift his lungi up high and expose his circumcised penis in the bright light of day, thus proving his identity, and the people of the mohalla say that they then observed tears streaming from Idris Miya's eyes, and running down his white beard. After that the men standing in line lifted up their lungis, one by one, and exposed themselves that day, and the people of the mohalla say that even as this was going on, they were alarmed that Subodhchandra would definitely get caught now, and if he was caught then so would they be. That was when, although the mohalla folk couldn't say how many men had lifted up their lungis before that, one person in the line, probably the man standing beside Subodhchandra, grabbed him, pushed him over the low headwall of the well and threw him in. Because it happened so suddenly, after having been momentarily startled, the two rifle-bearing soldiers panicked and fired, and three people were shot to death at Aziz Byapari's wellside that day, while Subodhchandra drowned in the well. The people of Ghost Lane could not forget that it was they who threw Subodhchandra into the well in 1971. The people of the mohalla were confounded that day, they departed from Aziz Byapari's house with three dead bodies, and perhaps their grief and shock was so dire that they forgot all about Subodhchandra who had fallen into the well, and they later admitted that this was a fatal mistake. That evening they performed the ritual bathing of the dead bodies, conducted the funeral prayers and took them to the Azimpur burial ground where the bodies were interred, and then they returned to their respective homes, and that was when the people of the mohalla remembered that Subodhchandra's body was still left in the well, so they again rushed to Abdul Aziz Byapari's house and they discovered that Swapna was not in her room, and the hitherto concealed white conch-shell bangles lay in a broken state on her bed, and on top of that was an open sindoor box, upturned; the people of the mohalla then became alarmed, and after a hook attached to a rope was lowered into the well, they drew up the pair of dead bodies of the couple. That day, the mohalla folk felt dejected, endangered and upset when they confronted the dead couple, and after that, in the midst of various preoccupations, the people of the mohalla completely forgot about Subodhchandra, until a person from Satkhira arrived looking for him. The people of the mohalla say that one or two months after the country attained independence, on a Tuesday or a Wednesday, a person arrived at Ghost Lane and went and stood in front of Abdul Aziz Byapari's house, and Aziz Byapari opened the door and saw the person waiting there, and the people of the mohalla learnt that a person had come looking for Subodhchandra; they then remembered

Subodhchandra and Swapna Rani, and a vague sense of shame returned to their consciousness; then those among them who went to Aziz Byapari's house saw him sitting in front of a silent young man in the same room where they remembered having eaten nimokpara earlier; on the bed in front of him was a folded shawl, and on top of the shawl lay the pieces of the broken conch-shell bangles, smeared with sindoor. The people of the mohalla say that after sitting in silence for a long time, he placed the pieces of the conch-shell bangles in the palm of his right hand and shook it, as if he was examining it, or perhaps he was doing it just like that, and after that he took out his handkerchief, wrapped the pieces in that and put it into his shirt pocket; the people from the mohalla who were standing there then were silent, and after a long time they asked, 'What's your name?' The people of the mohalla later said that when they heard the answer to this question, it had occurred to them that actually they already knew the answer; they say that upon hearing their query, the man turned to them, and they could not discern what they saw in his eyes; perhaps they didn't observe any emotion at all in his gaze, perhaps there was no melancholy, grief, anger, or hate in the gaze, and they say that his impassivity triggered the return of their inner sense of shame, and when they were almost reduced to helplessness, the man said that his name was Poranchandra Das.

The elderly folk of Ghost Lane could remember that seven years earlier, Subodhchandra once again fell into the well and they could not be certain about the circumstances behind that. At that time, there were reports of riots taking place in some localities in the city of Dhaka, and the people of the mohalla learnt one day that the tenant, Subodhchandra, residing in Aziz Byapari's house in No. 36, and his wife, Swapna, fell into the well and drowned, and they say that at first they thought that perhaps Subodhchandra and his wife had been murdered; but later they heard in the mohalla that it had been an accident, that Subodhchandra and his comely, dark-skinned wife had fallen into the water while trying to reach out and touch the reflection of the full moon in the well. They heard that one night during the rainy season, because Subodhchandra's wife wasn't being able to sleep, she left the room and went and stood in the open at the wellside; because it had been raining continuously, the water level in the well had risen a lot then, and there was a full moon in the sky that night. The people in the mohalla heard that at some point during that night, Subodhchandra joined his wife at the wellside, and they sat on the paved headwall of the well and chatted; and perhaps on account of their their youthfulness and nature's joyous unveiling, they were roused to passion. Looking then into the water in the well, which was almost within touching distance, Swapna saw the reflection of the moon, looking like a

round, golden platter submerged in the water. The people of the mohalla say that when Swapna gazed at this reflection in the well and exclaimed, 'Shall I touch it', Subodhchandra then responded, 'Touch it', and they learnt that the accident happened just after that. The mohalla folk could not find out what time at night the accident occurred, and who witnessed it, or who heard the conversation between Subodhchandra and Swapna, but they learnt that when Subodhchandra's wife sat on the headwall that night, the water level was actually not as high as she thought it to be; when she leaned down, extended her arm and tried to touch the surface of the water, her hand couldn't reach the water and it dangled in the air without support, and she lost her balance and fell headlong into the water. Although Subodhchandra was nearby then, because it all happened so suddenly, he couldn't prevent her fall, but he returned to his senses after that, and tucking his lungi between his legs like a loincloth, he jumped into the well to save his wife, and as a result he too perished with her. The people of the mohalla surmised that Subodhchandra's wife probably didn't know to swim, and so she began to drown after falling into the well, and when Subodhchandra jumped into the well and reached her, she grabbed him so firmly that Subodhchandra too inevitably drowned; the next morning, the people in the house discovered the dead bodies of Subodhchandra and his wife, both clutching each other, floating in the well. That day, the people of the mohalla first retrieved the pair of bodies from the well and placed them on the sitting platform in the verandah, and then sent word to Subodhchandra's family in Narayanganj, and that very evening Subodhchandra's brother and two others arrived by train, and after talking to them the people of the mohalla learnt that Subodhchandra's brother's name was Poranchandra. That day, after Poranchandra and his companions hired a lorry and departed for Narayanganj with the dead bodies, the mohalla folk gathered in Abdul Aziz Byapari's house, and they spotted the tulsi plant beside the courtyard wall which had been planted by Swapna; they observed that although there was no platform at its base, the soil at the base had been gathered and patted down in a kind of circle. After the bodies of Subodhchandra and Swapna were taken away to Narayanganj, the people of the mohalla forgot about them, and the tulsi plant beside the wall withered and died at some point of time.

The people of the mohalla say that when Subodhchandra and his dark-skinned, comely wife arrived as tenants in Abdul Aziz Byapari's house almost seven years later, for a long time they failed to notice that Swapna had planted a tulsi sapling at the former spot and gathered and patted down the soil at its base in a circle. But after the country's independence, on some Tuesday or Wednesday, Poranchandra arrived from Satkhira, and after he put the broken pieces of

Swapna Rani's conch-shell bangles in his breast pocket and packed Subodhchandra's belongings, he left for Kamalapur rail station, and after that the people of the mohalla once again forgot about Subodhchandra, Swapna and the tulsi plant beside the wall.

After that the people of the mohalla learnt while sitting in "Your Choice Saloon" for a haircut that new tenants had arrived at Aziz Byapari's house, and that their names were Subodhchandra and Swapna, and so they then went to meet them and talked to them. Sitting in "Your Choice Saloon", the mohalla folk chatted about that, they said that Babul Miya had gone to meet the new tenants one day, and when he asked Subodhchandra, 'What's your name?', he replied, 'Subodhchandra', and then Babul Miya declared that he already knew that.

'How is that?'

'Is your wife's name Swapna?'

'Yes, how do you know?'

'Don't you have a brother, back in the village?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Is his name Poran?'

'Yes, but how do you know all this?'

Babul Miya then said that everyone in the mohalla knew all this, and he warned Subodhchandra, 'There's a well in this house, just beware of that well!' The mohalla folk heard about all this as they sat at 'Your Choice Saloon', and they felt very perturbed; they then went to meet Abdul Aziz Byapari and informed him about their anxiety lest Subodhchandra and Swapna fell into the well again, but Aziz Byapari did not take what they said seriously, he brushed it off saying, 'Oh don't worry, do people fall into wells again and again!' There was nothing the mohalla folk could do then, so they went back, and after that they had nimokpara and tea prepared by Swapna and listened to Subodhchandra holding forth on the furies wrought by the river Jamuna, and that was when they once again noticed the tulsi plant beside the wall, and they observed that the soil at the base had been gathered and patted down in a circle, and sindoor had been sprinkled on the soil.

The people of Ghost Lane say that then, although they don't know exactly when, but they say that it was some time after the great floods that occurred towards the final phase of the reign of the thuggish, childless general, there was a terrible heatwave, and sparrows nesting in ventilators kept dying in the heat, and at that time they heard for the first time about the mosque in Ayodhya being demolished and became extremely agitated, but they found that it was Subodhchandra and his wife who were even more distressed than them; subsequently, the people of the mohalla remembered that they had given assurances of safety time and again to Subodhchandra, but on no occasion could they keep their word. Then one day they learnt that the mosque had not actually been demolished, and while sitting for a haircut in "Your Choice Saloon" one day, Subodhchandra remarked with a sombre look on his face, 'This isn't right, does religion require mosques to be demolished?' The people of the mohalla say that the other people in the salon who had come for haircuts saw in the larger mirrors in front of them, Subodhchandra's grimy and glum face above the neck-high white sheet wound around him, and even amidst the heatwave and the stench they surmised the reason for his dejection, and they asked, 'Are you scared?'

'No, why should I be scared!'

'Don't be afraid, after all you haven't done anything!'

But subsequently the people of the mohalla recalled all these events with a kind of bewilderment, dejection and shame and discovered the truth that they had perhaps not said the right thing regarding Subodhchandra for some reason that they could not fathom, because they saw that Subodhchandra and Swapna fell into the well again. All the rumours about the demolition of a mosque continued to spread, and one day it was really pulled down, and on the day this dilapidated and ancient mosque was destroyed following a long campaign, Subodhchandra did something that they were unable to explain, and they were disconcerted. The day the people of the mohalla got the news of the mosque really having been demolished, they were very morose, and two days later when newspapers published images of fundamentalists standing atop the debris of the demolished mosque, with their hands raised in a victorious vein, and turbans wound over their heads, they felt helpless, and then, that day, the matter of what Subodhchandra had done was revealed in the mohalla. The rumour spread quickly through the mohalla that the day the report of the mosque being demolished in Ayodhya was received, Subodhchandra went to Nawabpur and bought sweetmeats from Moronchand's shop, and then the husband-and-wife

duo had those sweets. The people of the mohalla were unable to say who witnessed this act of eating sweets, or who this report of their having done so was received from; they later said that the source of this news was perhaps Abdul Aziz Byapari's house-servant or maid servant or someone else; by that evening, this news spread through the whole of Ghost Lane and adjacent localities, and a huge group of overwrought and agitated people gathered in front of Abdul Aziz Byapari's house, and yelling "Allahu Akbar", they entered the house. That day the people of Ghost Lane forgot about the nimokpara served to them by Subodhchandra and his wife, Swapna, and when this mass of people left Aziz Byapari's house and departed, Subodhchandra and Swapna were found in the well, dead; but this time Poranchandra did not arrive, because after getting the news, the police arrived and took away the dead bodies. The people from Twin Bridge Lane and Padmanidhi Lane, and the people of the Narinda and Gaudiya Math localities, who went to "Your Choice Saloon" for a haircut or a shave, said that after that, at some point of time the people of Ghost Lane entered a complex labyrinth of time, because it was observed that they were unable to forget about having eaten the nimokpara prepared by Swapna, and they always recalled that they had repeatedly assured Subodhchandra, 'Don't be afraid', but Subodhchandra and his wife continuously fell into the well in the mohalla, or they themselves threw them in; the people of the mohalla then again fell into dejection and felt ashamed, and then around this time, a group of mohalla folk presented themselves at Abdul Aziz Byapari's house, with spades in their hands, and they then entered the greatest perplexity of their lives, and it occurred to them that the frame of time in their lives had broken down.

That day, these people from Ghost Lane appeared at Aziz Byapari's house with spades in their hands, and reproached him for not sealing up the well after piped water became available in the house, and they declared that they would dig earth and seal up the well. Aziz Byapari was flabbergasted when he heard that, and he retorted, 'Who's Subodhchandra? Where's the piped water? We're still surviving drinking the water fetched by Nijam's Mother!' And just then they saw Nijam's Mother entering Aziz Byapari's house, carrying a pitcher of water from the standpipe on the street for the family's dinner. These mohalla folk could not disregard the reality of the corporeal presence of the tilawali or water-carrier, Nijam's Mother, and then they realised that perhaps Subodhchandra had not yet arrived in the mohalla, the country had not attained independence, and the mosque in Ayodhya had not been demolished; but then, they could simultaneously remember Subodhchandra having continuously fallen into the well, and they felt very upset and ashamed and they were at a loss. They could

not figure out which plane of time they existed in, but they could not forget the taste of the nimokpara they had eaten or would eat, and the futility of the assurances, to not be afraid, that they had given or would give Subodhchandra tormented them so much that they announced to Abdul Aziz Byapari, 'We are going to seal up this well', and disregarding his objections, they dug up earth in front of his eyes and sealed up the well, and after that, come evening, some of them boarded a long, green-coloured E.P.R.T.C. bus with two doors from the Rathkhola intersection and went to Sadarghat. But the mohalla folk say that even before the bus reached Sadarghat, these people got upset, because they had Swapna and Subodhchandra in mind; it struck them that if the well was sealed up, Subodhchandra was not supposed to have fallen into the well, and so their delight at riding on this new E.P.R.T.C. bus was soured. The people of the mohalla say that in their state of confusion, it seemed to them that they were stuck in some place inside some dream, and within this dream they had penetrated into the future from the past or into the past from the future, and it occurred to them that perhaps the matter of Subodh and Swapna was not true, but a dream; but they then remembered Swapna's tulsi sapling planted in the courtyard of Abdul Aziz Byapari's house, and they went to Aziz Byapari's house and saw the tulsi plant beside the courtyard wall swaying in the gentle breeze; and then they remembered the well.

*1995*

Translated by V. Ramaswamy and Shahroza Nahrin.

## Megha Mittal

### Gift shop

A little white cat  
sits on your desk  
tiny, pristine.  
Waving it's pudgy  
mechanical hand.  
Back and forth.  
Back and forth.  
Your friend got it for you  
from Malaysia.  
What a nice friend.

A shabby roadside giftshop  
on an overstuffed  
Malaysian island.  
A million knick-knacks  
each worse than the next.  
This one a *maneki-neco*  
supposed to bring good luck.

Of course I didn't know it then.  
I didn't care.  
It was just something to get.  
A fridge magnet  
purposeless  
entitled giftshop junk.

Until you put it on your desk  
and told everyone  
your friend got it for you  
from Malaysia.  
Such a nice friend

they said  
as it waved at them all  
back and forth  
back and forth  
Such a nice friend  
who bought you this  
Cheap plastic cat.  
Who couldn't save you  
Who didn't know  
that it wasn't just one  
misplaced night of insomnia.  
Who didn't care  
Who thought that people  
could be saved  
just like software projects  
by slogging through  
at the end  
in the dingy waiting room  
seeping with grief  
with a wi-fi dongle  
and one eye on the gate  
with the doctors going  
back and forth  
almost always on time  
for their cryptic stand up updates.

Who locked mourning into a  
cardboard box  
and went back  
and -  
drowned in anger instead  
rebuking badly written code  
poorly planned sprints  
incompetence  
and unfairness  
because doctors -  
unlike managers  
cannot be yelled at.

A room  
littered with box after box  
of orphaned things  
that still reeked with the fragrance  
of their previous owner.  
A fake plastic cat  
puny, gross  
waving it's pudgy  
mechanical hand  
back and forth  
back and forth  
asking us to come closer  
and listen  
Listen to the guilt  
blaring through everyone's tears.

I stand frozen, hypnotized  
Maybe if I stay still  
Time will pass around me.

Do you want it?  
What!?  
Do you want to keep it?  
No, I don't want to keep it!  
I don't want to hear  
it's stupid mechanical hand  
waving  
mocking  
hurtling regret  
into the silence  
of everywhere  
back and.

**Priyanshi Singh**

**Great Rumbling**

Great rumbling takes hold.  
Some earthquake.

The sea rises, and says,  
What I miss most about being mortal  
Is the quiet confidence humans wear  
When they are loved and they know it.

## Shivangi Mariam Raj

### We Were Being Taught a Lesson<sup>i</sup>

The entire classroom multiplied into a moss of laughter when I was in fourth grade and got up from my seat to answer the teacher's question:  
I pronounced 'none' as 'known'.

I was a little older when I learnt what falls from the eye is a tear — and not *tesu*.  
If salt would trickle down my cheeks,  
mother would instruct me to keep my *tesu* to myself.  
Flowers, cradling the colour of fire, would plummet down the branches,  
one after the other, dislodging themselves from all that held them  
back, journeying towards something obscure  
enough to be named heaven.

February twenty three: Razzaq dragged  
his limp through four storeys of his burning house,  
pressing a clock against his chest, composing himself on its needles.  
Kneeling, he kissed his rooftop and turned into a beehive — hours swarmed  
through him.

February twenty four: Faizan, ash upon the asphalt afternoon,  
the national anthem snapped between his purple lips.  
Crows squat round him, pecking at words and entrails,  
hammering history and its consequences together.

February twenty five: It was a passerby who brandished her scissors,  
threatening to cleave the horizon, as Aas was retrieved  
from the drain. A prophecy streaked like a vertigo and half a sky  
fell into the gashes planted over his head and torso.

February twentysixtwentyseven: Amir and Hashim, *mutilated beyond recognition*,  
their sister was allowed to hold only their photograph, their fingers  
still clinging to cold metal, a tendril scaling the forest  
to examine the evanescence of a touch.

February twenty eight: Against a whetstone, the gardener sharpens  
a lullaby and shovels our shadows into a heap.  
Thresholds recede, doors slump, the city rasps  
as the blind men march, shoulder to shoulder, their daggers  
dripping with a mouthful of dew.

February twenty nine: The palimpsest can no longer hold the numbers.

The day on which everything can be taken away from us  
will always be beautiful and ordinary:  
it will begin with the wrinkled faces of pillows,  
the shopkeeper will forget to return the change,  
clothespins will pinch the chest of shirts,  
pockmarked leaves will glisten under the sun,  
neighbour will enter with rumours and leave with a bowl of sugar,  
smell of cumin and pepper will fill the kitchen,  
and within minutes, it will clasp the flesh that waits  
alone to reclaim the street.

Sometimes, a weight is too heavy for the body to endure  
like the sound of *ain* in Arabic.

My friend teaches me

*alam* is pain

*3alam* is world

I make mistakes, unable to wring out the sigh from my throat.

So, all world becomes a pain on my tongue.

I was shocked upon discovering,  
randomly among newspaper pages,  
that 'quagmire' is not spelled with a 'cog'  
that it was a longing we are condemned to without rescue,  
where we sink; no wheels turn.

Even while learning French, these mistakes continued  
to chase me, I confused *blessed*  
with a blessing; *blessed* is a wound.

For the fugitives, each night is an atlas of prayers and grief,  
written into the stars, numerous, inexhaustible  
like specks of dirt — or is it dust?  
Unsure, I slip again on the green of moss.

I get up from my seat, hold a dictionary and memorise:  
Dust is what needs to be taken out of the house every morning.  
Dirt is what should never be allowed in.  
Dirt is what becomes of young men thumbed into the reticence of earth.  
Dust is what rises after everything has left.

Under the cloud of dragonfly wings,  
the entire city becomes a haemorrhage of meaning  
and *tesu* blossoms fall, one after the other,  
becoming indistinguishable over roads, rooftops, and drains,  
growing pellucid in calendars, bloating: in every language,  
being corrected for their mistake.

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<sup>i</sup> *Between February 23 and 29, 2020, Hindu mobs attacked Muslim households and businesses in Delhi, leaving thousands homeless, missing, jailed on fabricated charges, injured, or killed.*

**Tanuj Solanki**

**Detective driving**

Dawn cloverleaf:  
bending blacktop drowned in gray.  
You turn your metal can—  
welded fenders, wizened roar—  
wondering if you should flick the cigarette  
and place the second hand on the wheel.  
The next moment, and you've forgotten,  
and all you do is puff as  
the curving hardness becomes straight.  
Now look at that lone light blinking in the field.  
Now look at that moon above, the clean lick of it,  
and the fading stars: smithereens.  
Even in solved murders you'll be no protagonist.  
One day you'll kill someone for that.

*Miya Poetry*  
*A Selection*

Translated and with an introduction by:  
Shalim M. Hussain

**Shalim M. Hussain**

### **Why Miyah Poetry (and not Char-Chapori Poetry)?**

*First published in Nezine, 26 November, 2016.*

On 29<sup>th</sup> April 2016, something interesting happened on Facebook. Dr. Hafiz Ahmed, a Guwahati-based writer, teacher and public intellectual posted a poem in English titled 'Write Down I am a Miyah' on the social networking site. Within a few hours of posting the poem, it had already been viewed and shared multiple times. It was a comment on the National Register of Citizens, a topic on which Ahmed has written widely and in different genres, and an appeal to fellow poets to declare themselves as 'Miyah'. On first reading it might have been dismissed as another 'rant' on the social networks but the afterlife of the poem was remarkable- within a day of the poem being posted, the first response to the poem came in, then a response to the response and so on until within a week the chain reaction had produced twelve poems by twelve different poets, all claiming the Miyah identity. These poems have collectively been termed 'Miyah' poems and the writers of the same have been given the collective identifier 'Miyah' poets. I will look at specific lines from Hafiz Ahmed's first poem and the poems that followed but for a moment let us pause and dwell upon the word 'Miyah' itself.

In Assam 'Miyah' is slang for an Assamese Muslim of Bengal origin who speaks one of the many dialects which are loosely classified under the language/ dialect cluster Bengali. Most of the people from this community live in the *chars* and *chaporis* of Assam due to which the earlier more politically correct collective term used for the community was 'Char-Chapori Muslims of Assam'. 'Miyah' is used interchangeably with the words 'Bangladeshi' and 'illegal immigrant', both of which are loaded with negative connotations of filth, uncouthness and barbarism. This group of insults presupposes two things- either that the community for which the word is used is composed of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh or that the community consists of people who share some historical affinity with Bangladesh and hence cannot be considered to be completely Assamese. This brings us to a question which has disturbed the people of Assam for a long time- how can the word 'Assamese'/'Axomiya' be defined? Or, what does it take to be an Assamese? The first question has been sufficiently discussed and debated with various groups suggesting various criteria but the second question is important to understand 'Miyah Poetry' or the 'Miyah Poets' or even the 'Miyah People'. So what does it

take to be an Assamese/Axomiya? If geographical belongingness is an indicator then it solves all the problems but the question is more closely tied to ethnicity and language. If Axomiya/Assamese is a pre-determined term for a pre-determined group of people fixed in whatever historical period, it seems to assume that only a certain number of people who lived in Assam before a given date are Assamese and that it is impossible for all later entrants to 'become' Assamese.

One way in which Muslims from the *char-chapori* have tried to assimilate into the 'Greater Assamese' fold is by constantly returning their language as Assamese in the census data. As the children of the *char-chapori* Muslims are predominantly educated in Assamese-medium schools, they pick up standard Assamese at a really young age and use the language for day-to-day transactions. There have been accusations that the dialects the *char-chapori* Muslims speak among themselves are not really Assamese but dialects of Bengali. This brings us to the language-dialect debate. Linguistically speaking, languages (in the case of India, scheduled languages) become languages through a socio-political process. In the originary position, all spoken codes are dialects until some are privileged over others for several social and political reasons and get standardized. As such, subsuming dialects under languages whereby a group of dialects are classified as subsets of a standard language is a rather problematic act. First, there is no central body authorized to perform this categorization. One dialect may share equal mutual intelligibility with two or more standard languages. Moreover, dialects are more dynamic than languages and keep changing and developing through an organic process. Standard languages can be tamed by dictionaries and grammar textbooks but dialects, since they do not wait for lexicography to expand their vocabulary or for universities to sanction new modifications of syntax mutate very fast. Hence, it is a futile exercise to classify the *char-chapori* dialects as Assamese or Bengali. In cases where census data defines the identities of people, the categorization of people as linguistic communities must be left to the choice of the people concerned. *Char-chapori* Muslims have constantly returned their linguistic identity as Assamese and this choice must be respected.

Given the above arguments, how is 'Miyah poetry' different from earlier poetry written by Assamese Muslim poets of Bengal origin? First, the poets self-identify with the word 'Miyah'. Selecting 'Miyah' instead of '*Char-chapori* Muslim' is a deeply problematic choice which we should examine in some detail. Many commentators from within the *char-chapori* community as well as people from outside the community have questioned the usage of the word Miyah on two grounds: first,

what is the rationale behind self-identifying with an abusive term? The second group of commentators has tried to explain that the word Miyah in itself doesn't have negative connotations. In its original use it means 'gentleman' or 'sir', they say. This clarification is absolutely unnecessary. Words do not have intrinsic meanings. A 'word in itself' is a hollow sound which requires a meaning to be bestowed on it. As such, words have connotative meanings and connotative meanings change from context to context. So if 'Miyah' means 'gentleman' in the rest of India and 'filthy Bangladeshi' in Assam, both the meanings are valid even if one is distasteful. So what does it mean for a group of poets to self-identify as 'filthy Muslim Bangladeshi'? The first assertion of this identity in print can be traced to '*I beg to state that*' (*Bineeto Nibedan Ei je*), a 1985 poem by Khabir Ahmed which has the infinitely quotable lines:

*I beg to state that*

*I am a settler, a hated Miyah*

*Whatever be the case, my name is*

*Ismail Sheikh, Ramzan Ali or Majid Miyah*

*Subject- I am an Assamese Asomiya*

(Translated by Shalim M Hussain. First published on The Sunflower Collective Blog. Source: [http://sunflowercollective.blogspot.in/2016\\_10\\_26\\_archive.html](http://sunflowercollective.blogspot.in/2016_10_26_archive.html))

This was probably the first 'Miyah' poem and for a full appreciation of its disruptive power, it has to be studied in comparison to the poems by *char-chapori* Muslims that preceded it. Let us look at Maulana Bande Ali's 1939 poem "*Charuwar Ukti*" the oldest traceable poem by a writer from the *char-chapori* Muslim community:

*I am not a charuwa, not a pamua*

*We have also become Asomiya*

*Of Assam's land and air, of Assam's language*

*We have become equal claimants.*

(Translated by Shalim M Hussain. First published in The Sunflower Collective Blog Source: [http://sunflowercollective.blogspot.in/2016\\_10\\_26\\_archive.html](http://sunflowercollective.blogspot.in/2016_10_26_archive.html))

Whereas the second poem has an element of supplication, the first is ripe with satire. By structuring the poem as a formal application letter, Khabir Ahmed highlights the tendency of reducing citizenship, and by extension, belongingness to a formal official process whereas identities are forced upon or taken upon by

communities through far more complex processes . Khabir Ahmed's poem is confrontational and the language, laced with humour and satire, is almost like a whiplash- strong, sharp and impossible to evade.

'Miyah poetry' proper began in April 2016, a good thirty years after the publication of *Bineeto Nibedan Ei je* - but this new set of poems shares the angst of the older poem. It is fitting that Hafiz Ahmed, the person who spearheaded the new series of poems is a well known and beloved writer of the *char-chapori* community and one of Khabir Ahmed's oldest friends. However, Hafiz Ahmed's '*Write Down*' (originally in English) is markedly different in tone as compared to *Bineeto Nibedan Ei je*:

*write*  
*write Down*  
*I am a Miya*  
*My serial number in NRC is 200543*  
*I have two children*  
*Another is coming*  
*In the next summer,*  
*would you hate him*  
*As you hate me?*

While Khabir Ahmed's poem is an application to a higher power, Hafiz Ahmed's poem is addressed to fellow Miyahs. The contexts in which the poems were written are different but not drastically so. *Bineeto Nibedan Ei je* was written in the aftermath of the Assam Agitation and the backdrop of the Assam Accord. Hafiz Ahmed's poem was written in the context of the NRC update. If the three poems mentioned above are arranged chronologically, one notices a steady gradation of aggressiveness. Whereas Maulana Bande Ali's poem is more passive and uses the sanction of religion to justify belongingness of people to a certain identity, by the time we come to Hafiz Ahmed's, the tone of benediction has been completely been replaced by a more assertive emphasis on the contribution of the *char-chapori* community to Assamese economy culture.

I might be accused of forcibly maintaining a teleological relationship on the three poets/poems. After all, different poets have different reasons for writing poetry and the stimuli behind poems belonging to a certain period might not be the same. However, it must also be recognized that the lives of the *char-chapori* people,

especially the category of people who think and write are tied to history regardless of their willingness to participate. Through acts of violence like Nellie and daily experiences of discrimination they become agents of history without really wanting to be part of it. It might be easier to take another example from the poems written by the Miyah poets. Siraj Khan, in his poem “*Amar polayo hikes svoborer gali*” writes:

*Just because he was a sandman  
They gave him many, many colourful names:  
Choruwa they called him, Pamua, Mymensinghia  
Some called him a Na-Asomiya  
And some ‘Bideshi Miyab’  
He carried these rashes on his heart  
To his grave.*

(Translation by Shalim M Hussain)

Or in my own poem ‘Nana I have Written’ written as a response to Hafiz Ahmed’s poem:

*Nana I have written attested countersigned  
And been verified by a public notary  
That I am a Miyab*

(Translation by Shalim M Hussain. First published by tekstso.in. Source: <http://www.teksto.in/article-nana-i-have-written-2.php>)

Siraj Khan’s poem is interesting because it is written in one of the local dialects spoken by the *char-chapori* Muslims of Assam. I translated my original English poem into the local dialect too. We do not give this dialect any name because doing so would mean falling in the language/dialect trap from which we are trying to escape. We are not trying to standardize anything- neither the language and idiom of our poems nor the multiple voices rising in protest. We are writing in the dialect we speak at home and use among ourselves in our day to day transactions.

Does this mean that we are trying to distance ourselves from Assamese? Not at all. A large number of the Miyah poems collected under Project Itamugur (an artists’ collective composed of Abdul Kalam Azad, Kazi Neel and I) are in the standard Assamese language and all the Miyah poems make a case for a more inclusive Assamese identity. There is no appeal for isolationism or secessionism. However,

writing in the local dialects gives our poems more vibrancy and volume. As mentioned earlier, dialects are more dynamic than standard languages and poetry, due to its non-conformist disregard for grammar and syntax helps our creative process. The dialect's disregard for standardization also means that the poems can be written in an idiom borrowed from any aesthetic and language. When we use the local dialects for our poems, the point we are trying to make is that these dialects are as close to our hearts as Assamese. By using the word 'Miyah' for ourselves, we are being confrontational in the same manner as Khabir Ahmed. We are trying to make an educated Assamese class, well-versed in either Assamese or English, to confront a word they themselves might have used in private but which they are too bashful to use in public. We are also trying to tell ourselves that there is nothing wrong in aspiring to be Assamese while being what the Assamese consider Miyahs. Where this assertion will take us is anybody's guess but we know that it will initiate debate. Exposure of hypocrisies lead to self-reflection and disruption leads to dialogue. However, despite all our efforts if a bigoted person says: 'See, they are calling themselves Miyah. Why shouldn't I call them so?' well, we will just shrug our shoulders and move on.

**Hafiz Ahmed**

**Write Down 'I am a Miyah'**

Write

Write Down

I am a Miya

My serial number in the NRC is 200543

I have two children

Another is coming

Next summer.

Will you hate him

As you hate me?

Write

I am a Miya

I turn waste, marshy lands

To green paddy fields

To feed you.

I carry bricks

To build your buildings

Drive your car

For your comfort

Clean your drain

To keep you healthy.

I have always been

In your service

And yet

you are dissatisfied!

Write down

I am a Miya,

A citizen of a democratic, secular, Republic

Without any rights

My mother a D voter,

Though her parents are Indian.

If you wish kill me, drive me from my village,

Snatch my green fields

hire bulldozers  
To roll over me.  
Your bullets  
Can shatter my breast  
for no crime.

Write  
I am a Miya  
Of the Brahamaputra  
Your torture  
Has burnt my body black  
Reddened my eyes with fire.  
Beware!  
I have nothing but anger in stock.  
Keep away!  
Or  
Turn to Ashes.

## **A Charuwa Youth vs The People (2000)**

Milord  
Yes, we are brothers  
He and I  
Brothers from the same family.  
Yet kokai is so bent  
On being king  
That he disproves  
Blood relations.

Milord  
Contrary to his claims  
I am not his step-brother  
Mother and son  
Were not separated  
When I was born  
He has eavesdropped too often  
On the whispers  
Of friends and foes  
And muddled his own head.  
This might be why  
He repeatedly declares me illegitimate.

Milord  
Very often he goes mute  
And his anger flows in frenzied gestures  
Sometimes in ungodly rage  
He tears the flesh  
From his body.  
Not once does he wonder  
Why six of our own sisters  
Were compelled  
To leave this home

Milord  
He is wiser now  
Or at least I guess so

You have studied our problems  
You have seen our own  
Burn on the pyre of  
Our mother's heart,  
Our own cannibalize  
Our own.

Milord  
How do I scatter  
The waters of peace?  
How do I stop Daksha's yagna?  
How do I keep intact  
The pieces of Sati's body?

**Shalim M Hussain**

**Nana I Have Written**

Nana I have written attested countersigned  
And been verified by a public notary  
That I am a Miya  
Now see me rise  
From flood waters  
And float over landslides  
March through sand and marsh and snakes  
Break the earth's will draw trenches with spades  
Crawl through fields of rice and diarrhoea and sugarcane  
And a 10% literacy rate  
See me shrug my shoulders curl my hair  
Read two lines of poetry one formula of maths  
Read confusion when the bullies call me Bangladeshi  
And tell my revolutionary heart  
But I am a Miya  
See me hold by my side the Constitution  
Point a finger to Delhi  
Walk to my Parliament my Supreme Court my Connaught Place  
And tell the MPs the esteemed judges and the lady selling  
Trinkets and her charm on Janpath  
Well I am Miya.  
Visit me in Kolkatta in Nagpur in the Seemapuri slums  
See me suited in Silicon Valley suited at McDonalds  
Enslaved in Beerwa bride-trafficked in Mewat  
See the stains on my childhood  
The gold medals on my PhD certificate  
Then call me Salma call me Aman call me Abdul call me Bahaton  
Or call me Gulam.  
See me catch a plane get a Visa catch a bullet train  
Catch a bullet  
Catch your drift  
Catch a rocket  
Wear a lungi to space  
And there where no one can hear you scream,

Thunder  
I am Miya  
I am Proud.

**Abdul Kalam Azad**

**Every Day on the Calendar is Nellie**

I live with a strange dream  
I cannot sleep  
Night glitters and my heart flutters  
My ears pop like a rabbit's.

On this new moon night I see  
Every day on my calendar stained in blood  
You have seen blood all your life, I tell my heart  
Why are you scared of blood?

I close my eyes  
Another handful of fear rumbles in my belly.  
May is not marked in blood- the Beki's waters  
Have washed it clean

I was scared in Khagrabari.  
I walked through the Beki and reached Mazidbhita.  
Haishyor's one and a half year old boy drowned  
And his body hardened  
One fine day in June

Nearby uncle Fajal trembles like a leaf  
Uncle has a fever, hasn't eaten for two days  
He sits on a bamboo bed the size of a calendar  
Aunty trembles like a leaf  
What if the waters rise some more?

The wet calendar dries  
Fear drenches my mind  
In a dark room my hands turns the pages  
A damned fox maybe a civet stole my hens  
The cacophony of chickens struts over my calendar

Sister Halimon has left her three month old child in Kokrajhar

Sister Hasina had her baby there  
In four years the little boy has not known the outside of a coop  
My world shivers in fear  
I cannot sleep

Lend me some strength friends  
Lend me some false hope

For one, just one night on this calendar  
Let me sleep.

## **Rezwan Hussain**

### **Our Revolution**

Scold us  
Kick us if you will  
Patiently we will continue to build  
Your mansions, roads, bridges  
Patiently we will keep pulling your tired, fat,  
Sweaty bodies in cycle rickshaws  
We will polish your marble floors  
Until they sparkle  
Beat your dirty clothes  
Until they are white  
We will plump you up with fresh fruits and vegetables  
And when you come visiting us in Tapajuli char,  
We will offer you not just milk  
But fresh cream

You continue to abuse us  
Even today we are the thorn in your eye

But don't they say: Patience has its limits  
Broken snails can cut through flesh  
Even we can turn revolutionaries  
Our revolution will not need guns  
Our revolution will not need dynamite  
Our revolution will not run on national television  
Our revolution will not be published  
On no walls will our revolution be painted  
In red and blue clenched fists

Yet our revolution will singe, burn  
Reduce your souls to ashes.

## Shahjahan Ali Ahmed

### I am Still a Miyah

Mine is the story of  
A burning bone-crunching sun  
My manhood the cautionary tale  
Of bent shoulders  
And the pricking of salted thorns  
Mine is the story of  
'Grow more food', man-eaters  
Cholera, diarrhea  
And a fragrant revolution scattered by  
My fathers  
In a forest of thorns  
Mine is a story of heroes.  
Mine is the sacrificial offering of '61  
Of blood screaming through  
The binds of history  
Mine is the story of 83, 90-94, 2008, 2012, 2014.  
Mine is the oppression, the ignominy  
The deprivation of Dravidians in Pragjyotishpur  
I am the colour of a shame  
Holding its ears, bending its knees  
While kings and dynasties pass  
I am the one under the fool's cap  
Standing in line with dumb cattle  
I am a painting of heritage  
Hung in a stable  
Because though the bottles look different  
The wine is yet the same  
And judging by birth alone, I am yet a Miyah.

## Siraj Khan

### My Son has Learnt to Cuss like the City

When I leave the chars for the city  
They ask, 'Oi, where is your house?'  
How do I say, 'In the heart of the Borogang  
Amid silvery sands  
Flickering between stalks of jhau grass  
Where there are no roads, no chariots  
Where the feet of big men seldom fall  
Where the air is a grassy green  
There, there is my home.

When I leave the chares for the city  
They ask, 'Oi, what is your language?'  
Just as the tongues of beasts and birds  
Have no books, my language has no school  
I draw a tune from my mother's mouth  
And sing Bhatiyali. I match rhythm with rhythm  
Pain with pain  
Clasp the sounds of the land close to my heart  
And speak the whispers of the sand  
The language of earth is the same everywhere.

They ask, 'Oi, what is your jati?'  
How do I tell them that my jati is man  
That we are Hindu or Musalman  
Until the earth makes us one.

They try to scare me, 'Oi, when did you come here?'  
I came from no 'somewhere'  
When Bajan left the chars for the city  
With a bundle of jute leaves on his head  
With no reason, no rhyme the police jumped on him  
And the examination  
of pieces of paper began  
Every time Bajan passed with laurels.

Just because he was a sandman  
They gave him many, many colourful names:  
Choruwa they called him, Pamua, Mymensinghia  
Some called him a Na-Asomiya  
And some 'Bideshi Miyah'  
He carried these rashes on his heart  
To his grave.

The rashes combined, raised their collective head and hissed at me.

O mister snake charmer  
How long will you slither and slide  
My son goes to college now  
He has learnt to cuss like the city  
He knows little but he knows well  
The sweet twists and the sweet turns of poetry.

**Kazi Neel**

**That Land is Mine I am Not of That Land**

The land that makes my father an alien  
That kills my brother with bullets  
My sister with gang-rape  
The land where my mother stokes in heart live burning coals

That land is mine  
I am not of that land

The land where my claim over a lungi is suspect  
Where there are no ears for cries  
Where demanding rights throws you under the plummeting fists of ghosts  
The land which demands eternal servitude

That land is mine  
I am not of that land

The land where a cap is radicalism  
A miyah sub-human  
Every charuwa a Bangladeshi  
Where earth is weighed and sold to Tatas, Birlas and Ambanis

That land is mine  
I am not of that land

The land where limb after limb is chopped and sent afloat the river  
Where in 83, the executionaries dance a shameless  
Grisly dance of celebration

That land is mine  
I am not of that land

The land where my home and hearth is uprooted  
Where my heritage is negated  
Where they conspire to bind me forever in darkness

Where they pour gravel, not gruel on my plate

That land is mine  
I am not of that land

The land where my throat cracks with appeals and no one hears  
Where my blood flows cheap and no one pays  
Where they politics with my sons coffin  
And cards with my daughter's honour

The land where I wander crazy, confused as a beast

That land is mine  
I am not of that land

## Rehna Sultana

### My Mother

I was dropped on your lap my mother  
Just as my father, grandfather, great-grandfather  
And yet you detest me, my mother,  
For who I am.  
Yes, I was dropped on your lap as a cursed Miyah, my mother.  
You can't trust me  
Because I have somehow grown this beard.  
Somehow slipped into a lungi  
I am tired, tired of introducing myself  
To you.  
I bear all your insults and still shout,  
Mother! I am yours!  
Sometimes I wonder  
What did I gain by falling in your lap?  
I have no identity, no language  
I have lost myself, lost everything  
That could define me  
And yet I hold you close  
I try to melt into you  
I need nothing, my mother.  
Just a spot at your feet.  
Open your eyes once mother  
Open your lips  
Tell these sons of the earth  
That we are all bothers.  
And yet I tell you again  
I am just another child  
I am not a 'Miyah cunt'  
Not a 'Bangladeshi'  
Miyah I am,  
A Miyah.  
I can't string words through poetry  
Can't sing my pain in verse  
This prayer, this is all I have.

**Ashrafal Hussain**

**Quit India, '83, Basbari**

I stand in the witness box and look at your face;  
Are you the symbol of justice?  
I shut my eyes and give you everything-  
My birth certificate, records of my childhood, youth,  
Senility, riots, Quit India, '83, Basbari.

You turn my worn out moth eaten papers  
Your stamp goes thump thump thump  
Your pen draws a long line-  
The sounds fall on my ears  
But my eyes are shut.  
My heart shivers.

I open my eyes and my hands  
Are in the hands of salaried gun slingers.  
I am taken to my cell.  
My days pass in fear and uncertainty  
Like a common criminal  
Lost to dignity, lost to justice.

Who I am is my crime  
What I am is what I look like  
And my crime of language is what makes me stateless.

## **In the Name of My Dead Mother**

When our poems strike their hearts  
They scream so loudly it's as if  
Their pain is greater than ours.

Should we remain silent then  
Or let their high voltage drama  
Stifle the fires in our heart?  
Should we let go of the thread that binds  
Our century-old heritage?

When my mother takes to the street  
With an old rag around her waist  
With an old bag of old papers  
One which is written  
The history of fourteen generations

When my sister has her children  
In a detention camp  
When I grovel for my rights  
Before the man in a black suit  
Then no one is left for me except  
My mother, father and sister.

I have grown a bud and two leaves on my hands  
I have learnt to write two lines  
I have learnt to open my mouth and say  
That they bit me and that  
I will squeeze the poison out of their teeth.

They say, rein it in man  
No, I won't rein it in.  
In the name of my mother who died  
In a detention camp, I swear  
That this voice in my throat will grow louder  
And some day rustle the folds in your ears.  
I swear sir, I swear on my dead mother.

## **Brother, I am a man from the chars**

Brother, I am a man from the chars  
On the Brahmaputra among kohua, jhau-ikra;  
In the shade of nal-khagori is my jute-stick house.  
People call me a choruwa, bhatiya, immigrant shaykh,  
Neo-Asomiya, Mymensinghia,  
Suspected Bangladeshi, non-aboriginal  
Bangladeshi and what-not.

And though I was born in Assam and pride in  
Calling myself an Assamese  
The language doesn't slide down my tongue  
My father wears a blue-checked lungi  
My mother wears a saree  
My sister wears mekhela or churidar  
And me, brother, I wear jeans pants.

My father wears on his chin a handful of beard  
A topi on his head, a string of beads on his hand, a jute bag on his shoulders  
But because he wears on his jaw broken Assamese,  
He walks from work to the police station  
Sometimes as a Bangladeshi, sometimes as a fundamentalist.  
The big men say chacha-chacha and help him out of the lock-up.  
The next day he's off to work again  
To repay the hefty bribe.

## **Abdur Rahim**

### **Don't insult me as a Miyah**

Don't insult me as Miyah  
Anymore  
I ashamed to  
Introduce myself  
As Miyah no more.  
You may love me  
You may hate me  
I lose nothing no more  
I gain nothing no more  
Don't insult me as a Miyah  
Anymore.

You may love me  
You may hate me  
Patronize me no more.  
Pull me in your arms  
And pin a dagger on my back no more.  
Don't insult me as a Miyah  
Anymore.

Look no more on my sun burnt back  
For barb wire scratches

**New in Poetry**

*Curated by Aswin Vijayan and Divya Nadkarni*

**G.N. Saibaba**

*Why Do You Fear My Way So Much?  
Poems and Letters from Prison*

Speaking Tiger Books, 2022, Rs. 450/-

I still stubbornly refuse to die  
The sad thing is that  
They don't know how to kill me  
because I love so much  
The sound of growing grass.

—G.N. Saibaba

The publication of these poems and letters from prison mark five years of Professor G.N. Saibaba's continuous imprisonment, and is one of many efforts and actions to ensure that Saibaba's voice endures and is heard. First arrested in 2014 under the UAPA, Saibaba was sentenced to life and solitary confinement in 2017. The collection is representative of Saibaba's continued work, despite the harsh and debilitating prison conditions that have left him with a 90% handicap. The collection also includes several of Saibaba's letters, a preface by Meena Kandasamy, and introductions by his wife Vasantha Kumari; Ashok Kumbamu, member of the Free Saibaba Coalition; and the Kenyan novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o.

## Love Isn't in Shrines

If love is found in shrines,  
My friends, there wouldn't have been  
a single miserable soul in the world.

For every lane, path and corner  
is decked with colourful shrines  
of every hue of the faiths of God.

If religion helps you to attain love,  
more of them are available in this land  
than anywhere else on this earth.

But why are we still  
intoxicated with hatred?

Kabir says,

Love can be found  
neither in shrines nor in scriptures,  
It can't be achieved  
through yoga or meditation.

Listen to me, O grievors,  
The world of love takes shape  
in your acts of struggle for it.

*2 November 2019  
(Written to Basith)*

## **Aphorisms of Our Age**

1

New universal truths  
emerge out of new experiences  
of democracies.

2

The priests of democracy  
enjoy the ease of lying  
in the public domain.

3

The sundry demi-gods possess  
high-tech from the past and the present  
to run the twenty-first century democracy.

4

Foul language defines  
the sacred games of democracy.

5

Data is the diet par excellence  
of the diabolic elections.

6

Like money begets money,  
data breeds data.

7

Data greases the palms  
of the ruling machine.

8

Your personal data  
shapes your shadow  
that surveils every corner of your life.

9

The prices of crude oil fall  
as the data, the new oil of democracies surges  
with mystic powers.

10

To graduate as a super-democracy  
produce more data,  
less food grains.

11

The monks howl and prowl  
shitting along the holy riverbanks,  
preaching cleansing of democracy.

12

As democracy deepens  
in the ancient land,  
the monks occupy the seats of power.

13

In the early days of cyberspace,  
all that happened in the real world  
could be captured in the virtual.  
During its late avatar,  
nothing that takes place in the virtual  
can happen in the real.

14

If you commit a petty crime,  
the law takes its own course.  
Sport far larger crimes,  
you end up making laws.

15

If a nation were a nuclear start-up,  
rules of denuclearisation apply.  
Build up a huge stockpile of nuclear arsenal,  
respect pours in praising you as a nuclear power.

16

Larger the military-war complex,  
superior is your democracy  
among the nations of the world.

17

The farts of a democratic  
dictator smell sweet.

*2 April 2019*  
*(Written to Sanjay Kak)*

**Smita Agarwal**

*Speak, Woman*

Red River, 2021, Rs. 299/-

In the third collection of poems from Smita Agarwal the speaker, distinctly female, speaks loud and clear. Donald Platt notes in the Foreword, Agarwal's poetry "constantly reinvent and reinvigorate . . . dictions and lexicons" as good poetry must. There are 38 poems in this collection under five sections that explore the private and public worlds of the vocalist-poet-academic. Agarwal's prowess shines through especially in the poems that traces love and loss, disappointment and despair.

## **Grandmother Diaries**

One mewl and I've jumped out of bed,  
toe snagged in nightgown.

A tightening of the chest; nipples erect,  
milkless, dry...

The hormones have been laid to rest;  
my emotions are alive and wide awake.

Child, as you squeal, memories of  
a time I was your Mum's age, revive...

I'm heavy and bovine, once again,  
responding to your urgent call  
like a first-time mother,  
laden with the milk of love,  
anxious to give, give and just, give...

## Gripped Climber

*rest in peace;*

*and call us, thy family, from weak regrets...*

- Tacitus

If this doesn't humble us  
what else will?  
The rush of warm blood  
at thirty-two  
arrested for ever on Everest.

April 18<sup>th</sup>, the West Bridge, and three big mistakes.

The first, you being young and unafraid.

The second, you choosing to stay behind  
when the weather broke, letting  
your companion go.

(Axt heard your screams, was  
too tired to retrieve his steps...)

The final grievous error,  
at twenty-three-thousand-seven-hundred feet  
where oxygen is far less than scarce,  
in the fog of your mind, you  
miscalculating the length of rope  
that secured your harness to  
the fixed rope above. When you lost  
your grip, you couldn't reach back up.  
The grappling, the loss of your glove, your  
jacket riding up exposing your  
midriff and the slow freeze freeze  
freeze over the crevasse on Everest.

Branch of the family tree  
Bogie, Lama, Harsh, we pray  
you knew no pain and saw fear  
only for that short while as you  
struggled to rise out of those depths  
where *no one showed you sufficient brotherhood.*

The cold came as your saviour.

You sank into a painless stupor  
embracing calm...  
Leaving us raging, writhing, ineffectual  
against this abiding grief,  
of your unnecessary, avoidable, death.

**Rohan Chhetri**

*Lost, Hurt, or in Transit Beautiful*

Harper Collins Publishers, 2021, Rs. 399/-

*Lost, Hurt, or in Transit Beautiful* is a poetry collection that obsesses over language, stories, and death. Rohan Chhetri in his second collection of poetry presents to the reader poems where violence and grief acts as a hook. The poems are divided into four sections titled 'Katabasis', 'Locus Amoenus', 'Erato', and 'Grief Deer.'

## The Singing Bone

The shaman comes to the valley after midnight  
Circling our boarding house. Pinned to our small beds  
In terror, we listen to the clean music of bones.  
Later, through a rift in the curtain, we squint into the mist  
But cannot see the past from a man  
Blowing the trumpet of a suicide's hollow shinbone.

Twenty years will pass before I understand this music  
Robbed from a grave. Sleepless in the new world,  
Listening to the laboring salt trucks make rounds  
On the frozen streets, it will come back to me  
All at once: the echo chamber of the creaking bamboo  
Grove where we smoked our first cigarette,

The army of deaf and mute in the village who spoke  
Only in obscene gestures, the lonely daughter  
From the herbarium who wrote letters to us  
In a hen's scrawl. The old house replaced  
By something modern, architecture standing in  
For a woman's death. Her husband's slow breakdown

Coursed for months, the clocks telling him to jump  
Off a cliff, the second marriage hurried in mourning.  
The white seed of lunacy sleeps, then swells to its fate.  
But all our fears of summer snakes & rabid dogs,  
Everything depended on them granting us safe passage  
Through fields redolent with the smell of semen

After a night of rain. Caught in the downpour,  
We stood under eaves of caves. The wind churned,  
Some vegetation pushed up lightless from the silver-blue  
Mud. We hollowed hovels out of lantana brambles  
Where we spoke in the voices of already grown men.  
In winter, I 12urassic12 down as the coiling roads of the world

Grew dark. I held my insides, bile-soaked, where joy  
Trembled. Prospect of home washed in the retch

Of anxiety. My history of nausea in the cold half-  
Light of childhood, where did it come from? Mother,  
Or the long descent in the old manner of hell—  
The asphalt frozen, slippery all the way home.

The shaman returns the next morning for alms,  
Turmeric, rice, strip of black cloth. We circle him,  
The mystification undone in daylight. Just a man bruised  
From the cold, with children starving somewhere  
In the mountains across the border, as we sit here  
Goaded him to reveal to us the singing bone.

## **Toward Some Dark**

They came at dawn, three angels  
in jumpsuits, and felled the two ash  
trees in front of the neighbour's house.

Now from our porch, the view  
of the sky stretched unbearable blue  
rent open from a mesh of shadowgreen.

The smell of pine in the air, pungent,  
wild. I thought this is how we arrive  
at clarity. Through some clearing of

the living. When Grandfather was dying,  
we found the little money he'd squirreled  
away in a box too embarrassed to bequeath it

to any of us. Him pleading to us through  
the final hours to please pull the fuckin'  
shroud off his head... It was the yellow

mosquito net hung low above the bed  
where he lay hallucinating, furious  
we were trying to ease him toward some dark.

Our flushed faces to him then, like  
the inhospitable cities of his youth.  
So much loss manufactured by men alone,

so why not those angels at dawn  
armed with their power saws putting back  
simple terror into things.

Like the monsoons bringing the abattoirs  
to the flooded city streets in Dhaka.  
The bleeding child who supposedly asked,

Excuse me sirs, is your Lord counting

all unrequited airstrikes? Or  
is His 15urassic desire our extermination to be.

Now the wind flits on our porch like  
a young unremembered thing, that one-legged  
beggar I once saw hopping across the platform

to catch the Intercity, so he could beg  
through the bogies, seven stations & back.  
But don't forget the wind, it has lost something

& doesn't know it, sniffing about the heady  
stink of sawdust & brine, stomping  
on our roof again & again

like it has stepped on so much blood  
drying from small wounds.

**Sridala Swamy**

*Run for the Shadows*

Context, 2021, Rs. 499/-

Sridala Swamy's *Run for the Shadows* opens with a poem addressed to a reader, a salvager, in the far future trying to decipher the meaning of the recovered "ancient script." The poems in this collection carries this bardic hope that verse will outlive our civilization while acknowledging the mortality of the human body and even that of the planet as we know it. Swamy employs nature imagery that evokes the beautiful in the process of being destroyed.

## Rituals of Departure

*"The first desire will accompany you to the last breath."*

— *Etel Adnan*

For years I thought of nothing but my father's death and the manner of its arrival: the prognosis so sudden and dramatic, the lingering decade when we treated the disease like an honoured guest that we wouldn't allow to leave, coddling it, and later accompanying it as it made to depart, dreading the lives that would be uprooted by the force of its final departure, as it was said the trees uprooted themselves to follow Hanuman as he took off for Lanka, not wanting to be parted from him but falling back to earth after all, as they must, and having to live with the consequences of the violence, and its aftermath.

We were ravaged but we recovered. Years later, when my own body began to alert me to its impermanence, I ignored it. Other people needed my attention more and I gave it. My body, insistent, showed me where it would give. Was I surprised that in this matter it followed my father? The path was already familiar. Death would come but could it not be invited in, the customs and forms of its welcome already in place and no surprises along the way? It may not have been what I had desired but in this particular avatar it was a companion I was familiar with. I could be a courteous host to this old guest leave when it does, quietly and in silence, just as my father did.

## All That Is Solid

Deep under the ground where dead things are kept  
but not preserved          he goes to retrieve that which has kept  
on decaying          believing what is under the earth is kept  
pristine          a place of storage merely even preservation          a crypt

that honours memory while he descending is alive to secure  
reassurance: that things stay the same in the cold and dark secure  
from the depradations of time so that even he – as he is – insecure  
bag of flesh          animated corpse in the half light – the word *sacro*

*phagus* intrudes upon the matter that composes his thinking mind —  
how can an object meant to preserve the physical body even though the mind  
has fled be called *flesh-eating?* – so that even he *claustrophobic* would not mind  
being interred when his tome comes —  
his tangled thoughts turn he turns lightwards – breathturned –

to all that is solid and in the air and warm buoyant alive  
(keeps for another time the thought of the things that live  
burrowing) all that hurts and ages quickens and enlivens  
he          keeper of the dead          returns above          a haunting of lyric.

**Jeet Thayil, ed.**

*The Penguin Book of Indian Poets.*

Hamish Hamilton, 2022, Rs. 1499/-

Jeet Thayil, in the Foreword to *The Penguin Book of Indian Poets*, traces the history of this anthology through three of its previous iterations. Like the three iterations before, Thayil refuses to bracket the poets included as merely Indian poets writing in English or Anglophone Indian poets or some such. He asserts the place of Anglophone Indian poets in the pantheon of Indian poetry. He also eschews chronological or alphabetic ordering of poets but follows what he describes as “a system of placement, or displacement, that gives the reader a deeper understanding of how vast, how riverine is the poetry, and a profound sense of its undercurrents and vitality.” The collection, that features author photographs by Madhu Kapparath, includes works of ninety-four poets, bookended by Nissim Ezekiel and Arun Kolatkar.

**An Overview of a Vaudeville Daughter Who Talks to Birds**  
*Jennifer Robertson*

Bolaño says,  
all poets, even the most avant-garde

need a father. He says  
that poets are orphan by vocation.

So, I wait by the window  
for a sparrow to arrive, while I rehearse my lines:

*Dad, here's your coat.*

**A hundred and one**

*Imtiaz Dharker*

Be old. Be very old.  
Wear bedroom slippers and cardigans,  
smoke a pipe, grow bald.  
Buy a loaf of bread and count  
your pennies very slowly at the till.  
Eat boiled egg and burnt  
toast and jam for every meal.  
Complain bitterly about the young.  
Sit on the sofa watching the telly  
till you are at least a hundred and one

or two or three. Be old.  
Be very old with me.

**Avinab Datta-Areng**

*Annus Horribilis*

PenguinVintage, 2022, Rs. 250/-

“I even slurped through the little/ meaning you hid in the leaves,” Avinab Datta-Areng says in ‘A hedgehog in Berlin.’ Meaning in Datta-Areng’s debut collection of poetry is intentionally obfuscated. There are several images that recur in these poems like that of the mother, father, fever, and panic attacks that act as signposts to guide the reader through the intense and vivid imagery of his poems.

## Beheading My Mother

I wanted to make you a garden  
so I could sulk into the seeds.  
Your faith made me furious, I hid  
my anger among the amaranth,  
shoveling all day at the backyard  
while you kept buying flowerpot  
after flowerpot, stacking them  
along the stairs your father built  
until there were no more steps.  
Walking up every time, for some reason,  
I can never look at them, as if I'm  
crossing a gallery of your  
most intimate thoughts.  
I read his diary, I read what he thinks of you.  
What he thought of you then he thinks of you now.  
I bought him another one, so I could see  
the extent of one man's hate for his saviour.  
In my mind it was mythical, it dissolved the classics.  
In the evenings you give me a hand,  
treating the dirt like a stillborn,  
bent over, pretending to sing a song  
you don't know the words for,  
and for a moment I can't see your head,  
as the light keeps dimming,  
I can't see how any of this has been allowed to go on.

## On My Way to the Anatomy Museum

Already the swans were  
paddling insatiably towards my heart on the promenade.  
They wanted to take turns,  
stretch my heart,  
wear it over their heads like a balaclava.  
I was aware  
that it might be unsafe to walk out  
of the house exposed like that, inside out.  
But given where I was  
going to, it came naturally.  
This was what I was inside, these were my possessions.  
How entrancing the sycamore fanning  
my cerebrum, how exhilarating to have  
the hummingbird hover above my aorta.  
To walk past the bridge, ignoring  
the ominous graffiti, past the concrete  
steps, leaping over the turnstile,  
my blood lighting up the living offices,  
possessed by a prenatal reverie, but aware  
this doesn't necessarily change anything.  
To declare: here I am, I'm ready.  
There is something inside me,  
I have presented its secret by not uttering it.



## Author bios

**Abdul Kalam Azad** is a human rights researcher, writer and community mobilizer from Assam. Abdul currently works as a post-doctoral researcher and lecturer at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Abdul previously worked with Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Guwahati, and at the Centre for Applied Human Rights, University of York, UK, as a visiting fellow. Abdul has written extensively on the issues of statelessness and human rights abuses in the state of Assam for national and international media platforms.

**Aranya** is a poet, and editor of the digital newsletter, *Poethy*. He is currently based out of Delhi, a place to which he does not belong.

**Jeevika** is a poet and journalist currently living in Washington, DC. She has poems in *SAND Journal*, *Levee Magazine*, *The Sentinel Quarterly*, *Ninth Letter*, *Cleaver Magazine*, and several independent zines.

**Megha Mittal** used to be a coder who loves to write wanting to become a writer who loves to code. Right now she is stuck in the middle of this metamorphosis.

**Priyanshi Singh** is a student of literature and Hindustani music, and an avid watcher of cat videos.

**Shahroza Nahrin** is currently pursuing a graduate degree at McGill University, Canada. Her translations include works by Shahidul Zahir and Anwara Syed Haq.

**Shaiq Ali** is pursuing his MA in English from Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. He serves as a co-editor for *The Sunflower Collective*. He loves to rummage through second-hand book shops for rare gems.

**Shalim M Hussain** is a writer, translator, teacher and researcher based in Assam. His books include a poetry anthology titled *Betel Nut City* and two translations- *Asimot Jar Herai Sima* (by Kanchan Barua) and *Post-Colonial Poetry* (by Kamal Kumar Tanti), both translated from Assamese to English. He is currently co-writing a book titled *Critical History of Assamese Literature*, to be published by Orient Blackswan in 2022. He is an Assistant Professor at Government Model College of Borkhola, Assam. His translation of Miya Poetry to be published by Tilted Axis Press has won PEN Translate awards for 2021.

**Shivangi Mariam Raj** is a translator and independent researcher from Delhi, India. Her essays, reportage, and poetry have appeared across newspapers, zines, magazines, and pamphlets published in India, Sri Lanka, Kashmir, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, and Nepal. She is currently working with *The Funambulist*, a platform that engages with the politics of space and bodies.

**Siddharth Dasgupta** writes poetry and fiction from lost hometowns and cities inflicted with an existential throb. His fourth book—*A Moveable East*—arrived in March '21 via the independent publisher, Red River, while a special-edition chapbook—*Almirah :: Alvida*—emerged in early '22 with The Remnant Archive. Siddharth's literature has appeared or is forthcoming in *Epiphany*, *Rogue Agent*, *Lunch Ticket*, *The Bosphorus Review*, *The Aleph Review*, *Kyoto Journal*, *Thimble*, and elsewhere. Recently, Siddharth has taken over as Editor, Visual Narratives for the reborn avatar of *The Bombay Literary Magazine*. He lives in Poona, embraced by an always fickle muse. You'll find the author on Instagram @citizen.bliss and <https://citizenbliss.squarespace.com>

**Tanuj Solanki** is a fiction writer, editor, and insurance man. In 2019, he was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Yua Puraskar for his short-story collection *Divali in Muzaffarnagar*. He is also the founding editor of *The Bombay Literary Magazine*.

**Tuhin Bhowal's** poems and translations appear or are forthcoming in *adda*, *Parentheses Journal*, *Ovenbird Poetry*, *Poetry City USA*, *South Florida Poetry Journal*, *The Night Heron Barks*, *Bacopa Literary Review*, and elsewhere. He currently serves as a Poetry Editor at *Bengaluru Review*, *Sonic Boom Journal* and *Yavanika Press*. Tuhin tweets @secondhandsins.

**V. Ramaswamy** has translated Subimal Misra's *The Golden Gandhi Statue from America: Early Stories*, *Wild Animals Prohibited: Stories*, *Anti-Stories*, and *This Could Have Become Ramayan Chamar's Tale: Two Anti-Novels*. He has also translated the novel, *The Runaway Boy* by Manoranjan Byapari, and the refugee memoir, *Memories of Arrival: A Voice from the Margins*, by Adhir Biswas. His translation, together with Shahroza Nahrin, of Shahidul Zahir's *Life and Political Reality: Two Novellas* was published in 2022.

**Vishnu Shanmugam** was born in Kancheepuram, Tamil Nadu. He started painting after moving to Kodaikanal. Currently, he lives and works on a farm on its outskirts with his wife and son.

**Zufishan Rahman** is a twenty-three-year-old university student. Her works have been previously featured on *LiveWire*, *Ainanagar* and *Maktoob*. Reach out on instagram @thedialecticalbiologist





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