Classic Poetry Series

Dom Moraes

- poems -

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Dom Moraes (19 July 1938 – 2 June 2004)

Dominic Francis Moraes, popularly known as Dom Moraes, was a Goan writer, poet and columnist. He published nearly 30 books.

Early Life

Moraes was born in Bombay (now Mumbai) to Beryl and Frank Moraes, former editor of the Times of India. He attended St. Mary's School (ISC), Mazagoan, Bombay, and Jesus College, Oxford University.

Moraes spent eight years in Britain, in London and Oxford, New York city, Hong Kong, Delhi and Mumbai.

Career

He edited magazines in London, Hong Kong and New York. He became the editor of The Asia Magazine in 1971. He scripted and partially directed over 20 television documentaries for the BBC and ITV. He was a war correspondent in Algeria, Israel and Vietnam. In 1976 he joined the United Nations.

Moraes conducted one of the first interviews of the Dalai Lama after the Tibetan spiritual leader fled to India in 1959. The Dalai Lama was then 23 and Moraes was 20. Moraes ended his writing career, writing books in collaboration with Sarayu Srivatsa.

Later Life

He had a lifelong battle with alcoholism. Moraes suffered from cancer, but refused treatment and died from a heart attack in Bandra, Mumbai. He was buried in the Sewri Cemetery in Mumbai and as per his last wishes Sarayu Srivatsa buried the soil from his grave in Odcombe, Somerset, on 19 July 2002 (his birthdate). Many of Dom's old friends and publishers attended the memorial service in Odcombe. A headstone in yellow Jaisalmer stone lies embedded in the front lawn of the church to mark the service.

When the Gujarat riots erupted in 2002, with their heavy toll of Muslim dead, Moraes left for Ahmedabad the minute the news came through, claiming that since he was a Catholic, Muslims would not see him as an enemy. Even though he was physically in considerable pain by then, he was one of the first on the scene.

Personal Life

In 1956, aged 18, he was courted by Henrietta Moraes. They married in 1961. He left her, according to his close friends in London, but did not divorce her.[citation needed] He had a son, Heff Moraes, with his second wife Judith. He later married celebrated Indian actress and beauty Leela Naidu and they were a star couple, known across several continents, for over two decades. They separated in the mid-1990s.

Awards and Recognitions

Hawthornden Prize for the best work of the imagination, 1958, for the book of poems A Beginning

Autumn Choice of the Poetry Book Society for Poems (1960)

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1958: A Beginning, his first book of poems (winner of the Hawthornden Prize)
1960: Poems, his second book of poems
1960: Gone Away: An Indian Journey, memoir
1965: John Nobody, his third book of poems
1967: Beldam & Others, a pamphlet of verse
1983: Absences, book of poems
1987: Collected Poems: 1957-1987 (Penguin)
1992: Out of God's Oven: Travels in a Fractured Land, co-author Sarayu Srivatsa
2003: The Long Strider, co-author Sarayu Srivatsa
Heiress to Destiny, biography of Indira Gandhi
Never at Home, memoir
My Son's Father, memoir

Absences

Smear out the last star.
No lights from the islands
Or hills. In the great square
The prolonged vowel of silence
Makes itself plainly heard
Round the ghost of a headland
Clouds, leaves, shreds of bird
Eddy, hindering the wind.

No vigils left to keep.
No enemies left to slaughter.
The rough roofs of the slopes,
Loosely thatched with splayed water,
Only shelter microliths and fossils.
Unwatched, the rainbows build
On the architraves of hills.
No wounds left to be healed.

Nobody left to be beautiful.
No polyp admiral to sip
Blood and whiskey from a skull
While fingering his warships.
Terrible relics, by tiderace
Untouched, the stromalites breathe.
Bubbles plop on the surface,
Disturbing the balance of death.

No sound would be heard if
So much silence was not heard.
Clouds scuff like sheep on the cliff.
The echoes of stones are restored.
No longer any foreshore
Or any abyss, this
World only held together
By its variety of absences.

Dom Moraes

Architecture

The architecture of an aunt
Made the child dream of cupolas,
Domes, other smoothly rounded shapes.
Geometries troubled his sleep.

The architecture of young women
Mildly obsessed the young man:
Its globosity, firmness, texture,
Lace cobwebs for adornment and support.

Miles from his aunt, the old child
Watched domes and cupolas defaced
In a hundred countries, as time passed.

A thousand kilometres of lace defiled,
And much gleaming and perfect architecture
Flaming in the fields with no visible support.

Dom Moraes

Key

Ground in the Victorian lock, stiff,
With difficulty screwed open,
To admit me to the seven mossed stairs
And the badly kept garden.

Who runs to me in memory
Through flowers destroyed by no love

But the child with brown hair and eyes,
Smudged all over with toffee?

I lick his cheeks. I bounce him in air.
Two bounces, he disappears.

Fifteen years later, he redescends,
Not as a postponed child, but a letter
Asking me for his father who now possesses
No garden, no home, not even any key.

Dom Moraes

Rendezvous

[For Nathan Altermann]
Altermann, sipping wine, reads with a look
Of infinite patience and slight suffering.
When I approach him, he puts down his book,
Waves t the chair beside him like a king,
Then claps his hands, and an awed waiter fetches
Bread, kosher sausage, cake, a chicken's wing,
More wine, some English cigarettes, and matches.
'Eat, eat,' Altermann says, 'this is good food.'
Through the awning over us the sunlight catches
His aquiline sad head, till it seems hewed
From tombstone marble. I accept some bread.
I've lunched already, but would not seem rude.
When I refuse more, he feeds me instead,
Heaping my plate, clapping for wine, his eyes
-Expressionless inside the marble head—
Appearing not to notice how the flies
Form a black, sticky icing on the cake.
Thinking of my health now, I visualize
The Aryan snow floating, flake upon flake,
Over the ghetto wall where only fleas
Fed well, and they and hunger kept awake
Under sharp stars, those waiting for release.
Birds had their nests, but Jews nowhere to hide
When visited by vans and black police.
The shekinah rose where a people died,
A pillar of flame by night, of smoke by day.
From Europe then the starved and terrified
Flew. Now their mourner sits in this café.
Telling me how to scan a Hebrew line.
Though my attention has moved far away
His features stay marble and aquiline.
But the eternal gesture of his race
Flowing through the hands that offer bred and wine
Reveals the deep love sealed in the still face.

Dom Moraes

Spree

[For Yosl Bergner]
Tonight I see your blue protuberant eyes
Following your angry wife, who sweeps away,
With their perpetual look of mild surprise.
'Nu, have another drink for luck,' you say
I settle back to let your swift talk flow
Freer with drink through the small hours till day
Reddens the bottles in your studio,
While, still unchecked, a rapid spate of words
Explains some brush-technique I did not know.
A Polish boy, you took cadaverous birds,
Perched in a burnt-out Europe, for your text,
Then came here, but kept sympathy towards
Creatures with wings, for you chose angels next,
Though different from those flaming ones that flew
Into the Bible: yours are too perplexed
Even to fly, waifs without work to do.
Yudl reproved you once, in the Cassit:
'Your angels are not Israelis, Jew.'
No: but they are the images we meet
In every mirror: so I understand
Those helpless angels waiting in the street
For somebody to take them by the hand.
Still, hangovers won't await, so now we walk
Past herons down the beach towards liquor land.
There's not much left to talk of: but you talk,
Waving both arms, eccentric, Yiddish, free,
In your new home where tall winged creatures stalk
Between the ancient mountains and the sea.

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