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Keki Daruwalla

- poems -

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Keki Daruwalla (1937 -)

Keki Nasserwanji Daruwalla (Keki N. Daruwalla or Keki Daruwalla) is a major Indian poet and short story writer in English language. He has written over 12 books and published his first novel "For Pepper and Christ" in 2009. He is also a former IPS officer, who retired as Additional Director in the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW).

He was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award, in 1984 for his poetry collection, "The Keeper of the Dead", by the Sahitya Akademi, India's National Academy of Letters.

Early Life and Education

Keki Nasserwanji Daruwalla was born in 1937, in Loni, Burhanpur (now in loni, burhanpur), in 1937. His father N.C. Daruwalla, was an eminent professor, who taught in Loni Institute of Literature (LIL). After the Partition, his family left Punjab while his elder brother stayed back, and moved to Junagadh in Gujarat, then to Rampur. As a result he grew up studying in various schools and mediums and started writing short stories in school.

He obtained his master's degree in English Literature from Government College, Ludhiana, University of Punjab.

Career

He joined the Indian Police Service (IPS) in 1958, and eventually becoming a Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on International Affairs. He subsequently was in the Cabinet Secretariat until his retirement.

Literary Life

With the publication of his very first book, Under Orion in 1970, Daruwalla established himself as a name to reckon with in Indian poetry. Senior Indian poet and critic Nissim Ezekiel applauded his work as "impressive evidence not only of mature poetic talent but of literary stamina, intellectual strength and social awareness".

Over nine books and more than three decades, Daruwalla's poetry has journeyed a long way both formally and thematically. However, it retains certain strong distinguishing characteristics: an ironic stance, an evocation of the multi-layered contradictory realities of Indian life, a preoccupation with diverse cultural, historic and mythic landscapes, a terse, vigorous and tensile style, supple imagism, sustained narrative drive, an ability to segue between metrical patterns and free verse, and a capacity to combine an epic canvas

with a miniaturist's eye for detail.

The characteristic features of his poetry can also be described as vigor and immediacy of language, knife-edge tone, an abiding and infatuated concern with love, death and domination, a skeptic and indignant cynicism about the plight of human society and a rare intensity in portraying living individuals. Daruwalla readily admits to critics' charges of being too much of a landscape poet who takes into his aesthetic stride the sights and sounds of England, Yugoslavia, Helsinki, Stockholm, Volgograd, and Moscow which he has visited for poetry readings. His thematic canvas transcends the boundaries of India and stretches itself into the rest of the world. Critics maintain his concern for broad landscape imagery rather than political and social issues is a result of his long career as a Government of India official.

A remarkable feature of Daruwalla's poetry is its ability to vividly materialise its abstractions, to strike a creative tension between image and statement. His poetry has the narrative energy and sweep to paint, for instance, a vast portrait of post-Independence India as "a landscape of meaninglessness": "Then why should I tread the Kafka beat/ or the Waste Land,/ when Mother, you are near at hand/ one vast, sprawling defeat?"

But it can also offer a fine-tuned vision of the particular, evident in his evocation of the rumbling innards of a miserable multitude listening to the speech of a corpulent political leader: "Within the empty belly/ the enzymes turn multi-lingual/ their speech vociferous/ simmering on stomach wall".

His landscapes extend from the ancient kingdom of Kalinga under the reign of the great Indian emperor Ashoka to the seething contradictions of the modern metropolis of Bombay ("From the lepers, the acid-scarred, the amputees/ I turn my face. The road, I feel/ should be stratified so that/ I rub shoulders only with my kind") as well as rural and small-town India (Benaras is unforgettably evoked as the place where "corpse-fires and cooking-fires/burn side by side", even while the sacred river Ganga flows on, "dark as gangrene").

His most recent book, Map-maker (2002), offers a compelling series of dramatic monologues by figures as diverse as a disciple of the Buddha and an old map-maker from Majorca, suggesting that the passionate interest in other cultural and historical milieux is alive and well. But there is also a more marked fascination with inner worlds, with philosophical notions of time and space.

In Migrations, for example, the metaphysical is integrally linked to the concrete and the singular, as the poem explores the theme of migrations across space and time, from the violent biography of nations to a searing moment of personal biography: "Now my dreams ask me/ if I remember my mother/ and I'm not sure how I'll handle that./ Migrating across years is also difficult."

Awards

A recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award and Commonwealth Poetry Award, Keki N. Daruwalla has so far published about 12 books, consisting of mostly poems and a couple of fictional works. Some of his important works are Under Orion, The keeper of the dead, Landscapes, A summer of tigers and The minister for permanent unrest & other stories. He also edited Two decades of Indian poetry. The Library of Congress has all his books.

Works:

Books

Under Orion. Writers Workshop, India. 1970 Apparition in April. Writers Workshop, 1971. Sword & abyss: a collection of short stories. Vikas Pub., 1979. Winter poems. Allied Publishers, 1980. The Keeper of the Dead. Oxford University Press, 1982.

Crossing of rivers. Oxford Univ. Press, 1985.
Landscapes. Oxford University Press, 1987.
A summer of tigers: poems. Indus, 1995.
The Minister for Permanent unrest & other stories. Orient Blackswan, 1996.
Night river: poems. Rupa & Co., 2000.
The Map-maker: Poems. Orient Blackswan, 2002.
The Scarecrow and the Ghost. Rupa & Co., 2004.
A House in Ranikhet. Rupa & Co, 2003.
Collected Poems (1970-2005). (Poetry in English). Penguin Books India., 2006. 2006.

A Take-off on a Passing Remark

Tall buildings impress me
the ones which cut off half the sky.
I like tall stories, even though false;
not the half-truth sleeping with the half-lie.
I want things on a large scale:
amplitudes, a sense of space and light,
the great yellow eye of the train
lighting up the distances of the night.
Urchins, furred caterpillars, moles
and fern-beds are all right.
But I want flowering trees, long
streamers of moss, flaming parasites.
But when you ask, still squirrel-young
short as twilight
short as a shadow at noon
why I love you, what can I answer?

[From 'The Glass-Blower: Selected Poems']

AL-AZHAR Lecture

They are naïve, those who suggest that the fortunes of the ruler and the ruled go hand in hand. Take the plague of 1350, which traveled like a caravan from China across the Pamirs to the caravanseral called Egypt; rested here, refilled its water-skins and moved on to Europe. Twenty thousand died each day in Cairo, Mamluk, Emir and fellahin. But while the people sprouted buboes and the cattle broke out in blains and the Nile was scaled with dead shoals of silver-bellied fish, the Sultan got richer. When everyone dies who succeeds to property but the Sultan who embodies the state? Jazziya was another money spinner And the plague must have spared The non-Muslim - it often does. Can we blame the State Treasurer If, as he prayed, he asked Allah for more plagues and more unbelievers?

[From: The Map-maker]

Alexander Crosses The Hellespont

He was a little tentative when it came to the East. Its ways were quite insidious and odd to say the least.

His experience was unhappy: His first stop had been Cairo where he had gone to dropp his card and call on the Pharoah.

They laid a banquet for him At the Casino Mariot and placed by Pope Shenodah who but Judas Iscariot!

The Turks would be more organized he fondly hoped - and damn! He couldn't cross the Hellespont. There was a traffic jam.

He raged and ranted fiercely "I must have been a fool to try and venture into intestinal Istanbul.

When do we get to Asia?"
Great Alexander probed.
"When Effendi comes to Turkia
He comes from Europe to Europe.

You can check with CNN Or ask the BBC. When you come to Turkey You come to EEC."

He remembered Aristotle: "Son, at the Turkish Rail ask for the Occident Express The Occidental Mail."

As he checked into a hotel
- the Turks call it Oteli he found Thais lodged in Hilton
while he was in Surmeli.

What really turned his eyes into two glowing bits of phosphorous was that his friend Hephaestion checked into Hotel Bosphorous.

His face turned dark and sullen as a cloud's before a storm.

And though they humoured him he screamed "I want Hephaestion!"

They offered handsome eunuchs, whores from the Golden Horn. But Alexander kept on saying "I want Hephaestion".

Thias phoned "I am bored at Hilton, And I am quite akeli." But he said what can I do for I am at Surmeli!"

And Mehmet Ali Pasha, a little high on raaki asked poor Alexander if he was an Iragi?

Then in the hotel dining room dressed in salwar-kameez, a man accosted him and said "could I have your good name please?

Arrey Janab Sikandar Sahab! Myself Assad Durrani. Oh what a treat it is to meet a fellow Pakistani."

Alexander answered darkly "Thanks very much Janab. Tell Porus inshah Allah We'll be meeting in Punjab."

He drove the Persians backwards right up to Tarbela. He beat them up at Granicus. He thrashed them at Arbela.

While he uncorkd the champagne and lit the fireworks, who should speak but Spoil Sport Parmenio, the jerk.
"Sire, though you thrashed the Persians, you never touched a Turk."

Bars

If you want
a cage, my dear
you do not have
to travel far.
If you want to feel
hemmed in, you'll be hemmed in.
Look for scars
you'll be full of scars.
Even light can turn
into a cage.
The cage of light
has seven bars.

[From: The Map-maker]

Before The Word

Corn is great, on the cob or otherwise, but before corn in the ear there was life. Fire is holy especially for Zoroastrians, but before fire too there was life. Before the bowstring and the flint arrow sang, there was life.

The word is great, yet there was life before the word. We can't turn romantic and say we were into bird speech or river-roar then, into the silence of frost or the language of rain. But forest speech and swamp speech came through easier to us. When lightning crashed, the cry of the marsh bird was our cry, and we flung ourselves to the other branch like any other baboon.

As winter whined on windy cliff, we shivered with the yellow grass. In winter-dark a hundred eyes flared yellow in the jungle scrub. When seasons changed, blood coursed with sap and flowered in meadows. We were at home. Nor eyes nor bat cries bothered us. What if we didn't know a bat assessed reality from the ricochet of its cry?

Though there were no words, fear had a voice with many echoes. Worship was quieter, adoration spoke only through the eyes or knees.

What was it like before language dropped like dew, covering the scuffed grass of our lives?

Fish

The sea came in with her and her curved snout and her tin coloured barnacles and long threaded rose moles patterned on her body.

The sea brought her and her curved snout and her rose moles and her eyes still translucent as if half aware and half unaware of the state of her body.

The sea came in with her and her scimitar snout and her translucent eyes greying into stone.

The sea brought her in, wrapped in seaweed and slapped her on the sand, all five feet of her with the armour of her scales and the filigree of her rose moles.

The tide kept coming in but couldn't disturb her or her resting place - she was heavy.

The sea fell back but even as the thin-edged foam line receded, it went to her once more with a supreme effort, rummaged among her barnacles and left.

Map-Maker

Perhaps I'll wake up on some alien shore In the shimmer of an aluminium dawn, to find the sea talking to itself and rummaging among the lines I've drawn; looking for something, a voyager perhaps, gnarled as a thorn tree in whose loving hands, these map lines of mine, somnambulant, will wake and pulse and turn to shoreline, sand.

The spyglass will alight on features I've forecast - cape, promontory - he'll feel he's been here, that voyaging unlocks the doorways of the past.

And deep in the night, in the clarity of dream, The seafarer will garner his rewards, raking in his islands like pebbles from a stream.

2

Does the world need maps, where sign and symbol, standing as proxies, get worked into scrolls? You see them, mountain chains with raingods in their armpits and glaciers locked like glass-slivers in their folds. Desert, scrub, pasture - do they need shading? They're all there for the eye to apprehend. A family of cactus and camelthorn tells you where one begins and the other ends.

These questions confound me, I'd rather paint for a while - a ship on the skyline, or cloud-shadow moving like a spreading stain. Yet they live, pencil strokes that speak for rain and thunder; and die - maplines ghosting round a cycloned island that has gone under.

3

Forget markings, forget landfall and sea. Go easy Man, I tell myself; breathe. Gulls will mark the estuary for you, bubbles will indicate where the swamps seethe. Map the wrinkles on the ageing skin of love. Forget Eastings, Northings - they stand for order. Cry, if you must, over that locust line flayed open into a barbarized border.

Mark a poem that hasn't broken forth, map the undefined, the swamp within, the hedge between love and hate. Forget the coastal casuarinas line.

Reefs one can handle. It's lust that seeks out its quarry that one cannot map, nor that heaving salt of desire that floods the creeks.

4

If you map the future, while a millennium moves on its hinges, you may find the present turned into an anachronism. This too is important - what is yours and mine, The silk of these shared moments. But having stuck to love and poetry, heeding the voice of reason; and experiencing the different textures of a season of love and love's eternal season,

I put a clamp on yearning, shun latitudes, renounce form. And turn my eye to the far kingdom of bloodless Kalinga battling with a storm. Dampen your fires, turn from lighthouse, spire, steeple. Forget maps and voyaging, study instead the parched earth horoscope of a brown people.

[From: The Map-maker]

Migrations

Migrations are always difficult: ask any drought, any plague; ask the year 1947. Ask the chronicles themselves: if there had been no migrations would there have been enough history to munch on?

Going back in time is also tough.
Ask anyone back-trekking to Sargodha
or Jhelum or Mianwali and they'll tell you.
New faces among old brick;
politeness, sentiment,
dripping from the lips of strangers.
This is still your house, Sir.

And if you meditate on time that is no longer time - (the past is frozen, it is stone, that which doesn't move and pulsate is not time) - if you meditate on that scrap of time, the mood turns pensive like the monsoons gathering in the skies but not breaking.

Mother used to ask, don't you remember my mother? You'd be in the kitchen all the time and run with the fries she ladled out, still sizzling on the plate.

Don't you remember her at all?

Mother's fallen face would fall further at my impassivity.

Now my dreams ask me

If I remember my mother

And I am not sure how I'll handle that.

Migrating across years is also difficult.

[From: The Map-maker]

Notes From The Underground

The wind is cold and the wind burns. The wind is cold and the wind is acid. On the Bar counter ice and amber swirl in thick gleaming glasses; in the Bar the ash of small talk, the smoke of ruminations. Light purrs on a bare shoulder, her feet are hidden in the drooping hem of her sari; ice and amber swirling I sit here between betweens, to the left of voices to the right of memory. Thought floats into the slow silence of air currents; the hours squat with me as I snap connections in autumn leaf detachment.

2

Nowhere to say this no one to say this to except to the typewriter (the computer would store it in its chip-memory and that could be embarrassing) as she pulled out he turned into a dead crab beach when the sea pulls out

3

Were the sea to pull out sea birds would pull out and the breeze; shells would turn brittle under crackling boot; fish and fishermen would be sucked into the great ebb and our traders would turn the white sea bed into 'The Salt Crystal Shopping Arcade', selling grounded oil tankers, ocean liners dredged out of the mud and whales flaked in salt. You could buy goldfish though as they circle the belly of a water jar.

4

You didn't come with me to the mountains this time, but as you know when you climb mountains the stars get nearer; don't ask me why this happens or how this happens but it happens when constellations smile death drops your catch. but often the stars go about their office routine in the night sky like glum bureaucrats this astral bureaucracy is even more baffling in its ways than our central ministries. In auto mode Rahu gets into the act; So does the moon debris that swirls around Saturn and forms its rings. Then what has to happen, happens. That's what happened to you.

5

The almond tree flowers white; beside it the peach flowers, as only peach can with its own interpretation of pink; and further in the lofty rear, winter has left its brown imprint on mountain and craq. Perhaps with the rains green may return to the slopes, a little moss here, a little grass there; you never know though, the rains may never come or life may run out before the rains the almond blossom, each petal soft as an eyelid, will also not see the rain. They are divided by a scimitar: parched landscapes and rain, parched lips and love.

6

Watching the wind-ruffled down on bird-breast I think for no particular reason of wind through quivering paddy in the Nepal terai.

I think I am at peace now, he said, for my dreams move like the thinnest veil of mist over water. Awareness of absences, of what is right with me or wrong with me is also like the perception of a veil of mist over a perception of water.

My troubles start when I think of hope, that thin smoke of mist over the iron-grey waters of dawn, icy waters, he said.

But you are with me always like a spring of underground water like the murmur of a spring of underground water.

I didn't for the life of me know whether he was addressing poetry (he had lost his touch lately) or his beloved.

Forty years with you and I am a better man, he said, awash in forty years of cleansing waters and forty years of light. The trouble was She couldn't hear him.

Sappho To Aphrodite

Long and lonely are my nights. Come help me Goddess, end my blight; her absence burns me, burns my sides with love intense.

Aphrodite, hail or sleet, I implore you to come down from Crete; my altar smokes, awaits your feet, with frankincense.

Your love-demented Sappho pleads: Give me no manna and no mead. It's love, not wine that Sappho needs you understand.

I haven't had a word from her! Once again make her my lover in bed and bower her breasts should flower, in my hands.

Her star-erasing beauty's spell, turns me feverish, frail, unwell. Her presence is both bliss and hell -I tremble so.

Her absence scars my empty flank. Goddess you don't need my verse to tell you this. My love is frank, I can't dissemble so.

Bring back Gongyla to my side! May she once more become my bride! May she, her lyre and her fire beside me purr.

Come foam-born and Cyprus-born, Goddess of love and the lovelorn, my altar awaits you with fire-urn, incense and myrrh.

Suddenly the Tree

The hive slept like Argus its thousand eyes covered with bees. The light as it fell through the neem tree was a marine light, in which yellow moths set sail from one perforated shadow to another. The hive was mystic, a drugged mantra with its dark syllables asleep. As the afternoon wore on the honey-thieves came and smoked the bees out and carved out a honey-laden crescent for themselves and left a lump of pocked wax behind. The bees roamed the house, too bewildered to sting the children. At night they slept, clinging to the tree fork, now scarred with burns. Sparrows and squirrels, a bird with a black crest and a red half-moon for an eyelid bickered over the waxed remains the next day. Then with a drone of straining engines the bees rose like a swarm of passions from a dying heart, and left.

[From 'The Glass-Blower: Selected Poems']

The Poseidonians

(After Cavafy)

[We behave like] the Poseidonians in the Tyrrhenian Gulf, who although of Greek origin, became barbarized as Tyrrhenians or Romans and changed their speech and the customs of their ancestors. But they observe one Greek festival even to this day; during this they gather together and call up from memory their ancient names and customs, and then lamenting loudly to each other and weeping, they go away.

Athenios, Deipnosophistai, Book 14, 31A [632]

All it takes to blight a language is another sun. It's not burn that does it, or chill, or the way woods straggle down the hills, or seas curl along the shingled coast. It is the women, cowering in fear, whom the soldiers, as they clamber down the boats, first reassure and then marry.

They are faithful, good with grain, at baking bread and fermenting wine and unscrambling the fish shoals from the meshes. They get the goddesses wrong sometimes [but so what?] Confusing mother with daughter. And there are minor errors In ritual and sacrifice, In lustration oils and libations.

A few seasons teach the man that his woman's omen birds are always right; her fears travel down the bloodstream and a new language emerges from the placenta.

What does one do with a thought that embarks on one script and lands on another? A hundred years go by, perhaps two hundred, Living with the Tyrrhenians and the Etruscans, and they discover there is more to language than merely words, that every act from making wine to making love filters through a different prism of sound, and they have forgotten the land they set sail from and the syllables that seeded that land.

What do they do, except once a year At a lyre-and-lute festival,

Greek to the core, with dance and contests, grope for memories in the blood, like Demeter, torch in hand, looking for her netherworld daughter? And weep a little for the Greece they have lost and reflect on the gulf of years which has proved wider than the Tyrrhenian gulf, and the hiatus between languages, wider than the Aegean? What can they do, but weep for Agora and Acropolis, forever left behind; and reflect, how three centuries distant from the Ionian coast, they have been barbarized by Rome?

[From: A Summer of Tigers]

Underwater Notes

(On revisiting a dream)

I am alone in the house. It is warm

but I feel cold.

The doors swing open across the years. For someone who has no ancestral home, who doesn't have the long shadow of the past

to ruffle his hair,

homecoming gets distorted. Time squints, space wobbles and the visit, encoded as it is, remains undeciphered.

2

It is cold, the windows are frost-smudged. Counsel yourself, there's no one

else to do it.

Let hieroglyphs remain dented where they are. Let wind erode them, or time - they are warp and weft of all erosion. Come out of the house and write (not hieroglyphs this time!) It is cold. Frost has smudged the windows. Your hair is grey as hoarfrost.

3

A rundown house, is a desolation.
A rundown house perched on a live memory, with me alone conversing with both is a double desolation.
Twenty years ago when I took a look around It wasn't there.
Someone now tells me at a reunion the house is standing, only new streets interlock around it.
It's still there! That's nice, one desolation gets sloughed off

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4

It's only when reality slips by like a sliding panel that you realize that the marvellous in the everyday real has passed you by.

5

Seated on the hull of your boat you lurch and tilt. The horizon is the forest, darkening leaf on darkening sky.

Slot your time properly in the right caves. The sea is the present The forest is the future.

Speech is present tense Echo is the future.

If you are talking of echoes you are talking of walls.
If you talk of water echo you are discussing womb walls - odd territory, come out of it.
Unsure on land
you take to the sea.
The skyline is a forest
Fern-dark, shadow-dark graveled with white coral grit.

6

Whatever evil he suffered, he forgot said Milosz in one of his poems.

Now that's a scrap of myth, isn't it?

And it is one thing to forgive and another to forget.

I tried to put things behind me, in the backyards of memory-clutter, and went back to my flirtations with altitudes, touched the Karakorams at Siachen, touched - Hindi has such a lovely word for it, 'sparsh' - Nubra, the garden of the North and slept in a tent at Tsomoriri - the rocks brown, the lake blue;

I got hold of a scrap of a myth here (at 15000 feet it's a good scrap to grab). It was very hot, and a woman called Tsomo riding a yak couldn't rein him in, as the yak made straight for the lake. She kept shouting 'riri, riri', 'stop, stop' in Tibetan, but the yak went in and they both drowned.

7

The stars have flung their net into the sea Among the thrashing fish shoal and the lassoed crab look for me.

Wolf

Fire-lit half silhouette and half myth the wolf circles my past treading the leaves into a bed till he sleeps, black snout on extended paws. Black snout on sulphur body he nudged his way into my consciousness. Prowler, wind-sniffer, throat-catcher, his cries drew a ring around my night; a child's night is a village on the forest edge. My mother said his ears stand up at the fall of dew he can sense a shadow move across a hedge on a dark night; he can sniff out your approaching dreams; there is nothing that won't be lit up by the dark torch of his eyes. The wolves have been slaughtered now. A hedge of smoking gun-barrels rings my daughter's dreams.

[From 'The Glass-Blower: Selected Poems']