



A  
Thousand-  
Petalled  
Gerland  
" "  
K. L.  
Chowdhury

**A THOUSAND-PETALLED GARLAND  
AND OTHER POEMS**

**K L CHOWDHURY**

**A Writers Workshop Redbird Book**

**Copyright 2003 K L Chowdhury**

**The author asserts his moral right to be identified as the sole owner of this intellectual property**

## Dr. K L Chowdhury Profile

Born on 7th March, 1941 in Srinagar, Kashmir, India

Graduated in Medicine from Panjab University in 1962 and post-graduated from Delhi University in 1966.

Married Dr. Leela Chogtu in 1966

Joined Medical College, Srinagar as a faculty member and rose to be a Professor of Medicine.

Completed a Fellowship in Neurology at London and pioneered the teaching and research in Neurology, developing it as a subspecialty in the Medical College.

Was forced to leave Kashmir 1990 when the wild fires of terrorism engulfed the valley; made Jammu his second home.

Deeply moved by the health trauma of fellow refugees and the alarming rise in the incidence of various diseases he held numerous medical camps for them and started the charitable Shriya Bhat Mission Hospital and Research Center.

Has published papers on various medical topics in national and international journals, but is widely known for his pioneering work on the health trauma of the Kashmiri refugees and is credited with drawing the attention of the world to this tragedy. He coined new syndromes like 'Stress Diabetes' and the 'Psychological syndromes' in the exiled population, and highlighted the adverse effects of stress, environmental and lifestyle changes on a displaced population.

Writes regularly on various subjects - medical and scientific, social-cultural and political.

Published a volume of verse, "Of Gods, Men and Militants" in 2000. A highly acclaimed anthology, this book takes the reader into the vortex of militant violence in Kashmir, resulting in the forced exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from the valley. It speaks about their travails in exile, their struggle for identity, their endeavors at self-discovery, their dreams and aspirations, their cry for roots and their ongoing debate with the gods whom they left behind and who they are now trying to re-create in exile.

Address: 16 B/2 - Roop Nagar Enclave, Jammu, India – 180013

Phones: 191-2592066 , 9419142066

e-mail: kundangleela@ yahoo.com

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

I am grateful to my uncle, Prof. Triloki Nath Raina of NDA, Kharakvasla, Pune and my friend, Prof. Kulbushan Raina of Jammu University for having gone through the manuscript separately and offering valuable suggestions.

# DEDICATION

## PART ONE

To Leela,  
the source and the inspiration

## PART TWO

To the memory of my father, Pandit Jia Lal,  
of Boyseb Chogtu, Mohanji, Krishnaji, Chuni Masi, Jigri, Nathseb  
and numerous other victims of cancer  
and to those who share their pain

## PART THREE

To my fellow exiles  
from  
the valley of Kashmir

# CONTENTS

## • PART ONE - ADORATION

- Dream
- Spring is here
- Retinal images
- Taking you in
- Sacred space
- Love tree
- The magic of distance
- Quintessential love
- Surrender
- Metaphor of the soul
- Alter ego
- Something in her
- A decade of matrimony
- Sacred trust – 1
- Sacred trust – 2
- A thousand-petalled garland
- A moment frozen in time
- Victory
- No mean devotee
- The examined life
- When she is not here
- Then she materializes everywhere
- Seeking your cosmic wholeness
- Your voice
- Aging together
- Flower behind the boulder
- A spring sunset
- Love is no monopoly
- Eyes

## ● PART TWO - TESTAMENT

- Pain
  - Battle ground
  - Make-believe
  - At peace
  - Reconciliation
  - Paying the debt
  - Dying for deliverance
  - Sacrosanct
  - Gratitude
  - Denouement
- 
- To eternity

## ● PART THREE - EXILE

- Keys
- The new millennium
- Old man and the tree
- The curse
- Summer in exile
- Even Siva got a bath
- Old Professor Shambu
- Entombing history
- Dear departed ancestor
- Anonymity
- Creator
- Release
- Who is my enemy?
- Stranger
- Golden silence

## Who may my reader be?

That my work may sell a million copies  
or be a best seller  
is not my desire,  
nor that it be a prize collection  
to adorn the drawing rooms everywhere,  
nor that it be stacked  
in the dark labyrinths of libraries,  
eating the dust and moth of time there,  
nor that it become a topic of dreary discussion  
in restaurants and coffee houses  
for the tired intellectual or the bored lover,  
nor that it be gifted to people  
who shuffle through its pages  
and toss it away,  
to be read hardly ever.

Even if it be a solitary reader  
whose heart beats in unison with mine  
as he travels from one page to another,  
who takes it all in -  
each word, each line, each stanza -  
as I give it to him, my love's labor,  
I covet that single reader.

# **PART ONE**

## **ADORATION**

Like a mountain stream  
is my love,  
eternal in its course.  
it may swell or shrink  
but neither swerves nor stops  
unless dammed.  
And then it backlogs,  
only to brim over  
in so many streams,  
to keep its tryst

## **Dream**

I saw her in a dream  
that lingered for some time  
in the twilight between waking and sleeping,  
waiting for me to hold it in my palm.  
I closed my fist on the dream  
lest it slip away.  
My fist will not open  
till the night descends  
and I dream her dream again

Often as children  
we tied a knot in our handkerchief  
to capture a star  
and would not let it go  
till we got our wish.  
I have again trapped a star  
and will hold it captive  
till she materialises for me.

## **Spring is here**

A pair of bulbuls on the *gulmohar*\*  
huddled close together,  
cooing in each other's ear;

a bunch of chirping sparrows  
flitting from one tree to another,  
looking for a nesting site somewhere;

a couple of rosebuds  
raring to unfold and scatter,  
their secret and precious treasure;

a grand dad away in a distant land  
craving to hear the dulcet chatter,  
divine music to his ear.

and a lover,  
a song on the lips and heart aflutter  
frisking to be near.

\*gulmohar - an ubiquitous tropical tree of the Indian plains.

## **Retinal images**

I open my eyes on her  
first thing in the morn  
to capture her for the day,  
else distortions mar the images,  
the doves hide in the groves,  
the butterflies turn into smudges,  
and the flowers shy away.

I close my eyes on her  
when I retire at the end of the day  
to capture her for the night,  
else the phantoms of darkness  
stalk my sleep,  
and sweet dreams turn into nightmares.

I must open my eyes on my love  
and keep her there all through the day,  
I must shut my love in my eyes  
and take her with me  
all through the night.

## **Taking you in**

Oft do I upbraid myself  
for not having taken you in fully  
when you had been with me.

Now when you are away  
you materialise everywhere  
all times of the day,  
emerging like a mermaid  
from the vast sea of memories,  
breaking yourself into rainbow colours  
from the tear drops of my reveries,  
flowing like a gurgling brook  
alongside life's journeys,  
wafting fragrance into the garden  
like the gentle spring breeze.

You move with me the whole day  
like my own shadow,  
and, after the day's toil ,  
creep silently by my side  
to rest your soothing palms  
on my tired eyes.

Then you filter my repose  
of terrors and nightmares  
and lull me to sleep  
with a lullaby  
as you become the plectrum  
that gently plays  
on the strings of my soul,  
and the music that flows  
is your symphony.

No, I could not have taken you lightly  
when you had been with me.

## **Sacred space**

How can someone else bear the name  
that sends my heart aflutter,  
the name that can belong only to her?

That name conjures the image  
that embellishes for ever  
the matrix of my soul,  
the image that none can ever replace.

Her name embodies her whole self,  
her sights, smells, and sounds  
her traits, tastes and tenderness,  
her velleity, her vision.

A rose is a rose is a rose,  
let no other flower be called a rose  
nor no rose bear a name other than rose  
no matter what the bard may say.

When uttered,  
her name, like a mantra,  
throws up a space,  
her reverent space,  
that allows no infringement  
that bears no encroachment.

I carry that sacred space with me  
wherever I be  
for there she reigns,  
my supreme deity.

## Love tree

The heart is full of pining  
watching the *gulmohar*  
that can no longer hold its secret.  
Burnished by the blazing sun  
it pours itself out  
in a riot of red blossoms

Love blushes into so many flames  
offering an inspirational skyscape  
across my bedroom window.

Battered by the hot wind  
the red flowers fall -  
so many martyrs -  
scattering themselves  
at the altar of love.  
Even in death  
they cover the shame  
of the brown and black patches  
on my arid lawn below.

The birds of love coo in delight  
and play their amorous games  
in the canopy of this tree.  
They evoke, in this languid season,  
the blissful memory  
of many a secret rendezvous.

The yearning mounts  
as the awareness grows  
as to whence the flaming red blossoms  
stole that cool and soothing touch,  
the perfect foil to the ferocious sun  
and the birds that melody,  
the anodyne for the aching heart.

How long do I wait, my love  
on the lonely road  
of this long summer?

### **The magic of distance**

No longer do I stomp home and enter,  
with shoes on, in unthinking defiance,  
despoiling sacred space.  
I stop short at the portal,  
take off my shoes and enter  
with a devotee's barefooted reverence  
even when you are not there watching me.

No longer do I rush to the computer,  
when my work is done,  
to take flight in cyberspace  
because you are not there  
waiting to be with me.  
I prefer to shut myself with my muse  
and take refuge  
in your sublime presence within me.

No longer, in leisure time,  
am I eager for the twin feat  
of a brisk walk and a visit to the temple,  
leaving you behind  
because you can not keep pace with me.  
I rather embark on an odyssey  
cloistered with you  
in the sanctum of my heart,  
my supreme deity.

The more distant you may seem,  
the stronger your presence ,  
and the nearer to you I manage to be.  
For distance does generate  
an acute awareness of you,  
and obedience too.

### **Quintessential love**

When she shied away from me  
she most wanted me to be  
near,  
and nearer than could be.

When she denied me a kiss  
she would like it to be  
much more than a mere formality.

When perchance I spied her  
in the act of changing her dress  
she seized the towel  
to hide her shame  
that I may unravel,  
sooner than I would dare  
or her eyes could see.

Now, when she is no longer with me  
and I am left to myself  
she knows it is the surest way  
of having me to herself entirely.

## **Surrender**

How is it, I ask myself,  
that in your absence now  
I find myself in a state of compliance,  
doing exactly as you ordained  
when you had been here.

Why would I match your bidding  
with reckless defiance  
in your presence  
and gloat over my nonchalance,  
while now, when you are away,  
like a repentant devotee,  
I try everything to propitiate thee,  
even as I know  
you desire none of my amends,  
nor entreaty.

For don't you already know  
that it was sham insolence  
trying your patience,  
that it was my childish impudence  
in doing exactly the opposite  
of what you wished me to?

My total surrender now  
to your erstwhile bidding  
may make no sense  
except a small recompense  
to my guilty conscience.

### **Metaphor of the soul**

The fingers ache  
to pierce cyberspace,  
to send thoughts  
that have been bouncing back,  
to package the idiom of the soul,  
to open the breast *Hanuman-like\**,  
that my heart I may lay bare,  
for you to discover  
your own self  
woven into each strand and fibre.

\*Hanuman - the monkey god in the Hindu pantheon  
who had the images of lord Rama and his consort, Sita etched in his heart

## Alter ego

When she serenades me  
with *Maneka's*\* charm,  
when the darts of *Kama*\*\*  
strike my sleeping heart,  
when my subliminal self  
is transfixed by a seductive hold,  
when she proxies to land  
into my unconscious embrace,  
when my nightly cantillations  
are smothered with passionate grace,  
when my meditation  
is sullied by amorous advance,  
when her trespass into dreams  
burst my passion's dams,  
I wake up with a sense of infidelity,  
in a maelstrom of guilt,  
but soon to realise  
that it is not a dreamy aberration,  
this transmutation  
of the object of my supreme devotion,  
but her alter ego,  
and my alter love.

\*Maneka - a celestial fairy

\*\*Kama - the god of desire

## **Something in her**

Unlike the gravitational pull  
that dims with distance  
she draws me closer  
the further she moves from me.

There is something in her,  
more than the natural laws can explain,  
that guides all my actions,  
my uncontrollable heartbeat,  
the ebb and flow of emotions,  
the content of my dreams,  
my conscious thinking streams.

Like a surrogate  
I live her life in me,  
having mortgaged my whole being  
at the altar of my love,  
transposing my soul with her  
like the genie of Arabian nights.

## **A decade of matrimony**

What's it that makes marriage click  
and grow from strength to strength  
to arrive at the ten year milestone?

Not the peace  
that one buys with selfless service  
and the other demands with over-lordship,  
nor the harmony  
which prevails when one orders  
and the other unquestioningly obeys,  
nor the joy  
which one gets giving all the time  
and the other merely receiving,  
nor the quietude  
that descends where life is mechanical  
and the voice of argument still;  
but the deferential acknowledgement of each other  
an acceptance - grooves ridges and all -  
an adjustment, but not a compromise,  
to fit the grooves and ridges into each other  
like a hormone to its receptor.

## **Sacred trust - 1**

When she left  
I made it a point not to forget  
feeding the derelict bitch  
who craved our attention;  
scattering grain to the birds  
every morning without fail  
and filling the pitcher of water  
for them to wash and drink;  
tending the garden  
and watering the plants  
and not let them wither away.

But instead of lunging at the plate  
the bitch looks at me with liquid eyes,  
wags her tail ever so lustily  
and in a rush of devotion  
opens her bosom for me to stroke.

And when I am about to wake up,  
and before I scatter the grain,  
the nightingale regales me with his song,  
the bulbul twitters atop the tree,  
the sparrow flits past me in joy,  
and the mynah taps at my window  
to bring her tidings to me.

And when I go into the garden  
to tend the plants,  
the jasmine bursts its bosom  
to spray incense in my tracks,  
the ivies unfurl their tendrils  
to curl round me in sweet embrace,  
my path turns saffron with the pollen shower,  
and the roses lean gently toward me  
whispering her secrets to me

I believed she had left them  
as a sacred trust to me  
but I discover that it is me  
she has left as a trust  
with the beast, the bird and the flower.

## Sacred Trust - 2

It was the call of duty,  
it was the call of love,  
as she journeyed again  
across the oceans  
with pain still raw,  
a strangled heart,  
a bruised knee,  
an unsure step,  
to take charge  
of our grandchild out there,  
crying out for care.

For a change  
it was not the infant god  
carried across the *Yamuna*\* in spate  
who opened the path in a miracle  
when his tiny feet touched the water.  
It was *Yasoda*\*\* who crossed the seas  
to accept the sacred trust,  
to foster the divine kid.

And, no sooner she took charge,  
miracles happened again,  
as time was held on leash,  
the long journey became a stroll,  
the jet lag turned into a laugh,  
the pain left at the infant's first touch,  
the knee steadied once again  
and the heart got unstrung.

Who is in whose trust,  
I wonder,  
between the infant  
and his ailing grandmother.

\*Yamuna - a north Indian River

\*\*Yasoda - the foster mother of the Hindu god, Krishna,  
who was delivered to her care soon after his birth to escape execution by his  
maternal uncle.

# A Thousand-Petalled Garland

## A Thousand-petalled garland

When I wished to make you a garland  
you would not let me pluck flowers -  
fresh, fragrant, of diverse colours -  
for you desired these to stay  
where they belong on the trees,  
dancing in the breeze,  
luring the butterflies,  
beckoning the honeybees.

Yet a garland I fain would offer  
as an emblem of my devotion  
but knew not of what essence,  
of what substance,  
that would be worthy of your form,  
that you would accept with grace.

My quest led me back in time  
when, as little children,  
we would joyfully gather  
the fall from the almond blossoms  
and weave them into wreaths  
as offerings to deities

I waited patiently  
for spring's arrival.  
I walked in the almond grooves  
watching the buds grow fatter.  
I held my breath in wonder  
as the pink-white blossoms started to appear.  
Then I prayed Zephyrus  
to blow some petals over  
and, before the early riser  
trampled on them,  
or the morning sun  
caused them to wither,  
I carried a slender needle  
and a thread of the finest silk.  
Picking them virgin from the ground,  
petal by petal ,  
I threaded them together,  
in an entire morning of weaving  
a thousand-petalled garland,  
embellished with your thousand names,  
each petal bearing my signature,  
for you,  
my beloved of a thousand attributes.

## **A moment frozen in time**

The phone cut off  
at the fag end of the call  
that had lasted nearly an hour  
and was almost over  
except for the adieus and byes.

Yet the feeling remained  
of an incompleteness,  
a half taste,  
a draft without a signature,  
a task unfinished,  
thirst unquenched,  
hunger insatiate  
when, by some accident,  
the last morsel drops from the plate.

Each side tried to reconnect,  
to speak those parting words,  
those affectionate good byes  
but the phones wouldn't click.

Even as the re-dial button  
was pushed repeatedly without avail  
the feeling crescendoed,  
of a breath suspended in the middle,  
the last line of a sonnet longing for rhyme,  
a moment frozen in time

## **Victory**

In the checkered course of our lives  
that we traveled together  
oft did we argue, and bitterly too,  
yet, made up each time,  
to emerge the friendlier.

Unique were the battles  
we fought with each other,  
with all the tools we could muster,  
our positions to bolster,  
yet neither came the loser  
for we would never falter  
in our love  
nor our deference  
for each other.

Now this round threatens to prolong  
and run into a stalemate,  
with not an inch to move along,  
on your side, or mine,  
for the tools have been thrown away,  
while cold hostility  
and a menacing indifference  
hold the battle's sway.

Lest we get frozen  
into back-to-back attitudes  
of cold war and détente,  
why not be face to face again,  
to fight this war to the end,  
to its logical outcome,  
to yet another victory  
for both of us?

### No mean devotee

I admit having hurt you  
and caused you wrong  
in so many ways.  
Pray do not mistake  
this waywardness  
for mean insolence.

You are no ordinary mortal,  
I know,  
but a gift of the gods,  
born of your parental vows and fasts,  
of so many acts of piety and penance ,  
of numerous wish-knots  
tied at *Kshir Bhavani*\*  
and *Baba Rishi*\*\*,

And are we not united  
by that divine force  
they call destiny,  
bound to each other  
from life to life?

While I may have nothing  
to show in my defense,  
no words,  
no great deeds,  
no arguments,  
yet if you accept any testimony  
to my adoration,  
here is a heart  
that beats to your moods,  
a mind  
incandescent with your thoughts,  
a conscience  
inundated in your essence,  
a spirit  
that soars in your presence.

I grant, you are no ordinary deity,  
but I too am no mean devotee.

\**Kshir Bhavani* - incarnation of goddess Durga at Tullamula in Kashmir

\*\**Baba Rishi* - a pious saint buried near Gulmarg, Kashmir

## **The examined life**

How much of this world do we observe in depth,  
how much escapes the mortal eye?  
The oceans, the hills, the mountain vales,  
the earth, the plants, the infinite sky?

How often do we pause and ponder  
at the insect, the flower and the butterfly,  
or fathom the meaning in the haunting notes  
of the bird perched high?

How much do we care to know each other  
beyond the moles, the warts, the colour of the eye,  
the hopes and fears, the longings and desires,  
the mind's sweep that we can't spy?

Between the two of us, my love,  
there is so much to live by,  
to learn, to unravel, to share,  
so much, my love,  
between you and I.

### **When she is not here**

When she is not here,  
my life,  
what a dreary affair!

There is no change in the day's routine  
yet every thing I undertake  
bears a flaw,  
the fault of the absence of that unseen mark  
that she leaves in all I do.  
There is an inner emptiness  
and an outer vacuum,  
and I hover between the two.

I am a downy feather  
floating without purpose in sultry weather,  
a marble in the river's bed  
where water has ceased to flow,  
a fish from the ocean deep  
sighing helplessly in an aquarium,  
a wingless bird in airless space  
neither able to sing nor fly.

## **Then she materializes everywhere**

Then she materialises everywhere -

In my sleep when I turn fitfully  
she is there to reassure me,  
her palm on my palm,  
the touch of balm,  
that gives my repose a fresh lease  
sending me back into reveries.

At the break of dawn  
her unstruck voice joins mine  
in the invocation to the rising sun:  
*'Om bhoor bhuvasa..'*\*  
and I carry that sweet music ,  
wherever I go  
as the days mantra.

In my workplace,  
she is there by my side,  
moving unseen through the vicissitudes,  
transforming the humdrum routine  
into a pleasant fare.

In my leisure hour  
I find her there,  
walking by my side  
as I go out for a stroll,  
and talking to me  
at the dinner table,  
watching the TV  
sitting on the settee with me,  
and again there to put me to bed  
reciting the day's events to me,  
singing them in a lullaby.

Time and distance melt away  
as she materialises everywhere  
I seek her.

\**'Om bhoor bhuvasa..'* - The sacred Gayetrei mantra invoked in Hindu prayers.

## Seeking your cosmic wholeness

Often do I seek you in so many ways -  
in colours and fragrances,  
and in peoples and places;  
frequenting your favourite haunts  
for the foot prints you left behind;  
soliciting the plant, the bush, the tree  
for the mantras you breathed into them;  
quizzing the birds that came to your window  
for the secrets you shared with them;  
listening to the *ragas*\* you so much loved  
to fathom the music of your soul;  
searching for features in your brothers and sisters,  
the sharp nose, the audacious chin,  
the serene smile, the sparkle in the eye;  
rifling through your prized books  
for the lines that strike a familiar chord;  
watching the clouds in the sky  
to catch the shapes you wove in them;  
visiting the temples of your chosen deities  
for the devotional streak so unique to you.

I gather a bit here, a bit there  
yet it leads me nowhere near,  
till I seek you in my inward eye  
and there you materialise  
in your cosmic wholeness.

\**ragas* - musical compositions

## Your voice

Whenever you call from that distance  
it is like a wish fulfilled  
to scale the lofty mountain peaks,  
to run wild in the glades,  
to sit hand-in-hand together,  
under the cool *Chinar* shades.

Through that voice I see  
the *Dal's* ripples in the morning breeze,  
and feel the *Vitasta* flowing past me  
under the bridge across the *Tawi*,  
and hear the *Lidder* flowing down  
singing her song of eternity.

Your voice comes through  
the interminable maze  
of the highways and byways of memory  
till I hear my own first cry  
when I was born to the valley.

The hairs grow grey and sparse with the years  
the skin taints and wrinkles with time  
the back bends and bows with age  
the hearing impairs, the sight obscures,  
but your voice always comes back to me  
in its pristine purity  
unchanged by time and distance  
like the primal sound,  
to bring me today  
tomorrow's memory

Chinar - the state tree in Kashmir  
Dal - the famous fresh water lake in Srinagar, Kashmir  
Vitasta - a river cutting across the valley of Kashmir  
Tawi, - a river in Jammu  
Lidder - a mountain stream in Pahalgam, Kashmir

## **Aging together**

How does it feel, my love,  
moving together  
into the golden autumn of our lives  
and to the very end of the journey ?

Like yesterday  
or like an eternity?

Like knowing so little of each other  
or having imbibed so much  
as not to be able to tell  
one from the other?

Like admitting it could not have been better  
or wanting to undo it all  
to re-mould it to our hearts' desire?

Like groaning under the burden of regret  
that we ever met  
or thanking blessed providence  
to have thrown us together?

Like wanting to give it a fitting finale  
here in this life  
or carrying on the vows  
from here  
to the hereafter?

.

## **Flower behind the boulder**

Often do we recall how chance  
threw us together,  
two strangers  
who seemed to know  
so much of each other  
in the very first hour.

It did seem, when we first met,  
that we were made for each other  
through a cycle of rebirths,  
yet it was the days that followed,  
month after month, year after year  
that were to unravel  
more and more of each other.

The human mind often mirrors  
the essence of a person  
in the very first encounter,  
yet, having spent a lifetime together,  
there springs a surprise now and then,  
a new shade, a new color  
like you suddenly discover  
a nevus, a mole or a freckle  
in your armpit or your shoulder.

It is these little unknown bits  
of each other  
that are the secret and spice of life,  
like, having cherished your garden  
day in and day out,  
you suddenly discover a unique flower,  
springing from a bush,  
or hidden behind a boulder.

The essence of life together,  
between you and I, my love,  
is to ignore the sour and the bitter  
and to look for that flower  
which is always there,  
hidden behind the boulder

## **Love is no monopoly**

Sometimes when you seek me most ardently  
and find me engrossed with others  
oh how you despair!  
You wonder  
am I am sincere  
do I care,  
when, in fact, where ever I be,  
you are always there.

Know you not that  
it is only the abundance  
of my love for you  
that, like pearls, I so joyfully scatter  
for others to gather?  
That the more I give of it  
the more it grows between you and me,  
and the more I am able to share.

How then can you be  
such a selfish deity?  
How can you raise that invisible wall  
that I bang my head against  
every time I want to be near,  
and dig that wide moat around you  
that I can not wade across and enter  
and build that impregnable fort  
where you retreat - so cold, so remote -  
a statue in a dark corner?

Was it not you that taught me  
that love is free  
of all shackles and fetters,  
that it respects no boundary  
and knows no terms and conditions,  
that love is not a monopoly  
and love for a solitary god  
can only be an anomaly.

Know it then that  
like the expanding universe  
love grows from that point in you .  
Verily,  
it is only there that it will return.

## **A spring sunset**

An invisible force splits the cloud  
and a silvery sea of light  
cascades down  
in a gigantic arc.  
Shining daggers  
slicing gently through  
splash rainbow colors in the east  
to set the earth ablaze.

A million deft hands  
darn a fiery pink braid,  
in the hem of the dark princess.  
Lightning trails weave  
a golden mosaic in her robe,  
shimmering into shades of delight..

A cool luminous point  
diffuses into a red ball  
tearing the dark veil over it  
in a big bang of thunder  
to force from your lips  
the mantra,  
*'om bhoor bhuva sa..'* \*  
as the universe is born again.

\* *'om bhoor bhuva sa..'* the Gietrei mantra chanted with the sunrise and sunset

## **Eyes**

Eyes,  
language unto themselves  
that no vocabulary can ever match,  
no Shakespeare, Kalidasa or Homer  
put down in prose or verse,  
no artist draw or paint,  
no sculptor elaborate in bronze or stone.

When eyes meet eyes,  
words, phrases, philosophy and all  
dissolve in a wink.

It is in the eyes where you find  
the plaints of a tender heart,  
it is they that reveal  
the innermost thoughts of the mind,  
and it is them that mirror  
the sprouting of first love.

And it is eyes  
that gently lower when modest and coy,  
that smile at you in joy,  
that kindle with the vision of heaven,  
that shut in peace,  
that turn inwards in bliss.

Yet it is eyes  
that betray and beguile,  
that enslave and ensnare,  
that burn and tear,  
that hurt,  
that pierce,  
that kill.

Look into eyes,  
delve deep into their depths,  
seek the quiet language of eyes.

# **PART TWO**

# **TESTAMENT**

Pain, like fire, consumes.  
Like fire it purifies.  
And like fire it sublimates.

Each one of us  
has to go through  
the fire test of pain -  
our own  
or of a near and dear one.

## **Pain**

The phantom stalks all the time,  
now lurking in the shadows,  
now only in the mind,  
now seizing hold -  
inflicting itself on me  
with unerring constancy.

With its invisible armory  
it pierces and bores,  
crushes and grinds,  
saws and hammers,  
cuts and tears,  
burns and sears,  
and delivers lightning bolts,  
any place of its choosing,  
now forewarning,  
now catching me unawares.

There is neither fire nor smoke,  
no visible wounds,  
no lacerations, no tears,  
no letting of blood,  
no gore,  
yet my ship staggers,  
and sinks little by little  
as it is struck  
again and again,  
now on the larboard,  
now the starboard,  
now from the stern to the stem,  
now the mast and the helm.

I twist and turn,  
roll and fold up,  
and shift positions -  
sit, squat and half-squat,  
on my haunches,  
on my buttocks,  
and on my hands and feet -  
for the elusive reprieve.

I try to stand and walk away  
from the pain,  
and from myself,  
only to stagger,  
as it gets the better of me

and hurls me down.  
Crumpled,  
I sink into another abyss of pain.

No feelings remain,  
only the tantalizing pain  
No thoughts remain,  
only the mind-transfixing pain.  
No ambitions remain,  
only of fighting the pain -  
remorseless pain  
that draws each action and emotion,  
each breath and heart beat,  
each cry and wail,  
into the black hole of pain -  
to harass and to embarrass,  
to brutalize and to demoralize,  
to humble and to humiliate,  
to defile and to denigrate.

I fight my pain  
with pills, suppositories and syrups,  
capsules, patches and injections.  
But, the pain,  
in its timelessness,  
returns with a vengeance,  
to bite me again and again.

And the pain has the last laugh,  
as it itself proves  
the only anodyne,  
to usher in that twilight state  
where pain becomes  
the cause and the effect,  
and the *raison d'être*,  
of living and dying.

## Battle ground

My body is the *Kurukhestra*\*.  
They are fighting a righteous war -  
the warriors on my side,  
my doctors, my family, my friends –  
arrayed bravely against the enemy  
sounding their bugles,  
their weapons drawn out.

My surgeons, with their deft strokes,  
carve my tissues away  
where the fiend has burrowed his way.  
The radiotherapists, armed as they are  
with lethal rays of all denominations,  
under a scorched earth strategy,  
bombard his tracks to burn him out.  
And the oncologists,  
ever ready for the chemical warfare,  
infuse into my vessels  
alkaloids, antibiotics and vaccines,  
to snuff him out from holes and bunkers  
where the fugitive may hide and survive  
and conspire to strike again.

They prompt me to fight back,  
to shore up my defenses,  
to marshal my immunity,  
to invoke the humors and hormones,  
the messengers and mediators.

They initiate me into yoga,  
and urge conscious imagination,  
fervent prayer and meditation,  
to propitiate the gods,  
to help me fight the *asura*  
who seeks new abodes in my body  
in his manifold incarnations.

And when I tire and despair  
that great *Charioteer*  
reminds me of my *Karma*,  
exhorting me  
to uphold my *Dharma*,  
to fight this righteous war,

and, either to win  
and savor the ecstasy of victory,  
or to fall a martyr  
and enter heaven for ever.

\**Kurukhestra* - the battle-field of the epic war Mahabhart

\**Asura* - demon

*Charioteer* – lord Krishna

\**Karma* – destined action

\**Dharma* – righteous duty

## **Make-believe**

My distraught family and friends  
humour me into believing  
that I am improving every day.  
I humour them back  
that I disbelieve not  
what they want me to believe,  
even as I suffer more and more,  
even as I fade day by day.

In this make-believe  
I start believing  
what they want me to believe,  
against their own belief.

But it is not long  
before the next round of pain  
that takes an effort to conceal,  
that makes me  
bite my hands and lips,  
that makes me  
wince, wail and squeal..

Then I plead with them,  
and with myself,  
to stop the make-believe!

## **At Peace**

Can I have a day off therapies,  
of infusions and injections,  
of blood-letting and tests,  
of x-rays and scans,  
of numerous queries  
from doctors, friends and busybodies?

Can the mind be free  
even while the body suffers?

Can I have some time alone,  
face to face with my fell disease,  
to sort things out between us,  
to be at peace with each other?

Can I dream of a dreamless sleep,  
of a peep at the dawn,  
of hearing the cock's crow,  
and the twitter of the birds  
before I sing the farewell song?

I have not looked at a rainbow for long.

## **Reconcilement**

We are all getting used  
to my slowly fading away  
as we all know -  
me and my family -  
that it is a malignancy  
that vice-like holds me.

While we wait impatiently  
for the dénouement  
they suffer my pain quietly  
and gratefully  
I suffer their indulgence.

My children from different climes  
will soon depart  
to get on with their lives,  
reconciled that all that could be done  
has been done.

I too am reconciled  
that they are reconciled  
but I know not  
how to take into confidence  
my garden that misses my walk,  
my books that I am too feeble to read,  
my dairy that I have not entered for long,  
my home which I will quit soon  
to make place for whom?

How do I reconcile them all  
to depart in peace?

## **Paying the debt**

My son abroad  
wants to be with me  
in my final hours,  
to ferry me across  
the last lap of my journey.

But there is a job crunch in America  
since the 9/11 tragedy  
and he can avail a limited break,  
two weeks or at the most three.

He will be sought here  
to perform that last ceremony  
and put to flame my funeral pyre,  
a cross that a Hindu son has to bear.

He could be here now  
to watch over my dying  
but I may hang on much longer  
than he can afford ,  
and beyond the time  
of his return journey.

He would rather wait  
till I am ripe and ready  
but who can tell him  
with any degree of certainty  
as to when that will be.

He has sounded his boss  
that he may have to fly  
at a short notice,  
but fifteen days  
is what he has got,  
at the most twenty.

He speaks to me on the phone, regularly,  
to figure out for himself.  
'Papa, when you need me I am ready.  
Say yes and I will be there.'  
But I change my tone,  
from pain to bonhomie,  
and leave him guessing.  
I will not let his job in jeopardy  
however much, in my death throes,  
I would wish him to be with me.

I fear his presence by my side  
may give me a fresh lease  
and prolong his agony.  
Isn't it me  
who pushed him to that country?

Oh how I think of him when awake,  
how I dream of him in sleep,  
how I call his name  
when, in delirium, I rant and rave!  
Yet, I have the comfort of the thought  
that he will make it  
and lend his shoulder to my mortal remains,  
or gather my ashes while they are yet warm,  
or take them in an earthen pot,  
for their final immersion in the river,  
to flag me off to my final voyage.

That is how he will discharge his debt,  
while I am discharging mine now  
by dodging his journey to this place  
when I need him most.

## **Dying for deliverance**

How I am dying to meet you,  
faithless lover,  
how you spurn me  
and make me cry!

How you force yourself upon others,  
unwilling and unguarded partners -  
embryos in wombs with the first spark of life,  
innocent infants and dreamy youth,  
the middle-aged in the midst of their earthly duties,  
and the old craving to live a little longer -  
when there is me,  
dying to embrace thee?

My ears are cocked  
to hear your footsteps,  
the eyes unblinking  
seeking your visage,  
the breath held in anticipation  
and the heart aching  
with the tedium of waiting.  
Every time I sense you near  
you give me the slip  
and pass me bye.

How long can you escape me  
when all life has to end in thee  
as all the rivers end in the sea?

Why tarry then  
and give me the throes,  
why serenade me  
and play hide and seek,  
why stalk a willing prey  
only to spare the effort  
to gobble it up ?

Verily, one day,  
your game will be up  
and like a beggar,  
you will return  
knocking at my door.

Alas! I may not be in a state then  
to receive you  
as royally as I do now!.

Give me a kiss happily then,  
take me in your arms  
ere it is late,  
and while there still is this urgency,  
this dying wish to meet with you.

## Sacrosanct

Not being able to bear  
the full burden of your joy  
whenever it came your way,  
you would never demur  
to pass it on to me.

But now,  
when you are dizzy  
with the pangs of agony  
you guard it,  
oh, how zealously!

Can I forgive myself  
for ignorance about your pain?  
Can I forgive you, my dear,  
for refusing to share it with me?

Oh how you wear the mask  
of those beguiling smiles,  
how you scatter the pearls  
of your affected laughter,  
how you put on that peaceful visage  
while your anguish grows  
within you!

And with each passing day  
how stingy you become,  
how selfish,  
and how possessive of your pain,  
that you refuse to part with  
even a thought of it,  
while it consumes you so,  
to make you sublime!

That you hold on to your pride  
to bear it alone with such equanimity  
may be your victory.  
That you ever believe  
that what has steeled you  
would break me so easily  
as to compound your pain,  
alas, is my tragedy!

(For my brother, Robin)

## **Gratitude**

Pray do not torment your mind  
with the burden of gratitude  
for the time I spend with you  
or the little service  
that is in my share to render

It is me who am indebted  
for the trust and confidence  
you repose in me,  
as you painfully plod  
to the fiery end  
of your journey.

Not easily does one get a chance  
to be near,  
or to extend a helping hand,  
to a Titan  
facing the hour of his reckoning  
with such courage and fortitude.

To share a bit of your pain,  
to live some of your suffering,  
to feel a whiff of your agony,  
to get singed while you smolder.  
to wince while you groan,  
to brave the shadow of *Mahakala*\*  
while he waits on you  
is the fire test for me  
and my expiation.

No, my dear,  
it is me,  
beholden for your indulgence,  
not you,  
whose suffering humbles and purifies.  
and makes my life sublime.

\* *Mahakala* - the lord of Time/Death

## Denouement

And then there was nothing,  
no pain,  
no feelings,  
no pangs of conscience,  
no fears,  
no desires,  
no thoughts whatsoever.

The seven Chakras\* froze  
the Kundalini\* sapped  
the Shasradalkamal\* faded away  
and all consciousness snapped  
as the clock stopped  
and Mahakala\* took over.

The contortions of the face leveled,  
the taut muscles relaxed,  
the limbs fell limp by the side,  
the twisted torso straightened out,  
the bellows collapsed  
the pump stopped  
the eyes glazed,  
the warmth evaporated  
and all colour faded

A pale handsome visage remained,  
washed of all tarnishes and taints,  
in cold and stony repose,  
ever grateful for the deliverance  
and ready for the pyre,  
for the final test of fire.

The soul soared away  
waiting to don a new garb  
to begin life all over again.

\*Chakra - plexus or a confluence of nerves/ energy

\*Kundalini – the hidden serpent power coiled in the spinal column that ascends through the Chakras to Shasradalkamal

\*Shasradalkamal – literally the lotus of one thousand petals, the place in the crown of head., to where the ascent of Kundalini leads to Turiya or the super-conscious state

\*Mahakala – the lord of Time

## **To eternity**

My son,  
he did come.  
He would not let anyone down,  
not me,  
not himself.  
He took the first flight  
when he received the phone call  
he was waiting for.  
It had to be got over with,  
this last duty  
of a dutiful son.

When we depart from our loving ones  
do we know whether we meet again,  
when, where and in what state?

What a unique reunion this,  
we both eagerly looked forward to,  
on the cremation ground!

Oh how poignantly  
he gathered me in his hands!  
What a solemn feeling for him,  
how blissful for me!  
Carefully he secured me in the earthen urn,  
like a treasure,  
and with what resignation he surrendered me  
to the swirling bosom  
of the holy confluence  
of the Ganges, the Jamuna  
and the invisible Swarasati!

My soul will wander no more  
for my first-born son  
has blazed a path for me,  
to eternity?

# PART THREE

## EXILE

If I die in exile  
think this of me  
that there is a corner  
out there in Kashmir  
that was for ever my abode  
where my soul will come to rest.

## Keys

Even after a decade in exile  
I hang, from my girdle, this bunch of keys,  
keys that I carried with me  
when I was forced to flee,  
keys to my home,  
keys to my relics, my diary, my library,  
keys that opened the sanctum  
where my gods reside,  
all the keys  
except the keys to my new destination.

I keep wandering in exile,  
carrying these keys  
like an albatross.

I know the locks to these keys  
have been forced open or broken,  
and all they guarded taken away,  
my little possessions squandered,  
my secrets laid bare,  
the books consigned to flames  
or sold worth their weight as trash,  
the prayer room desecrated,  
the gods defiled.

These keys that I carry with me  
are rusted with disuse  
but I do not throw them away .  
I rub them softly, gently,  
like Aladdin's lamp,  
and all my treasures materialize.  
They help me unlock  
the memories of yesteryears.

## **The new millenium**

The neighbor's truck honked me out of sleep  
and the millenium dawn broke today  
like any other dawn.

The sky, the earth and the hills  
stood in their places as before  
and the morning daily  
brought the news ever so faithfully  
of so many terrorist strikes,  
scams, kickbacks and violent deaths.  
Yet the phone kept ringing,  
each time a spirited greeting,  
while I forgot to scatter the grain  
till the birds came pecking  
at my window pane.

Pray what is this furore all about,  
this bonhomie,  
the media hype,  
the noise and frenzy  
and last night's revelry  
when my faucet is waterless as before,  
the power shut off for the day  
and the thought so scary  
of the bumpy commute to my work,  
in the bus overflowing with jostling humanity  
along roads, pot-holed and dirty.

And why this fear that grips everyone  
the panic about the millenium bug  
going to turn the world topsy-turvy,  
and some computer glitch  
about to stop the march of humanity?  
Does it matter to me,  
the millenium that faded away  
or the millennium that begins today  
when it is all a part of eternity,  
of Time without a beginning or end,  
Time that we partition artificially  
into a year, a decade, a century ?

Are there candles in the house  
to light up the millennium night ?  
Is there enough kerosene in the stove  
to cook the millennium meal ?  
Is a trailer somewhere handy  
to tow water to my house  
that I buy weekly

for five hundred and fifty?  
Do I have for my ears  
cotton wool to shut off the noise,  
and a mask to wear on my face  
to ward off the dust and fumes?

In that case I am okay  
and need not fear Y2K.  
I am immune to the bug,  
compliant and ready  
to face the new century.

## **Old man and the tree**

I did not cry when he was gone  
for, they say,  
we should bid a happy farewell to those  
that lived a full life.

Yet when his body was laid on the pyre  
tears streamed down my eyes  
for he was my grandfather,  
and more,  
there was this long kinship with him,  
an abiding friendship,  
that had suddenly snapped.

One day I asked him  
about the tree in our backyard  
that was gaunt and bent with age.  
“Why don’t we cut it down, grandpa,  
lest it fall down in a gust of wind  
or break with the force of a lightning?”.  
“Wait my child”, he replied,  
“for the tree gets old with me.  
Together have we journeyed thus far,  
together we go to the very end.  
When an old man dies in these climes  
his tree makes his pyre  
and hand in hand they travel  
to the life hereafter.”

Alas! my grandpa died in exile  
but, the tree back home?  
Nobody knows who felled it down,  
nobody knows whose pyre it made.

(For Adarsh Ajit. This is a modification of his poem)

## **The curse**

They say accursed is the valley  
and weeping tears of blood  
since we were forced to flee  
and thrown into the wilderness of exile

It hardly rains or snows there  
and when it does  
it rains red  
it snows black.

That mighty river of life,  
the Vitasta,  
now a foul gutter,  
her bosom laid bare  
and unable to hide the secrets  
of broken bones and crooked skeletons  
of her once daughters and sons.

The roaring mountain streams  
are a gurgle,  
the glaciers  
but specks of dirty white,  
the proud Aharabal fall  
a trickle.

The lake Dal,  
that jewel of the city of Srinagar,  
shrinks into a stinking pond,  
overtaken by the red weed  
that feed on innocent blood.  
The proud lotus  
gripped by its tentacles  
hangs its head in shame.

The bush, the vine and the tree  
all wither away slowly.  
Black is the walnut shell,  
hollow its kernel,  
Scab-stained the apple  
and the almond bitter.

The spring of Kheerbhavani  
changes colour -  
bright red to pitch black -  
one presaging blood-shed  
the other dark death.

The bulbul has lost his golden voice,  
the *koel* hides in fear,  
the parrot has flown far away,  
the *bombur* is lost somewhere  
looking for his *yamberzal*.

The sad October moon,  
rising gingerly behind the *Mahadev* ,  
shines as before  
on the cold desolation of *Pampore*,  
waiting the whole night long  
for her tryst with the saffron.

The call of the muezzin  
drowns in the din  
of the grenade and the gun,  
religion sells a penny,  
curse sounds the sermon.

They also say  
that they hear strange moans  
from the deserted Pandit\* homes  
and the frightened neighbourhood dogs  
bark the whole night long  
at the eerie shadows  
that flit across  
the open windows and doors.

*Koel* - dove

*Bombur*- the bumblebee

*Yamberzal* - narcissus

*Mahadev* – Mt. Mahadev

*Pampore* – a small town 15 km from Srinagar

*Pandit* – Kashmiri Pandit , the minority Hindu of Kashmir, presently in exile

## Summer in exile

The heat pervades and penetrates,  
plentiful humidity that saturates,  
the leaden air that suffocates  
the canopy of cloud  
that covers like a shroud,  
power breakdowns and water scarcity  
that make life one long misery,  
dust storms that blow every thing away,  
also memory.

The limbs refuse to carry,  
blank goes the mind,  
limp and prostrate the body,  
the lungs tired,  
the heart tardy.  
All desires take leave,  
except the wish to hibernate,  
to be silence's votary,  
to assume the crocodile posture,  
and to enter that death-like state,  
the *Shavasana* of the yogi.

Summer, like exile -  
a leveler of humanity,  
a fellow feeling  
of suffering and agony,  
a wringing of the sins  
like the sweat that pours out  
from every pore of the body.

Summer in exile -  
a sublimation,  
a penance,  
a transcendence.

## Even Siva got a bath

For a change  
the weekly trickle through the taps  
instead of the customary spluttering and gurgling  
progressed to a steady streaming  
and we watched, unbelieving,  
as we filled the empty buckets  
while the flow continued  
beyond the allotted forty-five minutes.

We opened the stopcocks to the tanks under ground  
as word went quickly around  
about this largesse, this welcome shower  
after the weekly spell of drought.

The tanks underground filled steadily  
and we switched on the pumps  
to lift the life fluid to the tanks overhead  
as we kept running up and down  
between the roof and the ground  
watching the levels go up and up,  
rising incredibly to the very brim!

As the windfall continued  
it was the turn of pots and pans  
and of clothes in waiting  
that needed a washing,  
of sprinkling and rubbing and mopping the floor,  
of toilet flushes to buzz and to roar,  
of watering the lawns, the flower beds,  
of washing the car, the path, the pets.

And then Siva too had a bath  
and the *Ganga*\* that had dried up in his locks  
came to life again.  
Lamps were lit, incense burnt  
and the lord was anointed  
with vermilion and sandalwood paste  
to the singing of chants  
that hit the heavens.

It was a slaking experience,  
that seven hour bonanza,  
as the mystified beneficiaries kept guessing  
about this unique occurrence,  
this benefaction, this boon.

It was a quirk of fate, some thought,  
that the turnkey man quite forgot  
to turn off the valve in the supply line,  
while others believed his palm was greased  
so the wrench kept slipping from his hands,  
and yet others, that he dozed off  
after a mighty booze,  
while Siva who so much fancied that bath ,  
watching contentedly from his corner,  
chuckled at what was and what was not.

\**Ganga* - Ganges, a north Indian River, taking birth in the  
Himalayas and held by Lord Siva in His locks before it was released lest it flood the  
country.

## **Old Professor Shambu**

Nothing seems to deter you  
old professor Shambu,  
neither your handicap  
that hardly allows you leg space  
and puts snails in your pace,  
nor the heavy rimmed glasses,  
nor the burden of the hearing aid;  
neither the dangling cord of the sundered phone line,  
nor the intercepted mail;  
neither the verbal tirade and innuendo,  
nor a box on the ear then and now ;  
neither the canine existence  
with morsels kicked towards your kennel,  
nor the hunger insatiate,  
nor the little needs ever denied,  
nor the frightening solitude  
and the craving for some company,  
a bit of old bonhomie,  
a jug of wine, a glass of whiskey,  
or an idle pleasantry  
with a neighboring beauty.

Nothing seems to distress you,  
or dampen you spirits  
old Professor Shambu,  
for you seek the august company  
of immortals, sages and seers  
who dwell in your treasury  
and though decrepit and old in body  
you possess a youthful heart, a spirit lively  
and a spring-well of mental energy  
that leads you on to creativity.

With your sagacity  
of having conquered pain with penance  
you make light of the punishment  
heaped on an unfortunate father  
who chooses his son's abode  
as his lair  
and the final resting place.

When your beloved son  
finally chooses to tie you up  
and put you into a sac,  
ready to drown,

pray narrate him another father's story  
who, while being carried by his son  
to drown on the river's east bank,  
pleads and prods him on to the west.  
"Why the west bank?" asks the son.  
"That is where, my dear son,  
I put my father to final rest,  
on that bank yonder,  
in the west".

## Entombing history

Martand, Awantipura, Parihaspura-  
O, ancient monuments  
to the glory of the sun-god,  
Kashmir's legacy  
of a civilizational acme -  
you withstood time's ravages,  
the sword of the savages,  
and the fanatic zeal of iconoclasts  
who tried to break your spirit  
but could just bruise your body.

Yet, when our country is free  
of foreign yoke and invasion,  
and wedded to a secular polity,  
she fails to stop your ignominy  
of being carried away,  
piece by piece,  
limb by limb,  
in the darkness of the night  
by her own progeny,  
the ravenously greedy,  
thieves of history.

Stealing their own past,  
dismantling their own heritage,  
they lay the foundations  
of their temporal residences  
of brick and concrete  
with your stolen parts  
and entomb them in ugly tin roofs.  
Their dwellings stand like crosses  
on these tombs of history.

The Bamiyan Buddhas  
in neighbouring Afghanistan  
escaped with a fairer deal  
in being crushed into rubble instantly  
with cannons spewing gunpowder.  
They attained nirvana  
and disappeared for ever from history,  
and, unlike you,  
not be desecrated  
and profaned perpetually.

## Dear departed ancestor

Dear departed ancestor  
you will have to bear with me,  
today, on your anniversary,  
as I offer you water  
that has been stored for days together  
and not fresh either from the tap,  
the spring or the river.  
For while the taps run dry  
here in exile,  
*Vitasta\** is only a memory  
and, I hear,  
the springs there in the valley have dried up,  
and the lakes irrevocably overtaken by weeds.

Dear ancestor  
I offer this oblation of water  
on my bare palm  
without the *sacred thread\*\**  
hooked around my shoulder  
that is such a nuisance to wear  
in this hot and humid weather,  
stinging and sticking to my neck  
like a slave's rope and a hangman's noose.  
I have put it away in a cupboard somewhere.

Dear loving ancestor  
as I offer water  
the recitation that goes with it  
has faded from my memory  
nor is there the priest to help me  
for their class fades even quicker  
than the rest of the exiled community  
as we lose, slowly but certainly,  
the very foundations of our heritage  
and the symbols of our identity.

Dear revered ancestor,  
I fear, you will have to share,  
some of the constraints of time and space,  
here in my exile with me

for while I have myself been pushed into a corner  
your framed photographs and heirlooms  
that kept you alive in the drawing rooms  
will have to be tucked away  
for now.  
Soon you will rest only in memory,  
and only as long as it does not fail me.

Dear ancestor  
how rapidly you are being pushed  
into a distant pedigree!  
A generation has departed  
in its prime in exile  
and the new generation that grows  
mingles and loses its identity  
in cross matrimony.  
Slowly your genes get diluted  
to fade into obscurity.

Dear ancestor,  
exile throws us into a crisis of existence,  
as it blurs your identity  
and threatens mine.  
Alas! You stand to lose your status,  
as the dear ancestor,  
in the none-too-distant future!

\*Vitasta - a River cutting through the valley of Kashmir

\*\*Sacred thread - a ceremonial thread worn by Hindu Brahmins

## **Anonymity**

With your vows,  
your meditation,  
your steadfast devotion,  
you have pleased me, my devotee.  
It is time to ask your boon.

Your piety earns you admiration,  
transforming you into a celebrity,  
an icon threatening to be a god,  
to compete with me.

There is always an obligation to a devotee  
who has passed the fire test of fidelity.  
Pray ask your boon, and let me be free

“I desire no boon, no benediction, my lord.  
except to be in your favor,  
in your eternal service  
to carry out your wish”.

I grant your wish,  
my favored devotee  
and demand no more  
of your penance and piety,  
no sacrifice whatsoever,  
except to disappear  
into anonymity.

## Creator

I created thee, my creator,  
that thou re-create me  
in thine own image -  
the image that I shaped thou in -  
materializing thee  
from the non-being into being,  
giving form to the formless,  
shaping thou into gods and deities  
with attributes divine,  
effecting thine resurrections  
revealing thy reincarnations,  
making thee the cause and the effect,  
the source,  
the sum and the substance,  
the be all and end all of existence..

And what didst thou create in return,  
my lord,  
except a human to the core,  
far from thy own image,  
the image that I gave thee?  
All thou could shape  
is an aberration,  
an amalgam of opposites –  
of good and evil,  
of the base and the refined,  
of sin and piety,  
of turbulence and peace,  
of hatred and love  
of sorrow and joy.

Who is the better creator  
between me and thee,  
pray tell me my lord?

## **Release**

Everyday,  
every waking and sleeping moment  
we seek release.

We seek release  
all the way from our conception  
through the sojourn in our mother's womb  
to this world,  
and from here  
to the hereafter.

We seek release  
from the busy tiring day  
to night's repose  
and back to wakefulness,  
from the bondage of responsibility  
that life forces upon us.

We seek release  
from prying neighbors  
and their perverse curiosities,  
from our indulgent friends  
and their small envies,  
from our relatives  
and their hypocrisies,  
from our bullying bosses  
and their egotistical mentalities-  
from our cringing subordinates  
and their sycophancies,  
from our rivals and foes  
and their atrocities.

We seek release  
from the sloth of bureaucracies,  
from the tyranny of autocracies,  
from defiled democracies,  
from terrorizing theocracies.

We seek release  
from ourselves,  
from life's drab banalities,  
from our pricked consciences,  
and unresolved conflicts.

We are born to seek release  
from the non-being before birth  
to the pain of being  
and we die to seek release  
to the uncertainties  
of the mysterious void beyond .

## Who is my enemy?

Who is my enemy?

Is he the one  
who holds different views and beliefs,  
who dresses and eats differently,  
whose rituals differ from mine,  
who belongs to a separate faith,  
who prays a different god ?

Or the one  
with whom there is known rivalry,  
an open hostility,  
the battle lines clearly drawn,  
each charting out strategy  
for a new confrontation,  
a new argument,  
a new weapon.

Or the one  
from within my ranks,  
from amongst my own tribe,  
of my own faith,  
a votary of the same god,  
wearing a friendly mask,  
on whom I shower my love,  
to whom I give my sweat and blood,  
who yet covets my position and my gold,  
who never confronts me openly  
but watching me fail or falter  
waits for the first opportunity  
to hurt and humiliate me,  
to feed his ego on my hurt pride,  
to stab me in the back,  
and kill me with a thousand cuts ?

Or my uncle *Kansa*\*,  
who, having imprisoned my parents  
and killed my seven sisters,  
now schemes to destroy me?

Or Judas,  
my friend and companion,  
eating from my plate,  
ready to betray me,  
to see me crucified?

Or *Harunakashypa*\*\* , my father,  
ever inventing new ways and means  
to put me to eternal sleep?

Or me,  
my other self of base desires,  
ever battling inside me  
with my vision of eternity?

\**Kansa* - the tyrant uncle of Lord Krishna

\*\**Harunakashypa* - Prince Prahlada's father who wanted his son killed  
for worshipping Lord Vishnu and not acknowledging his own father as god

## Stranger

I have been seeking you,  
stranger,  
in parks, malls and restaurants,  
in trains, oceans and air.

There is much buried inside me,  
welling up to deliver,  
waiting for your virgin ear,  
and much I would like to hear.

There are people close,  
and so very dear -  
parent and offspring,  
friend and partner  
and the kindly neighbor -  
with whom I could share.  
But, for the sake of kinship,  
nurtured with such patient care  
I do not dare,  
for so much depends  
on every word we speak and hear,  
each intonation of the voice,  
each action,  
and the expressions we wear.  
And so much is at stake,  
so much of give and take,  
an arithmetic so delicate,  
that there is this lurking fear,  
of judging and being judged  
of hurting and getting hurt.

So we shuttle our words,  
inflect our voice,  
sham our actions,  
and force expressions,  
or wear a mask  
and go into a shell.

Have not the most sacred vows  
ended in a bitter divorce,  
bosom friends  
turned into sworn enemies,  
and loving brothers  
into strangers,  
for reasons so trivial -  
a rash remark,  
an unwary gesture?

Between you and me,  
dear stranger,  
there is this unique factor  
of not knowing each other,  
of standing on an equal footing  
with no prejudice or bias,  
no binding commitments,  
no expectations,  
nothing to hide  
and nothing to fear,  
no contract whatsoever.

And free to exchange our thoughts  
without fear or favor,  
to share our little urges  
without the dread of ridicule,  
to relate our dreams and premonitions  
with no fear of misinterpretations.

Stranger,  
let us turn our hearts over,  
let us share this treasure  
buried inside here,  
let us seek deliverance in each other,  
and then part our ways  
to move on,  
to look for another stranger.

## Golden silence

When words fail the sentiments  
and succeed in whipping up arguments,  
when words become double entendres  
giving rise to faulty notions,  
when words ruffle relationships  
to cause fractured friendships,  
when words reinforce mindsets  
to forge widening chasms,  
when words hurt and humiliate  
and demean, debase and denigrate;  
silence, golden silence,  
you step in to the rescue,  
as *Shiva-like*\* you swallow  
the poison of words,  
to absorb the insults and outbursts  
to sooth the nerves, and still the tempers,  
to change attitudes, and inspire deference,  
to heal the wounds  
and thaw the frozen relationships,  
to recreate the vocabulary  
of words that endear.

\**Shiva-like* - To save mankind from doom, Lord Shiva swallowed the poison that was churned from the mythical ocean.

----- End -----

